

Digital transformation needs the human touch

Javier Bajer

Of course, we know that digital transformation is happening everywhere, driving how we live, work and even how we relate to each other.

From an HR perspective, things will change dramatically. Talent management and development functions will be decentralised, becoming powerful business tools for individuals and their managers. Most likely, our HR organisations will get smaller and a lot more business-relevant. Rather than struggling to earn the position of “business partners”, HR will become more strategic and, as such, an integral part of the business.

But for too many people, digital transformation carries a daunting perspective. There is a growing conversation about how many of our jobs are going to be replaced by more “intelligent” alternatives. The scaremongers have been too busy warning us of the discouraging future we are walking into. We have been told of the number of jobs that will disappear from this earth, a consequence of the relentless invasion of digital transformation. There is even a BBC website where you calculate the probability of losing your job to a robot in the next few years – amazing!

Call me an optimist, but I believe that this is an exciting opportunity for the world of work to reconnect with our true potential as humans.

For years, we have been designing (and resourcing) jobs without necessarily considering what people are best at. Any job was good enough so long as it could keep someone sufficiently busy, “productive” and earning an income so the economy could continue to turn. And as it goes, we have been too busy matchmaking people with work, favouring market dynamics over human unique abilities and preferences.

The proof that we have missed the plot is that, as shown by most Employee Engagement global indicators, nine out of ten people do not like their jobs today. Considering that we spend about a third of our lives working, this is rather significant. Over the recent years, we have developed alternative ways to “engage” our workforces by using a combination of pay, perks and promises – perhaps trying to compensate for those jobs where people were not adding their unique value. We have confused engagement with attachment, agreeing amongst ourselves that this is not actually a big problem, so long as it is everyone’s problem.

Digital transformation is now giving us the opportunity to create a new generation of jobs where humans can finally do what they are best at. HR professionals can now be very creative and design jobs based on what makes us different and special.

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Rather than competing with digital transformation, we need to embrace it, creating a partnership where both technology and people can produce sustainable value.

So, what makes people unique?

Organisations will benefit from exploiting the disruption that digital transformation is causing and design a new generation of jobs. These jobs need to take advantage of what makes humans unique, for two reasons: first, because it will increase engagement, giving people the possibility of adding value in a natural way. Second, because technology will not be as good as humans in these areas.

These are some ways in which humans are better than digital alternatives. Consider these when designing the new world of work, supporting people with technology in every possible opportunity.

Unstructured problem solving – creativity

People are great at solving problems where rules do not yet exist. Once they do, this learning can be 'passed on' to a tool,

allowing people to continue the exploration.

Designing a marketing campaign, resolving a customer's situation after a failed FAQ and writing a persuasive argument at a court case are all examples where humans can outperform computers (at least, for now).

Value driven

There are situations where it is key to making a value judgement, reading the context in its own merits and making a decision which would create a better outcome than the one which would have been produced by a rule-based series of equations.

Selling insurance, negotiating, adapting customer solutions and helpdesks could be digitalised up to a point. But in a competitive environment, human's capacity to navigate complexity to find unique paths is what will create distinct value.

Human "touch"

People's capacity to express empathy, care or make someone laugh when they need it will be a

tough one for technology. So, while the time and effort of nurses can be saved by having a smart patient's medicine reader that sends off top-up requests to the pharmacy and even transports it to the patient's room, it does not eliminate a nurse's job. Even better, in this case, the technology allows the nurses to focus their energy on what only they can do par excellence – give patients the emotional support, which, in combination with digital solutions, will contribute to an accelerated healing.

Of course, this does not mean everyone needs to retrain to work in care. Technology has the potential to transform our jobs, replacing dull and repetitive tasks with creative, holistic thinking and expertise requiring process that harnesses human potential at its fullest. We need to get better at understanding what makes humans unique, using technology in the right ways to empower people to add value through their jobs. Value that only they can add.

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