

Leadership mantra in the age of AI

Creating a synergy between human and machine will be the winning formula in this brave new world of Artificial Intelligence

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The invention of steam engine way back in the 17th century ushered in an era of machines replacing the muscle power of human beings. The second machine age led by Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the potential to replace humans in the areas of brain power – by virtue of which the human species is superior to all others.

AI has been identified as the biggest existential threat to humans by Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk. The late Stephen Hawking had also expressed apprehensions that future developments in AI “could spell the end of the human race.” Or, as well-known author Yuval Noah Harari says, “AI will create a useless class” of humans. These apprehensions are a fallout of the ground-breaking developments taking place in the field of machine learning – where technology is supplementing (even supplanting) human intelligence.

Notwithstanding these concerns, use of AI has been permeating almost every field, every industry and even routine activity. It is already helping business leaders in automating business processes, gaining insights through advanced data analytics and engaging with customers/employees with natural language-processing chatbots.

Active use of AI has been instrumental in expediting diagnostics, development of vaccines and treatment protocol for the Covid-19 pandemic. The need of the hour is, therefore, to enhance the capabilities of human beings

with the support of these intelligent machines while attempting to keep the apprehensions at bay. A leader in any organisation will, therefore, need to develop skills to seamlessly fuse this ‘mechanical’ workforce with ‘human’.

The following skills may come in handy:

Adaptability: The pace of technological advancement is matching the speed of light in the virtual world of data and product life is getting shorter day by day. The average product life-cycle for smartphones is only 12-24 months. A leader needs to adapt to this pace of change and use technology to keep his organisation ahead.

Emotional intelligence: We score over machines, at present, on emotions and empathy even though AI-enabled machines are catching up fast. The capability to manage his/her emotions and the ability to connect with/mould other humans offers a clear advantage to a leader where success would depend on influencing other people.

Data vision: 2.5 quintillion bytes of data is created each day, which is accelerating with the growth of Internet of Things (IoT). The machines are better than human beings in identifying patterns from the data and present it into interactive dashboards. Leaders need to develop a data vision to discern signals from noise in data using dashboards to carve out an effective business strategy, vision and mission of the organisation.

The process would typically involve mapping, mining, preparation, modelling, analysis, evaluation and deployment of data



AI has the potential to replace humans in the areas of brain power ISTOCK

solutions. Considering the capability of AI to process and calculate a lot more information than humans, Deep Knowledge Ventures (DKV), a venture capital firm in Hong Kong, made history in 2017 when it appointed the first AI robot to the board of directors. DKV has decided not make any positive investment decisions without getting approval from Vital.

Innovation: Innovation has always been crucial to an organisation’s long-term success. In this age, innovation has to be ‘innovated’ to exploit machine intelligence to improve productivity, engage customers and employees, improve service delivery and optimise business processes.

Judgment: For any business leader, the importance of predicting the next market shift or great product and making sense of multiple factors needs no emphasis. AI tools are increasingly being adopted to capture patterns from the market and predict emerging trends. However, in machine guided decision-making,

the judgment of a leader becomes all the more important. The AI algorithm, Beauty.AI, used to assess an international beauty contest, turned into an embarrassment as the algorithm picked the winners solely on the basis of skin colour. A leader has to ensure that bias-free data is used for machine learning and results are thoroughly validated before deploying the model.

Vigilance on ‘fake’ data: Deep-fake, a branch of machine learning, applies neural net simulation to massive data sets, to create a ‘fake’. Jordan Peel, an American comedian, used some of the latest AI techniques to create a fake video of Barack Obama commenting on President Donald Trump to demonstrate the possibilities of misuse of AI technology.

One can imagine what can be the consequences of such foul play in a culturally diverse society as in India where deep fakes can be used to create mistrust among different religious groups. A

leader will have to be wary of such fake information to avoid any adverse impact.

Privacy of data

Data is the new gold and data mining – legal or illegal – has become crucial. The leaders of the new world will be required to mitigate cyber risks which involves establishing organisational policies ranging from employee behaviour to technical security controls.

Human resource management: Various studies suggest that 30-40 per cent of the jobs will be lost to automation by 2030. Some jobs will disappear but there is also no doubt that new positions will spring up. The leaders will have to create an enabling environment where man and machine can work side by side, compensate for the other’s weaknesses and complement the other’s strengths.

As AI increases in size and scale, leaders would need to cultivate a culture of lifelong learning. It is estimated that every 10 years, a person will have to acquire new skills to remain relevant in this second machine age.

The most daunting challenge before a leader in the second machine age will be to sustain the relevance of man by leveraging capabilities which can possibly not be emulated by smart machines.

Synergy between human and machine is the winning formula to brave this new world. In the second machine age, a leader can flip the coin of technology in his favour by enhancing the above competencies.

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