

Preserving Humanity in the Face of AI

At one time in my life, I wanted an airplane - a toy airplane actually. It could go places I couldn't and it was the latest fad for kids my age. I got one and played with it till it crashed, I soon lost interest not just because it crashed but because in reality, it couldn't take me anywhere. A few years later it was a bicycle I craved for, well this time not a toy bicycle. A real bicycle, it could take me places I couldn't get to ordinarily faster and more conveniently. A bicycle isn't the most sophisticated means of transportation but it's usually the first means of transportation that can be controlled at such a young age. Learning to ride a bike is a significant part of the growth process of any person because once learnt, it can't be forgotten. It's simple yet, empowering.

Talking about bicycle, in the early years of Apple, Steve Jobs talks about a study on the efficiency of locomotion by popular American science magazine - Scientific American in the early 70s, they looked for different species of things in the planet, birds and cats and dogs and fish and goats and measured how much energy it took for them to go from here to there. The condor - a vulture won using the least amount of energy. Man didn't do so well. Fortunately, someone at Scientific American was insightful enough to test a man with a bicycle, and man with a bicycle won. According to Steve Jobs, "What it showed was that man is a toolmaker, has the ability to make a tool to amplify an inherent ability that he has." ¹

The Primary Role of Technology

There's often being the debate on the primary role technology plays in the lives of users, is it making us do less hence promoting redundancy or simply helping us do things better thereby increasing efficiency? Ben Thompson addresses this issue when he talks about the two philosophies that the top tech companies have, He says "Google and Facebook have always been predicated on doing things for the user, just as Microsoft and Apple have been built on enabling users and developers to make things completely unforeseen." The first philosophy is that computers do things for people, while the second philosophy is that computer enables you to do your work better and more efficiently. He concludes by saying that no philosophy is better as both complement each other. ²

I believe the primary role of technology is to enable humans do more meaningful work. Technology is an enabler. Artificial Intelligence (AI) which is intelligence displayed by machine is simple and empowering. The rise of AI has meant that some occupations will decline, others will grow, and many more will change.

In response to the debate about what kind of effect technology would have on Job creation a report by McKinsey says “Historically, Technology has been a net job creator. For example, the introduction of the personal computer in the 1970s and 1980s created millions of jobs not just for semiconductor makers, but also for software and app developers of all types, customer-service representatives, and information analysts.”³ As more advancements is being made machines will be able to carry out more of the tasks done by humans, complement the work that humans do, and even perform some tasks that go beyond what humans can do. However, social, emotional, and higher cognitive skills, such as creativity, critical thinking, and complex information processing, will also see growing demand. Despite all the positives, the advancement of Artificial Intelligence hasn’t been without criticisms, often Elon musk and other like minded people have raised concerns that AI could destroy the world, stating that AI is capable of vastly more than anyone knows, and the rate of improvement is exponential.

Asking ourselves the right questions

The first profound shift in our way of living was the transition from foraging to farming, this happened about 10,000 years ago and was made possible by the domestication of animals. The agrarian economy was replaced by the industrial revolution. The World Economic forum succinctly explains the transitions between the different industrial revolutions, “The First Industrial Revolution used water and steam power to mechanize production. The Second used electric power to create mass production. The Third used electronics and information technology to automate production. Now a Fourth Industrial Revolution is building on the Third, the digital revolution that has been occurring since the middle of the last century. It is characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres.”⁴

As seen above every Industrial revolution rides on the back of the previous era, AI is an integral part of the fourth Industrial revolution and as such what it offers isn’t new. It’s only an upgrade on the existing. Instead of bothering about the jobs that AI would take, we should be asking the right questions. Klaus schwab comments on this issue in the *Fourth Industrial Revolution* saying “The question for all industries and companies, without exception, is no longer Am I going be disrupted?” but “When is disruption coming, what form will it take and how will it affect me and my organization?”⁵

Peter Drucker in *Managing Oneself* mentioned that “Success in the knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves - their strengths, their values, and how they best perform.”⁶ I believe applying Peter Drucker’s Questions in Managing Oneself

to the issue of AI and humanity would offer reasonable insights on how AI can allow us to make the most of ourselves. We should ask ourselves the following questions.

What are my Strengths?

We need to ask ourselves what are our most valuable strengths and focus on them. Stephen Klasko, CEO of Philadelphia's Jefferson Health says, "With AI on the horizon, training humans to be better robots doesn't make sense, The doctor of the future needs to be self-aware and empathetic." ⁷ Mundane and repetitive task can be automated, carrying out complex search and analysis can be done in no time, allowing humans to focus on what they are best at, which is social, emotional, and higher cognitive skills, contributing in ways that AI can't do.

How do I perform?

Drucker found that "Amazingly few people know how they get things done." It's not enough for us to know what we're good at, we also have to know how we work best. This includes knowing how we learn, receive information, come across to others, get tasks done, solve problems, etc. The advent of AI means we can choose to focus on what suits our style. An example of this is Speech to Text recognition which uses machine learning to convert voice to written text, this means people who aren't writers can communicate comfortably and easily pass across their ideas.

Also, Learning has been crucial to our existence as humans, as knowledge is passed on from one generation to another. Peter Drucker once said "Knowledge has to be improved, challenged, and increased constantly, or it vanishes." In recent times, Artificial Intelligence systems are able to identify students needs and come up with models which focus on learning methods and reasons for performances rather than just bald facts. This improves the understanding of how we learn and how we work with other people.

What are my values?

Imagine that in a split-second, a self driving car has to make a choice with moral and mortal consequences. Three pedestrians have just blindly stumbled into an oncoming crosswalk. With no time to slow down, an autonomous car will either hit the pedestrians or swerve off the road, probably crashing and endangering your life. Who should be saved?

The above question is known as the Self driving car dilemma which has been a part of recent discussions about the kind of algorithms that power AI and the type of people that write these algorithms. What kind of bias do algorithms have? what are their values? If we're going to let algorithms make decisions for us we must ensure that they are created by people who have right values such as Integrity, Compassion, Tolerance etc.

Where do I belong?

According to Drucker so much of what we call management consists in making it difficult for people to work. Company Environment should foster collaboration between humans and machines. The transition for replacing humans with AI should be gradual and there be room for retraining or efforts to re skill workers to fit into other roles.

As intelligent machines and software are integrated more deeply into the workplace, workflows and workspaces will continue to evolve to enable humans and machines to work together. For example, as self-checkout machines are introduced in stores, cashiers can become checkout assistance helpers, who can help answer questions or troubleshoot the machines.

How should I contribute?

A three-year study was carried out at NASA's Space Life Sciences Directorate on Innovation, The organisation used both the traditional collaborative R&D model led by its own experts, and also open online innovation platforms led by crowds of non-domain experts. The study found out that the most resistant scientists and engineers saw open source methods as a fundamental challenge to their professional identities. They defined themselves as "problem solvers," but open innovation crowdsourcing platforms didn't let them play that role; instead, they had to frame problems for someone else to solve. However, the most receptive scientists argued for the need to let go of the "how" of their work and refocus on the bigger "why." They called on their colleagues to shift their professional identities from "problem solvers" to "solution seekers."

It was found out that Open innovation efforts fail because of the scientists because they feel that other people are doing their work for them, they came to solve problems and having other people solve the problems make them feel like they're not contributing. ⁸

Similarly, people feel technology is a threat to their professional identities. Workers could feel they aren't contributing due to the involvement of AI in their work processes, but if we make them realise that it's a partnership and that AI is here to enhance their productivity and better achieve the end goals, it would change their outlook.

New Roles and Responsibilities of institutions and their Management

In a few hundred years, when the history of our time will be written from a long-term perspective, it is likely that the most important event historians will see is not technology, not the Internet, not e-commerce. It is an unprecedented change in the human condition. For the first time - literally - substantial and rapidly growing numbers of people have choices. For the first time, they will have to manage themselves. And society is totally unprepared for it.

Peter Drucker

It is evident that Institutions have a huge role to play as AI is on the verge of shaking up the foundations of society. The required levels of leadership and understanding of the changes underway, across all sectors are low when compared with the need to rethink our economic and social systems response to the changes in technology. The focus appears to be so much on AI taking over but I think we should focus more about the touch of humanity being lost in communication and execution of tasks, I suggest we should worry more about people thinking more like machines than machines thinking like people. We are left with more choices than before, asking ourselves the right questions would ensure we make the right decisions.

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⁶P.F Drucker, Managing Oneself (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 1999)

⁷Klaus Schwab, The Fourth Industrial Revolution (Switzerland: World Economic Forum, 2016)

⁸Hila Lifshitz-Assaf et al, "A Study of NASA Scientists Shows How to Overcome Barriers to Open Innovation" 2018, Harvard Business Review, 23 June 2018, <<https://hbr.org/2018/05/a-study-of-nasa-scientists-shows-how-to-overcome-barriers-to-open-innovation> >