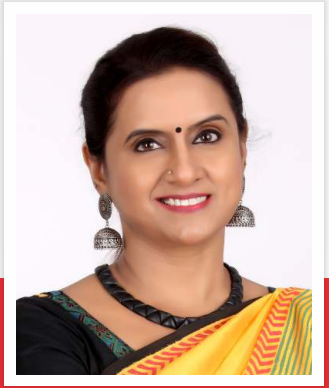
Being Human in the Age of AI
Can We Draw a Line?

Dr Saundarya Rajesh, the founder President of AVTAR group is inspirational in her approach to tackling systemic issues.

Her first entrepreneurial venture, AVTAR Career Creators, a recruitment and diversity consulting firm emphasises the importance of women at the workplace. After a research project in 2005 revealed the large untapped potential of the Indian Woman Professional, Saundarya increased her focus on gender. In 2011 she set up FLEXI Careers India to focus on women transitioning into a career and in 2017, she extended this into education with Project PUTHRI - India's first ever developmental project that seeks to create Career Intentionality among underprivileged girl students.

She has deservedly received multiple awards: Nari Shakthi Ambassador for the Ministry for Women & Child Development in 2018, #100Women Achiever of India in 2016; the 25 Women Transforming India Award by Niti Aayog in 2016, the FCCI FLO Women Entrepreneur of the Year award in 2012; and the SCOPE Women Exemplar award in 2006, to name a few.



Dr. Saundarya Rajesh

Being Human in the Age of AI – Can We Draw a Line?

In a nutshell

In an era where Artificial Intelligence (AI) has irrevocably penetrated the lives of people, especially users of the new age economy, an important question is this – how much is too much? In today's times, the HR function is no longer limited to managing people and their aspirations to deliver business results. It is managing ecosystems of human-machine co-existence and deploying AI technologies to obtain results, solve problems and enrich employee experiences at their workplaces. How does a human, more specifically a human resource professional, draw the line between utilising technology to create efficient work and actually losing the empathy that the function is built on? Can the HR function strike fine balances between the 'transactional' and the 'emotional' while using AI to deliver experiences? Is it possible to really be human in the age of AI?

> The real risk with artificial intelligence isn't malice but competence. A superintelligent AI will be extremely good at accomplishing its goals, and if those goals aren't aligned with ours, we're in trouble.
>
> **Max Tegmark**, Author,
> "Life 3.0, Being Human in the Age of AI"

I first had the opportunity to discuss in detail about Artificial Intelligence when I spoke at a conference on Diversity & Inclusion and one of the attendees, young Santhosh ("Call me Santy"), a freshly minted MBA HR who had got campus-placed into one of the Big Five, stood up to ask me a question.

"Dr. Rajesh" (Yes, the doctorate is usually awarded to my husband for no fault of his) "When you speak about Diversity & Inclusion, is it possible that a more inclusive world can actually be created by machines, because they are by definition, sans emotions and therefore minus biases?"

It was a question that made me ponder long.

The advent of Artificial Intelligence in Human Resources Function in India

18 years since the turn of the millennium, there is an ever growing need to embrace digital/ Artificial intelligence (AI) -powered technologies for solutions, particularly when people like Santy - the millennial generation - are set to take up 75 per cent of the global workforce by 2025[1]. Matching majority employee expectations requires the HR function to be as nimble as a food delivery app that Santy favors, as agile as an ecommerce platform that he is a die-hard loyalist of. However, for the Human Resources Management function to stay true to its existential purpose – that of enabling humans, it is important that technology remains an aid and not the sole navigator of processes. This means that the onus is on managers and

leaders as users of artificially intelligent systems to consciously infuse emotions into what could otherwise become transactional experiences.

But going back to the question asked by Santy, can AI actually remove the flaws in human-driven processes? Or would it, on the contrary, end up contributing to the 'dehumanising' of the human resource function?

To answer this question, it is imperative to scrutinize the permeation of AI in HR. Artificial Intelligence systems by definition are augmented tools that perceive the environment, emulate human intelligence by inferencing vast repositories of data and enable humans to maximize success in achieving their goals. Such systems are fast becoming powerful place holders in business environments – the Human Resources function included. Machine learning tools that are at the heart of all AI systems today, are capable of big data led deep learning. They are significantly faster than humans in drawing case based inferences and creating insights, after processing several terabytes of data. Contextualising to HR, the 4 prominent areas in which Artificial Intelligence will continue to impact are a) Talent Acquisition, b) Talent Management, c) Training and d) Compensation and Benefits.

Talent Acquisition

Talent Acquisition managers today have access to systems that can skim through millions of profiles to identify the best organisational fits. This is a huge benefit as it allows the recruiter to spend quality time evaluating just that select group of eligible profiles. HR units are able to increase the quality of hiring decisions and cut down on heavy costs of screening and selection. Cognizant was one of the earliest adopters of AI based shortlisting systems, throwing in SMAC[2] based processes too to enhance flavour. LinkedIn, world's largest professional online network, recently reported that repetitive jobs within recruiting, such as CV reading and data processing/correlating, will soon be automated – allowing human talent to be better used in more strategic aspects of the HR role.[3]

Fig.1 shows how Artificial Intelligence and Machine learning are likely to impact recruiting activity in the near future. This chart developed by LinkedIn maps Automation Potential (from High to Low) in the X-axis against the Value added with Human Touch in the Y-axis.

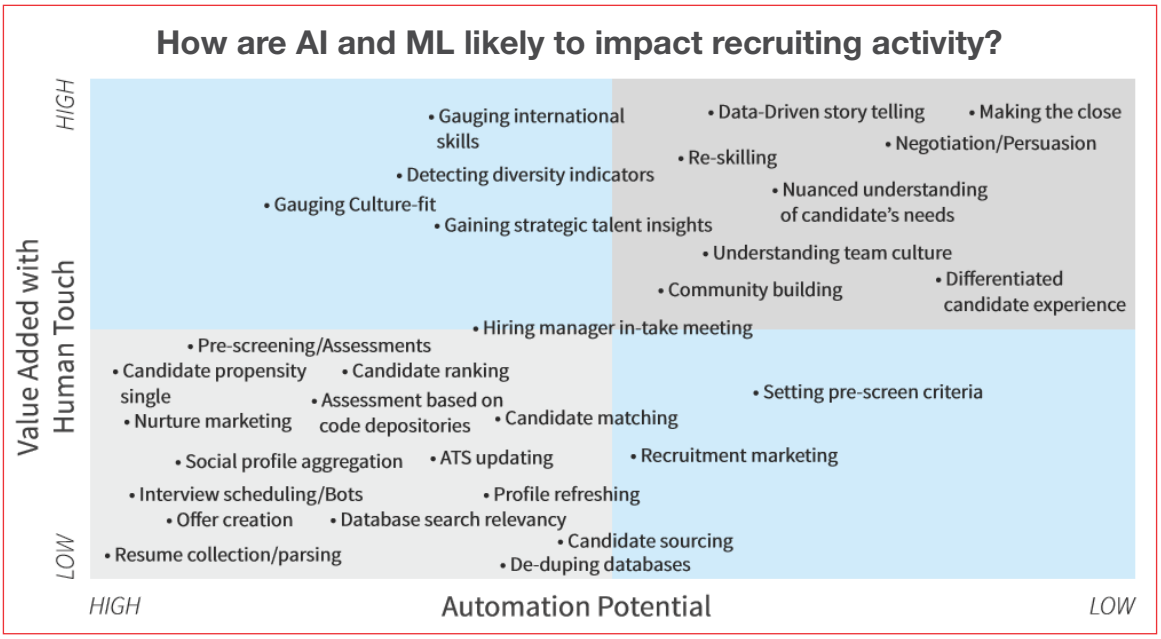


Figure 1: How are AI and ML likely to impact recruiting activity? Source: LinkedIn[4]

Talent Management

AI's role in talent management begins right from the on-boarding process and impacts all employee engagement efforts, a key tactical component in the HR function. Today, AI powered systems can conduct and analyse organisation-wide employee surveys to unveil several workforce trends and preferences. Google[5], world leaders in all things AI, used this tool very effectively to conduct sentiment analysis of their workforce and prepare themselves to gird up engagement. AI also helps organizations examine past performance trends of individuals & teams and give insights to HR on the steps that need to be taken to improve performance or morale as and when the tool spots a potential threat or identifies a problem area.

Learning & Development

The biggest catalysts of career progression of employees, L&D initiatives become more effective when an employee's career progression is mapped to the organizational goals and strategically chartered. Accenture[6] has experimented with AI in customising L&D initiatives for each employee at appropriate junctures in order to provide more effective learning experiences. Remote classrooms and digital classes that are AI powered will expand the scope of employee learning, a vital business prerequisite in this VUCA world.

Compensation & benefits

Compensation & benefits – another pivotal area under the purview of the HR function is also significantly impacted by AI systems. Built on complex, neural algorithms, AI can fast detect patterns that statistically correlate employees' past responses to the organization's comp & ben layout. Such tools will determine the overall workplace morale and recommend relevant actions in the areas of concern. Eventually, such systems will also help predict and project employee behaviour patterns and ensure retention.

Over 58% of the Indian companies are already using AI work at scale, beyond pilot and test projects. The number of AI start-ups has increased since 2011 at a compounded annual growth rate of 86% in the country[7]. AI is all set to revolutionize manufacturing, transport, healthcare, finance and retail industries to name a few. A 2017 report by McKinsey states that much as automation causes declines in some occupations, automation will change many more—60 percent of occupations have at least 30 percent of constituent work activities that could be automated[8]. It will also create new occupations that do not exist today, much as technologies of the past have done. By 2030, 75 million to 375 million workers (3 to 14 percent of the global workforce) will need to switch occupational categories.

So, getting back to Santy's question that started this all, the challenge (and opportunity) for the HR function across sectors would be to effectively manage professional ecosystems where digital intelligence and human intelligence together drive organizational processes. 'Uberisation of the workforce' isn't some distant reality – fluid, dynamic people teams that collaborate virtually are fast becoming the order of the day. And with organizations increasingly moving to a learning paradigm, the onus on HR function is multi-fold – to enable flatter organisations that have cross-functional teams, to find avenues for continual up-skilling and re-skilling, and most importantly help decision makers drive process automation from front.

Table 1 summarises the top-down impact of AI led systems in the HRM frameworks of fast growth organisations today.

HRM sub-function	Current impact	Projected impact	Scope for greater human intervention
Talent Acquisition	• Intelligent access to millions of candidate profiles • Improved quality of hiring decisions	• Bias- free screening of huge volumes of candidate profiles • Projections on potential recruit's future in the organisation	• Train AI systems on quality data that can positively impact hiring decisions • Upskill the HR fraternity to leverage AI tools, in an inclusive manner
Talent Management	• Sentiment Analysis on employee communication channels • Tracking impact and growth of organisation wide initiatives for talent management	• Predict employee retention rates with greater precision • Identify differentials in aspirations of a diverse workforce through nuances in workplace communication and behaviour	• Ensure that employee experiences retain the necessary human touch • Respect employee aspirations around data privacy and security
Learning & Development	• Intelligently conduct training need analyses based on skill deficits • Customize L&D plans for employees	• Deliver virtual employee sessions on massive scales • Conduct continual assessments of training needs to improve business efficacy	• Identify appropriate benchmarks to gauge impact of L&D initiatives • Leverage AI systems to identify patterns in usage of L&D initiatives, to create deeper, wider impacts
Compensation & Benefits	• Correlate employees' past responses to the organization's comp & ben layout to detect aspirational patterns • Benchmark comp & ben schemes against market standards	• Analyse impact of comp & ben components on employee morale & performance, at an individual level • Predict employee aspirations for comp & ben, packing these effectively into annual budgets	• Use AI tools to identify disparities in comp & ben packages • Train AI systems on unique organizational values that drive comp & ben, to improve efficacy

AI in HR: Augmented or Artificial?

When systems are data driven, it is important to identify the 'ethical lines', the crossing of which may result in infringement of privacy. Harvesting of personal data has proven to be a double edged sword, more so in the wake of recent scams. Though having a technology-managed system atmosphere will enable you to perform mundane activities in seconds, having an integrated AI-based HR function can also pose a series of threats or challenges.

HR data is humungous and is often not organized or structured in most companies. For example, a company may have different types of systems to record varied data. To apply a unified algorithm across the systems may result in deceptive interpretations. So companies will have to collect, collate all the data in one integrated platform for an AI system to analyse appropriately and produce the desired results.

The second is how much of the data is personal. The challenge will be in explaining to employees what data of theirs will be used where and how – transparency would be key. Santy would not appreciate his data being used to train a machine. So an AI system will have to put policies and structures in place that will protect employee privacy, and also ensure that the available data is used for positive purposes and results. This also means creating highly secure systems to host such AI tools, breach of which are impossible. With hacking methodologies also becoming smarter with every passing day, this remains a continual challenge.

Finally, we come to the predicament of staying human while being wired. Today there is an increasing emphasis on organizational work cultures, changing demographics and the need to develop equitable, inclusive work environments for diverse workforces. But when we incorporate AI to an already built-in diverse work environment which Santy and his friends cohabit, the humane touch disappears somewhere in the middle. In the race for digital inclusion, human inclusion may become less of a priority.

AI in D&I (Diversity & Inclusion)

The dimensions of diversity in a workplace of today include gender, generation, physical capabilities, culture, sexual orientation, to name a few. Juxtaposing these in an artificially intelligent world, machines and bots could emerge as representatives of a significant strand of workforce diversity. Inventive inclusion that requires thoughtful intervention will become key. In fact not just key, but indispensable to avoid machine-led extensions of structural, economic, social, and political imbalances that would further pronounce inequalities based on different demographic variables.

Exclusion and bias that are by-products of data discrimination will have to be watched out for in an artificially intelligent, diverse world. 'Data silos' will have to be systematically identified and disbanded locally and globally. While the machines do the drudgery of monotonous work, thought leaders and HR managers will have to increasingly focus on training their AI systems on data representative of the organizational agenda on inclusion.

Conclusion

"Santy, let's not imagine Artificial Intelligence systems for HR to be like Tony Stark's Man Friday - Jarvis. We are presently still talking about bots and virtual assistants written using the language R, which pull data about 100 times better and faster than your XL pivot. So, what you feed is what you get. If you feed in biased data, then the machine spews out biased answers. If your training data is bias-free, you can expect the machine to be unprejudiced too. In that sense, AI is like the genie that jumped out of the bottle – if you train and command it to be empathetic, inclusive and sensitive, it will be. If you use it to deepen the divides, then the AI genie will be just as happy to deliver that as well!" – even as I answered young Santy, I realised that AI - a technological marvel of our times – similar to electricity or motorised vehicles in the past – is the equivalent of fire to the Neanderthal Man. You can use it to create, or destroy.

There aren't many facets of life untouched by AI. Such inevitability places great responsibility on us – the users. Especially, all of us in the HR fraternity who will continue to build and burnish organizations to ensure great workplaces. We will be called upon to demonstrate even greater empathy and inclusion than before, now that we have the benefit of machines that take away our drudge work. We will have the power of augmented intelligence to stay more human than ever before.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Max Tegmark again, (whose disquieting quote formed the frontispiece of this article) "Career advice for today's kids: Go into professions that machines are bad at – those involving people, unpredictability and creativity". I think he just described the HR function.

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