

Beyond Minutia: HR Minding the Future Frontier

By **Isabelle St-Jean**

TECHNOLOGY. WE LOVE IT AT WORK AND IN LIFE, BUT WE KNOW it also presents certain entrapments that can be difficult to avoid. What if we could develop a new relationship with technology? Let's consider a technology with which the time-consuming, daily minutia, data collection, basic-learning and a multitude of other tasks can be fully handled by AI—to let us humans do better what technology can not.

Once our minds are relieved from smaller, detailed preoccupations and interruptions, they are free to reflect, share and integrate fresh insights, dive into deeper potential, innovate and envision ways to create a better future. No longer threatening to engulf us or escape our control, AI could better serve us, free us, ultimately enabling our brains—now far better known thanks to neuroscience—to focus on what matters most. Would this not allow our minds to reach new, expanded vistas, from which visionary concepts and timely solutions emerge?

Empowering Strategic HR

As per several inspiring speakers's highlights at the recent HR Conference + Tradeshow 2018 in May, there is growing support for exactly such thinking—fostering higher visions of workplaces inclusive of modern technologies and real-time modern thinking. With a wealth of tools and software already in the proverbial pipeline, there seems to be a convergence of both purpose and potential for AI to assist in lifting us above from myriad, minute tasks to achieve something more.

For example, consider how much payroll programs, which have long been integrated in progressive work sites, have continued to evolve. In conversation with HRIS/payroll consultant Alan McEwen, he explained that the newer systems enable employees to log in and self-serve, access their remaining vacation time, make changes to their benefits plan and so on. In essence, such technology, as it did from its HRIS origins, will continue to liberate HR professionals to serve more strategic purpose by alleviating the administrative function even further.

Smarter Tools Enable Engagement

Likewise, in the process of hiring, technology is often being leveraged to enable companies to more quickly hire the best employees they can find. According to conference presenter Sarah Wilson, head of people for SmartRecruiters, and previously director of performance management and talent acquisition for

Indigo, research shows that the right combination of AI and the best human-driven hiring practices can help companies grow three times faster.

Similarly, while technology saves time in the hiring process, onboarding can also be automated to optimize the new employee's ability to step into production mode with ease, surety and flow. Keeping in mind the importance of balancing the use of AI with the human elements, Wilson reminded us that technology can never fully replace humans—particularly because the cultural fit is ultimately something still best assessed by a perceptive HR professional or recruiter.

In payroll, hiring and other functions, with time saved, HR professionals can do more of what truly engages their passion: listen to and support their people to reach for and achieve their ambitions, as they draw out the best from within employees to further drive engagement and productivity. With fewer interruptions or the need to attend to the “small stuff,” our minds remain open to engaging the greater potential both within us and our teams.

An Opportunity to Attune

With fewer administrative burdens, HR professionals are also better able to focus their efforts where they impact most, with culture being a great, but challenging, starting place, as noted by Steve Cadigan in his keynote conference address. Looking back at his LinkedIn HR days, Cadigan stressed the need for organizations to be creative and intentional about how we articulate elements of culture.

Finding those keystones of connection between your culture and customers, striking a tone that resonates with employees and knowing the pulse of your organization are all aspects with which AI again can provide an assist. However, as with many aspects of the evolving technology picture, striking the balance and communicating the bigger picture remains a uniquely human challenge and opportunity.

Technology No Silver Bullet

Indeed, balance is key to thriving in our relationship with AI overall. “It's like yin and yang,” said Dan Pontefract, consultant, chief envisionser of the Telus Transformation Office and author of *The Purpose Effect*. He stressed that we must keep technology in balance with necessary changes in human behaviours. While applications of AI can further culture change, help us focus on

innovating faster and handle productivity concerns, it is not a “silver bullet” in Pontefract’s view.

Furthermore, Pontefract cautioned, “Technology can sometimes mask other underlying problems such as engagement issues.” In fact, it’s not uncommon for organizations to become overly focused on technology as a problem solver while overlooking the importance of human actions and behaviours. Too often in organizations, we forget the fact that humans need time and mind space to envision new possibilities, breakthroughs and solutions.

Welcome to the Human Pace

In his upcoming book, *Open to Think: Slow Down, Think Creatively and Make Better Decisions*, Pontefract expands further on such thinking. While AI can free us by outsourcing the minutia, Pontefract says, it can also keep us riveted to our screens where we become overly busy and yet not necessarily in a purposeful mode. The unfortunate result is that taking action incessantly, at an often-frenetic pace, is valued over taking the time to pause, ponder and allow new, actionable ideas to surge.

As HR professionals know the danger in such thinking, there is a very real need to secure technology that works best for their organizations, while creating more structured and informal learning/insight opportunities among teams. In turn, when new and brilliant ideas are intentionally invited and heeded, they can be used for the greater benefit of the organization and its people—bringing technology full circle in the employment cycle.

Circles, Cycles and Connecting

In essence, while technology defines our reach, it is the human element that it enables to prosper which gives rise to ever greater, shared potential. This equates to author Otto Scharmer’s concept of freeing the “Circle Being,” which he defines in his seminal book, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, as the greater collective intelligence which, given right circumstances, can ignite in the midst of a passionate team setting aside ego while inquiring and pondering important questions.

Working with large successful companies, Scharmer has been explaining and enabling the integration of new concepts such as presencing—“leaning into and connecting with our highest future potential” as individuals and as an organization. In this field of heightened awareness, explains Scharmer, our consciousness changes: it slows down, opens up, redirects, lets go and lets come.

What this thinking involves is what we need most in a future of increasing AI presence—a shared mindset open to integrating the new, groundbreaking game changers with a refreshed perspective of core principles. 📍

Professional speaker, author and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, PCC brings to her clients two decades of experience in leading, educating and providing practical solutions to major work/life challenges and transitions.



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