

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE INVASION

WITH AI SET TO CHANGE EVERYTHING, HERE'S WHAT HR LEADERS CAN DO TO PREPARE THE WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

By Heather Hudson

The world is set to be rocked by an innovation that is “more profound than electricity or fire,” said Google CEO, Sundar Pichai, at a Google town hall event in San Francisco in January 2018. “AI (artificial intelligence) is one of the most important things humanity is working on.”

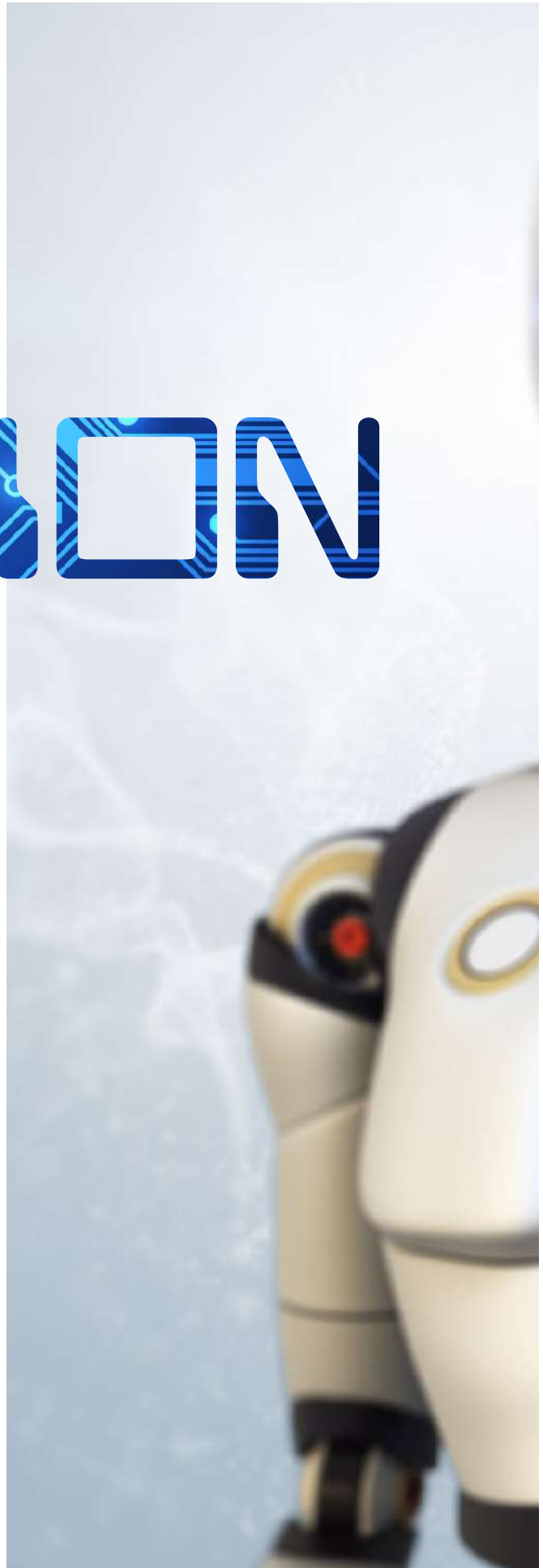
What does this mean for the world of work? What will workplaces look like in five, 10 or 15 years? How can HR leaders and employees prepare for the seismic shift that is set to take place?

While precise answers remain to be seen, many experts believe the future of work lies in humanity. Human beings need to “out-human” machines by cultivating skills that can't be learned by machines.

WHAT IS AI?

In broad terms, AI refers to the simulation of intelligence performed by a machine, one that mimics human capabilities. Since Alan Turing first coined the phrase in 1950, AI has exploded into a number of disciplines, including rules-based systems, machine learning, predictive analytics and pattern recognition.

“These overlapping disciplines create an ecosystem of capabilities that allows computers to become cognitive, to respond in a human-like fashion to their environment autonomously – without human intervention,” [said Steve Holder](#), national executive, analytic strategy at SAS, an analytics and data management company. “Even if the process of gathering information is autonomous,



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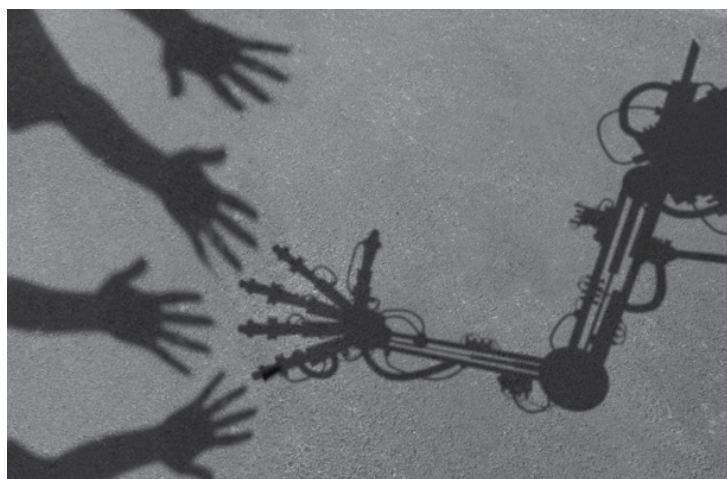
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AI is the simulation of intelligence, distinct from sentience or self-awareness.”

AI already has deep roots in our daily lives. A March 2018 special report by *The Economist* confirms that organizations across all types of industries are already “harnessing AI to do things like forecast demand, hire workers and deal with customers. In 2017, companies spent around \$22 billion on AI-related mergers and acquisitions, about 26 times more than in 2015.”

AI is embedded into the workplace with collaboration tools like Slack, which helps employees communicate – and it also provides data that helps managers learn how fast staff actually achieve milestones. Other AI software measures productivity, teamwork, professional interactions, deviations in expense claims and even improves hiring practices.



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“WHAT WE KNOW TODAY IS THAT WORKPLACES WILL NEED PEOPLE SKILLS FROM A JUDGMENT AND EMPATHY PERSPECTIVE. IT’S VERY DIFFICULT FOR AI TO BRING EMPATHY TO THE TABLE.”

– DARIO GUESCINI

PREPARING FOR THE WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE

Ontario’s Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development has outlined Essential Employability Skills that must be demonstrated to achieve a college-level diploma – regardless of the field of study – including communication, critical thinking and interpersonal skills.

George Brown College in Toronto is focusing on these skills within the curriculum of each of its diploma programs. The *GBC 7*, a research study conducted by the college, asked 1,000 employers about the skills that make an employee stand out.

“While technical skills are key to getting the job done right, employers told us they value people skills just as much. We call these key people skills the GBC 7.”

The GBC 7 builds on the essential skills identified by the ministry with input from employers. They are:

- Responsibility and work ethic
- Communication
- Teamwork and citizenship
- Customer service
- Problem solving
- Flexibility and resilience
- Initiative and perseverance

“Trade skills such as numeracy, STEM, science and math are important for the future, but in order to be successful, our students have to go to the next level and that means human skills. This is how you differentiate yourself,” said Dario Guescini, director of Work Integrated Learning at George Brown College. “At the end of the day, we don’t know what machines will be able to do. What we know today is that workplaces will need people skills from a judgment and empathy perspective. It’s very difficult for AI to bring empathy to the table.”

CREATING THE SHIFT RIGHT NOW

Cheryl Fullerton, EVP, people and communications at Corus Entertainment, says the rise of AI and the changing face of the workplace is not news to most HR leaders. In recent years, HR executives (and executives in general) have been talking a lot about the future of work. With machine learning and AI, we know we’ll have different kinds of jobs and will need different types of people. Skills won’t be about memorization, knowing facts or rote work. It will focus on more human elements of work, like critical thinking, judgement, relationship building and creativity.

“But the organizations we operate in today aren’t even close to shifting to embrace that mindset. Our infrastructures are very tied to old economy thinking. We all need to start shifting to the new economy now,” said Fullerton.

She believes hiring criteria needs to shift to increase the value of “human” skills and learning agility that employees bring to an organization.

“We should be hiring for capability and flexible thinking and problem-solving skills, and yet there’s still a barrier today [to getting hired] if you haven’t put in a number of years or completed a number of tasks in a very similar role or business area,” she said.

Bringing in talent from other industries or specializations may serve as a counterbalance to business processes that have been built over decades of tried and true best practices. Fullerton contends that there’s still a place for experienced and knowledgeable long-time staff in workplaces of the future – but they have to be balanced by disruptors.

“We need a heavy dose of people who don’t have any assumptions about ‘the right way’ to get things done,” she said. “That’s why retail is being disrupted the way it is. Customers don’t need to squeeze the Charmin; they can have it delivered to their homes. In manufacturing, machines can do a lot of the work previously done by people.”

She argues that recent advances made in these and other sectors are the work of leaders and employees with strong human skills.

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— CHERYL FULLERTON

Those who are willing to look at the needs and pain points of consumers and the power of technology and turn a business model on its head to allow it to be competitive in a new economy.

“This new dynamic makes our portfolio in people leadership more important than ever. I’ve lived through a lot of different things over the last 25 years, but I think the next couple of years are going to be a whole new level of change,” said Fullerton.

PREPARING THE WORKFORCE FOR THE FUTURE

For HR leaders and employees who’ve established a playbook on how to succeed in the old economy, a shift to valuing human or “soft” skills over experience may be challenging.

Corus Entertainment has introduced the concept of learning agility into its development programs for new, high-potential employees and for high-performing mid-career leaders. An assessment tool provides participants with a clear picture of their current level of agility and adaptability in areas like problem solving, change and interpersonal relationships so that conversations about development and career path can focus on these elements.

“We’re starting the shift to the future workforce within our organization by starting to teach people to value different things. You need to change thinking before you can ask people to change behaviours – for example, who to hire or who to promote,” said Fullerton. “We’re trying to look at talent from a view of who has flexibility in ability and approach, particularly when facing new situations. We’re asking questions to uncover, ‘Does this person in sales have the potential to go and do marketing or programming?’ We’re stretching conversations between functions and within functions. This kind of agility is crucial because what they’re doing right now may not exist in five years.”

Nick Todd, general manager at Expression for Growth, a global training provider, says the most in-demand skills employers seek today are human skills. Organizations around the world bring in his facilitators to provide training solutions that employees may not have encountered in their formal education or on-the-job learning.

“For us, the common thread is communication,” said Todd. “These are what some people call soft skills, but for lots of people, the soft stuff is the hard stuff. It makes the biggest difference to ask the right questions, listen to answers and seek to understand. That kind of skill set, whether you’re in leadership, sales or working on a team, makes a massive difference.”

He’s observed that the qualities that differentiate performance are softer skills like creative thinking and the ability to build productive habits and behaviours with good outcomes.

“Your background or practical skills are not always a good predictor of how you will show up with your soft skills.”

Another factor that sets workers apart from each other – and potential AI replacements – is emotional intelligence.

“Basic stuff like being able to ask good questions and really listen and be curious is amazingly effective, but it can be so hard for lots of people... 80 per cent of questions people ask are to confirm what they’re already thinking,” said Todd. “If you’re a manager and you want to find out how to motivate your team, rather than think of 72 different ways you could do it, engage your curiosity and invite a conversation so you’re receiving information and connecting at the same time.”

CREATING AN AGILE WORKPLACE

Building agility and resilience into workplace culture is a crucial way to help employees informally develop new skills.

“One of the things I love about Corus is that when people go on parental leave, we see it as a huge opportunity to give other people different workplace experiences and build up their strengths and potential for future opportunities,” said Fullerton.

They also try to build a culture where people can learn about, offer ideas and get involved in other parts of the business. People who embrace these opportunities help identify which employees are motivated to be agile and capable of accomplishing things in ways they hadn’t previously demonstrated. It’s also a chance for experienced professionals to rub off on people newer to the area and vice versa, creating that counterbalance between the knowledgeable and the disruptor.

Fullerton acknowledges that leadership plays an integral role in facilitating a culture of agility.

“Senior leaders have a big impact on what’s acceptable and what’s not. Leaders here have really spearheaded our culture of ‘test and learn,’ which makes it okay to speak up, try things and make mistakes. People here aren’t afraid of challenging and asking questions. One of our core values is to ‘think beyond,’ to challenge assumptions and invent opportunities. We actively work to nurture that.”

When it comes to creating a workplace for the future, the unknowns can be overwhelming. Fullerton advises making small changes rather than waiting for full answers.

“We spend a lot of time thinking and talking about the future of work, disruption and building cultures of innovation, but we’re not yet spending the same amount of time actually getting started on it.

“For now, we have to play in both worlds at the same time. We just have to get started.” ■