The Insightful Leader Podcast Transcript
How You Should Divvy Up Work Between People and Machines

Jessica LOVE: These days, the line between the work that people and the work that robots do is becoming increasingly blurred in the workplace. Tasks once done by the bank are now being split among a person, an ATM, and a smartphone app—and you could tell a similar story about travel agents or many factory workers. And as artificial intelligence masters more and more skills, humans and machines may soon be sharing labor in all kinds of fields. Here's Adam Waytz.

Adam WAYTZ: So, now, it's become clear that white collar work—I've heard amongst radiologists there's a concern that machine learning programs have become extremely good at automating cancer diagnosis.

LOVE: From here on out, no matter where you work, machines are going to be a big part of how work gets done. So Waytz thinks it's high time that everyone—especially those of us who manage workers—start thinking about an important question:

WAYTZ: How do we optimally divide labor between humans and machines?

LOVE: Welcome to *The Insightful Leader*, from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. Earlier this year, Adam Waytz published a book called *The Power of Human: How Our Shared Humanity Can Help Us Create a Better World*. One of the ideas at the core of this book is that, if you let humans and machines play to their unique strengths, you can build a happier workplace—one that helps your employees to feel valued and purposeful in an increasingly automated world. Today on the podcast, Waytz shares three guidelines that will help leaders figure out which tasks should go to robots, and which should go to people.

   [musical interlude]

LOVE: The first principle for divvying up work: Let the humans handle the moral stuff, like making sure people are treated fairly. Now, on the one hand, this might sound backwards. After all, isn't one of the great things about machines that they're impartial, calculating, well… machines? So shouldn't they make objectively good decisions about things like bias or fairness? As Waytz explains, there's actually more to it than that.

WAYTZ: The problem is, oftentimes, utilitarian decisions miss other moral things that we care about, like was anyone discriminated against in the process?

LOVE: To explain, he points to a service that Amazon rolled out a few years back.

AMAZON AD: Introducing Prime free same-day delivery, available seven days a week, exclusively for Prime members in metro areas all across the country… **[fade out]**

LOVE: When Amazon rolled out its same-day delivery service, they initially used an algorithm to decide which ZIP codes should be eligible.

WAYTZ: So part of what goes into their algorithm are, "Where are shipping centers? Where are other Prime customers?"

LOVE: Seemingly innocuous stuff—right?

WAYTZ: But as Bloomberg News discovered, Prime was inadvertently discriminating against predominantly African-American neighborhoods.

LOVE: The algorithm had disproportionately excluded these neighborhoods from their same-day service. Now, the data they fed into their algorithm did not include anything about race, so the company thought its decision would be neutral and unbiased. But nonetheless, the bias found its way in.

So once this problem was discovered, what did Amazon do? It brought in people to correct the discrimination that the algorithm had created. Managers just looked at which neighborhoods had been excluded, and intentionally expanded the service to many of those places. Which demonstrates the other side of Waytz's point: Humans are actually pretty good at spotting moral problems that machines can't see.

WAYTZ: So if you're developing an algorithm to bring goods to people as efficiently as possible, you still need a human working on that algorithm to say, "Okay, are we discriminating against any neighborhoods? Is anyone missing from our delivery routes?" Things like that.

LOVE: What's more, Waytz says, there's actually research showing that people tend to like when humans are the ones who make moral decisions. So letting them do so will not only help your organization avoid bias—it will also earn the trust of your customers and employees.

      [musical interlude]

LOVE: Waytz's next guideline for dividing up labor is that humans are happier when they get to try new things—to deal with surprises, and improvise when they need to. For instance, if you're working at a call center and you have to follow a rigid script on every call, that's going to get old *fast*. To Waytz, a better alternative is what shoe delivery company Zappos does.

WAYTZ: There are no scripts at Zappos. So they say to their employees, "Just handle any call the best to your abilities." And that lets people feel more empowered and lets people feel like they have some real agency.

LOVE: So, building off of that idea. Waytz's second recommendation for organizations in an increasingly automated world:

WAYTZ: Let robotics do the dull rote stuff of sifting through data and then have humans provide their specific expertise. This is also referred to, I believe, as "human in the loop thinking."

LOVE: One good example of human-in-the-loop thinking is an AI platform from MIT that's designed to evaluate cybersecurity threats.

WAYTZ: So what the cybersecurity platform does is, it pours through endless amounts of data, emails, et cetera. It does the robotic work of just crunching a lot of numbers going through millions of pieces of data that humans couldn't do and identifies, "Is there a cyber threat or not?" When you leave the platform on its own, it produces a lot of false positives. But you feed some of the output to human security experts, and the human security experts then say, "Okay, well, this one's a false positive, this one's good, this one's bad, this one's good," and then feed that back to the machine—in other words, humans really doing the human work of looking into the details.

LOVE: … which is much more engaging than sifting through thousands of emails every day. It's the kind of work that's not going to burn you out after a year or two. So making sure your people aren't being expected to act like robots can increase your employees' satisfaction, and help your organization retain good people.

But not only that—organizing labor in this way will also help you get more out of your AI. For example, in that cybersecurity platform Waytz described, every time a human corrects a false positive that the machine has identified...

WAYTZ: The machine learns from the human and is much closer to perfection in detecting security threats.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: Waytz' final suggestion involves emotional labor. In other words, the work of mustering empathy and regulating your emotions in difficult situations. Emotional labor is required for a lot of jobs, from doctors, to flight attendants, to customer service representatives. And Waytz's suggestion here is a little counterintuitive. You remember earlier he made the case that moral decisions are probably better left to people, who can notice nuances and spot problems. You might think that if that's the case, then humans should handle emotional stuff too. But Waytz says, not necessarily.

In fact, his third recommendation is actually to offload certain emotional work to machines. As odd as this may sound, it's actually already begun to happen.

PEPPER AD: Say hello to Pepper! Pepper is not your typical robot. Pepper is here to make people happy! **[fade out]**

LOVE: This is an ad for Pepper. It's this short, humanoid robot that's able to read faces and emotions and respond accordingly. Pepper is being deployed in places like hospitals, where even simple tasks—like giving a patient directions or answering questions about parking— can be charged with emotional weight. Because Pepper has something like empathy, it can take care of these simple tasks, so that doctors and nurses save their emotional energy for those moments when their patients need it most.

In other contexts, machines can help *keep* stressful or frustrating situations from arising in the first place. Waytz gives a relatable example.

WAYTZ: If you call a bank, typically you have to do all these things to prove that you are you, to authenticate yourself. And it can be frustrating to go through that with a human. Then by the time you get to your inquiry, you're annoyed. But there's much more efficient biometric software that can detect who you are by your voice and deal with that authenticating part of the customer service process. So then, by the time you get to the human, you're not so frustrated and taking out your annoyance on them. And the human can deal with your specific inquiry, and experience less burnout from trying to manage your emotions.

LOVE: Again, this isn't just hypothetical. When a European bank implemented this kind of software to handle authentication, it reduced call time and 93 percent of callers gave their call a positive rating.

If you follow these three suggestions—letting humans handle moral questions, giving robotic work to the machines, and divvying up emotional labor—Waytz thinks that the people at your organization will feel more like people. And as a result, they'll be happier and more motivated—not to mention, you'll likely get more out of your technology, too. Altogether, your organization will be better off as a result.

  [musical interlude]

LOVE: This program was produced by Kevin Bailey, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Jake Smith, Michael Spikes, and Emily Stone. It was written by Jake Smith, and edited by Michael Spikes.

Special thanks to Adam Waytz.

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