

EXPERT HUMANS

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EXPERT HUMANS

Critical Leadership Skills for a Disrupted World

By

Michael Jenkins



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80071-261-4 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80071-260-7 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80071-262-1 (Epub)



ISOQAR certified
Management System,
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Environmental
standard
ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated to Margaret Dunlop, a truly Expert Human.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family for their invaluable ideas, insights and suggestions during the writing of *Expert Humans*: my wife Joyce for thinking things through with me, my daughter Maia for her superb advice and feedback, and my son Nat for his technical assistance. Thanks everyone!

I would also like to thank Andy Dunlop, Dr Robyn Wilson, Dr Vijayan Munusamy, and my agent Nick Wallwork for their unstinting support and encouragement. Thank you.

Michael Jenkins

Singapore, 2020

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Michael Jenkins was born and spent his early years in Malaysia. He graduated from Durham University in Chinese Studies followed by postgraduate studies in Japanese language, politics, and economics at Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan (supported by a scholarship from the Rotary Foundation for International Understanding) after which he worked for Toyota Motor Corporation for four years as a Motor Analyst in the Overseas Planning Department.

Returning to the United Kingdom in 1988, he worked at the University of Bath as Director of the Foreign Languages Centre where he established and taught on the UK's first PG Diploma in Japanese and English Interpreting and Translation. In 2001, after two years with INSEAD in France as Regional Director, Japan and Korea, he returned to Asia as Director of INSEAD Executive Education in Singapore. He subsequently took on the role of Managing Director of the Center for Creative Leadership Asia Pacific and in 2009 he joined Roffey Park Institute in the United Kingdom as CEO. Moving back to Singapore, he joined the Human Capital Leadership Institute as CEO in July 2018 before moving to set up a new company, Expert Humans in April 2020.

The United Kingdom's *HR Magazine* named him as one of the United Kingdom's Most Influential Thinkers in Human Resources in 2013 and again in 2016. He served as a member of the Institute of Human Resource Professionals Board in Singapore from 2018 to 2020 and in July 2020 he joined the UK-based FutureWork Forum (which explores the working world of tomorrow) as a Partner. He is a regular contributor at conferences in Singapore and abroad where he specialises in topics such as humanising the workplace, new thinking in leadership development, the Future of Work, and sustainability.

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a disrupted world where change is rapid and relentless. Technological advances and an acceleration in adverse global climate change underscore a massive quickening of transformation and disruption. Added to this we have far-reaching global health challenges, ongoing and persistent inequality of many kinds and an all-pervasive crisis of trust in human institutions across the political, social, and business landscape. In *Expert Humans*, we take a look at all these disruptors and ask: what are the critical leadership skills needed to chart a course to benefit human beings now – and into the future?

Change has always been part of the human experience, but it is the speed of current disruption that marks the changes we are going through now as being fundamentally different to the changes of the past. At the same time, there is growing unease around our ability *as humans* – to keep up. This book aims to take the reader through a brief history of fundamental human qualities and core attributes, pointing out along the way the ‘hidden gems’ of what it means to be human and the nature of the human experience, while also making specific reference to what it means to be a working individual, in the workplace, in the here and now. *Expert Humans* looks at important aspects of human psychology as well as suggesting practical ways to make the world of work a better place, starting with improving the quality of our leadership.

In writing *Expert Humans*, I have tried to combine the knowledge I have accumulated over three decades spent in people development to propose some new approaches to how we work together in organisations. In the book, we scrutinise the often overlooked and under-emphasised human attributes of altruism, compassion, and empathy via the ACE model, arguing strongly that these are fantastic elements at our disposal if only we knew more about how to make the most of them. Stories about how organisations have adopted a more human approach to business and work life afford examples of what is possible, and they give the reader the impetus to get started on developing a more human workplace for themselves. We also look at concrete actions we

can take to develop some of our under-utilised human skills to complement the professional and technical skills we already possess. The book draws on a broad set of data sources – economic, financial, social, and demographic – to strengthen the evidence base for change and to give those sceptics the reassurance that the deep human skills we examine in the book are far from soft and ‘nice-to-have’: in fact, they are going to come strongly to the fore in the years ahead as technology accelerates the replacement and augmentation of humans and the clamour for action around sustainable business becomes ever louder. We will also consider how strengthening our human skills, as humans, benefits not only organisations in terms of equality, creativity, innovation, talent attraction, and talent retention, but critically, individuals themselves are less likely to suffer the mental ill-health that frequently results from working in a toxic or psychologically unsafe workplace.

The book closes by underscoring the growing awareness across the world that digital disruption is less about robots and chatbots and more about real people and that climate change and the concomitant encroachment on animal habitats and the increased potential for animal to human viral transmission – were wrought by the action of humans and in turn, must be arrested by humans.

The good news is that the development of more human organisations and leaders is attracting an increasing amount of interest and support. Adding fuel to calls for substantive change have been the disruptive events of recent times, giving us a rare window of opportunity that we should try to use to everyone’s advantage – in other words, we should act before disillusionment about the true potential for change sets in. Calls to re-imagine the future of work, advocacy for sustainable and responsible business plus the eruption of anger around racial equality should give us all hope that despite the enormity of the tasks at hand, the biggest disruptors of the day can be tackled head on by talented people and the deep human skills of altruism, compassion, and empathy.

PART ONE

WHAT'S GOING ON?

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DISRUPTION – CRITICAL LEADERSHIP FOR A DISRUPTED WORLD

A brief look at where we are in terms of technological and digital disruption and what's likely to happen in the next five years or so.

- The tyranny of the algorithm.
- Dehumanisation.
- Are we heading into an 'AI winter'? If so, is this an opportunity in time for us to catch up on our development into 'Expert Humans'? If not, is this the time to accelerate that same development?
- Jobs of the future – how these will require 'Expert Humans'.
- Corporate psychopaths and the erosion of trust.

Disruption comes in many forms. It can mean 'preventing a system, process or event from continuing as usual or as expected' (Cambridge English Dictionary). In business, disruption means the action of completely changing the traditional way in which an industry or market is operated – through the introduction of new methods or technology.

We are living in a time of multifaceted disruption. Technological advances and digital transformation wrought by artificial intelligence (AI) are examples of changes that impact our lives in ways that were unimaginable even a short time ago. But that is not all. Our world is undergoing disruption to its very core. Sustainability of the planet is at the forefront of public discourse: it has taken on an urgency and intensity of a kind that we have not seen before. We are at a pivotal point ecologically but also, I would argue, we are

entering an age where people are questioning the fundamentals both of what it means to be human and how we interact with each other at a profound level. Privacy and individual protections have suffered an irreversible assault due to the intrusiveness of social media and the surge in populist sentiment around the world. These are disruptions too.

What this all means is that our lives are being changed in ways that are both obvious and covert. In *Expert Humans*, I will set out an agenda which advocates a change in human behaviour to benefit us as a species at a macro- and micro-level.

THE TYRANNY OF THE ALGORITHM

Let us zero in on one major source of disruption coming from AI: the algorithm. The author of *The Master Algorithm*, Pedro Domingos (2017), quoted in the World Economic Forum article *Artificial Intelligence can make our societies more equal: here's how* – makes a good point:

People worry that computers will get too smart and take over the world, but the real problem is that they're too stupid and they've already taken over the world.

An algorithm consists of a set of procedures followed to produce a specific outcome. In AI terms, algorithms carry out computational tasks based on defined parameters – and the integrity of algorithms as we perceive them today are influenced by the humans who put them together in the first place. And where humans are involved, the potential for unintended consequences is huge. Chris Brahm of Bain & Co (2018) has noted that AI can lead to a number of risks that we need to consider carefully: they can create hidden errors; they can lead to a loss of critical thinking; they can open up new hazards; they can cause a loss of control. But most significantly, they can unwittingly institutionalise bias and contribute to a loss of empathy. We will explore these issues in more detail later in the book but for now, it is worth noting that the effect on humans has already started. Some might call it the tyranny of the algorithm.

What we do know is that opinions of AI and disruption are a complicated mosaic. We have entrepreneurs and visionaries such as Elon Musk

heralding the end of work as we know it, who believe ‘AI will make jobs kind of pointless’, and are looking ahead with cautious but gloomy pessimism. Then there are leaders like Jack Ma who, while seeing AI and technology as a huge opportunity, believe ‘man can never make another man. Computers only have chips, men have hearts’.

Research has shown professionals in recently automated organisations have mixed attitudes to the new technology in their lives. A 2020 survey from edtech company MindEdge/Skye Learning found that 76% of respondents who had had AI, robot workers and analytics introduced in their workplace felt this technology had ‘made their lives easier’, while 69% said it had a positive impact on overall company morale. So far, so good. However, while almost half of those surveyed said they ‘weren’t at all worried’ about being replaced by technology, a similar number (57%) agreed that ‘robots and advanced automation are bad for American workers’. This shows the degree to which workers are conflicted over AI and the dehumanisation of labour – tech makes life easier, but it’s also bad?

Fear about job losses connects at a profound level with the notion of core human identity. The thinker Dan Pink has written extensively about what constitutes motivation in humans and has concluded that three things are key. These are: purpose, autonomy and mastery. It is the aspect of mastery – the idea that people derive a sense of self-worth and identity as a result of being good at something – *and being recognised as good at that thing by others* – that fuels our particular anxiety about being replaced by the ‘human’ face of AI – robots. This anxiety has led to the publication of a number of reports from highly reputable organisations seeking to understand the future impact of AI on humans at work. And wherever you get your numbers, the estimates are astronomical: ‘133 million new jobs will be created, but 75 million jobs are likely to be eliminated’, according to a World Economic Forum report in 2016. And a McKinsey Global Institute report (2017) says, ‘between 400 million and 800 million individuals could be displaced by automation and will need to find new jobs by 2030’, though as many jobs – if not more – could be created. And there are many others. Forward-facing thinkers like to talk about ‘jobs that don’t exist yet’ as one way to assuage what might be in store for us. The question is: what form will these jobs take, and what can humans do to prepare themselves to land one? What new skills might humans need to develop in order to meet the challenges ahead?

So, this concept then of ‘job churn’, in which more jobs are created to replace those that are eliminated, could provide some comfort. What we know for sure is that digital disruption is creating challenges in every sector. The key lies in identifying those skills that make us human and drawing those out to the best of our abilities.

In their 2020 *Randstad Talent Trends Report: Looking to soft skills*, Randstad highlighted the importance of talent fluidity, that is, professionals who can shape their skills to complement AI, automation and changing company needs. Commenting on her company’s report, Rebecca Henderson, Randstad’s CEO of global businesses, emphasised the fact that digitalisation has ‘redefined the skills that are most important for employees to possess’ and said it was important that organisations ‘reskill staff to keep up with changing technology and bolster the soft skills that only humans can possess’.

It follows then, as we stand on the cusp of the third decade of the twenty-first century, that technological and digital disruption will continue to transform the world of work at every level. To many, this represents not only a threat to jobs, but a threat to what it means to be human. For many, there’s a fear not only of job loss, but of an irrelevance that will make it close to impossible for large sectors of society to ever find work again. If careers and identity are inextricably entwined, what does it mean to face down a future in which the work we do is basically useless? We will return to this question again when we consider what human skills we need to dial up – and what human behaviours in the global workplace might need to be dialled down or even eliminated.

The key point is that humans are going to have to work harder at being not just experts in their chosen (technical) field – but at becoming expert at being human too.

We know that AI is imperfect. The algorithms which characterise AI are vulnerable to errors and are vulnerable to hackers as well. This means the human aspect (for checks and balances) may actually become more, not less, important even as progress continues to be made to eliminate bias from AI. ‘Navigating the impact of robotics, automation, and AI is a pillar of modern business operations that will take time and experience for business leaders and employees to understand’, said Jefferson Flanders, CEO of MindEdge Learning (in 2020).

American workers are continuing to uncover exactly how they feel about robotics and automation in the workplace. But regardless of how they may feel, technology is inexorably transforming the U.S. workforce – and employers and workers need to prepare for it.

We can also discern mixed feelings in the world of Cloud Security. A 2020 report by the Ponemon Institute entitled ‘Staffing the IT Security Function in the Age of Automation’ and reported on by Scott Ikeda of CPO magazine, found that while 74% of IT security decision-makers agree that automation frees up IT staff to focus more on ‘serious vulnerabilities and overall security network security’, only 40% of respondents believe automation leads to a reduction in human error. On top of this, half of respondents believe automation will actually make jobs more complex, and 54% said automation will never replace ‘human intuition and hands-on experience’. An even larger percentage (74%) report that automation is not capable of certain tasks, up from 69% the previous year.

And in an article in the *Financial Times* in November 2019, “Workers can learn to love Artificial Intelligence,” the journalist Gillian Tett described a study by Google in which a research team from the company discovered that modern office workers tend to make a mental distinction between ‘core’ work – or jobs they identify with – and ‘peripheral’ work – work that does not contribute to their wellbeing or happiness. As Gillian goes on to say: ‘Office workers will readily use AI to replace peripheral work. But they resist this for core work’.

This demonstrates how attitudes to AI and technology are not only complex, but susceptible to large shifts year on year. What this means is that while improvements in AI and technology might well be exponential, the human dimension in all of this is likely to be lumpy, pattern-less, and unpredictable. In other words, the antithesis of the algorithm.

DEHUMANISATION

These days, without even trying, it would be easy to pass an entire day devoid of human-to-human interaction.

Self-checkouts; ATMs; Starbucks pre-ordered for pick-up; automated machines for train tickets to and from work. In 2019, the rideshare platform Uber unveiled the ‘quiet preferred’ option on their app, allowing passengers to choose whether or not they want their driver to talk. Even our choices of music are made for us, generated by an algorithm and curated by streaming platforms. It’s no great secret AI has seamlessly dismantled the day-to-day interactions we have with other people – often so fast and with such convenience we hardly have time to notice. These days, I’ll find myself more surprised

by having to interact with a real-life customer service representative than the reverse. Without question, AI has made life more convenient – and people will continue to make use of these conveniences as long as they serve them.

And at the same time, AI is helping to erode some of the ‘weak-tie networks’ we all have that are important for mental wellbeing; these refer to the interactions we have with other humans who we know but don’t *really* know. These include the barista who knows our order but not necessarily our name; the school bus driver who picks up our kids each morning who waves and smiles as she pulls away; the friendly guy in the local 7-Eleven who cracks a joke about you calling in (every night) at 11 p.m. to buy a bar of chocolate. Every time a weak-tie event occurs (you smile, the other person smiles back) – your brain is bathed in feel-good chemicals. It’s important we protect these precious moments.

There are also cultural and generational differences when it comes to AI. At the supermarket recently, I witnessed an older gentleman struggling with the self-checkout machine. ‘We should get a 10% discount for having to check the groceries out ourselves’, he joked with the attendant who came to his aid. On the other end of the spectrum, those of us with Gen-Z or even Millennial children will know how keen they are on automated, self-service systems – and how they will go out of their way to use them.

In a 2020 Zapier report, it was found almost all Gen-Z (95%) and Millennial (91%) respondents were willing to automate at least part of their jobs. What’s interesting are the reasons behind this openness: of those who said ‘yes’, the majority only wanted to automate parts of their jobs if it meant more flexible work hours (61%) and allowed them more time to spend with loved ones (54%). These are uniquely human motivations. It seems, among this generation in particular, there’s already an instinctive understanding of how AI can weave through our working day to boost and bolster personal lives rather than inhibiting or infringing upon them. I argue that even in the self-service age, even among these digital natives who are perfectly comfortable going from one automated service to another, we are all still intensely social creatures who need person-to-person interactions.

In many ways, we human beings are already half-ceded to the digital world. This is nothing new. Since the advent of the first computer, humans have had a morbid curiosity with the notion of atomisation; how technology drives us further from each other, nor closer. This rapid, seemingly unstoppable hold AI has on our lives makes the case for Expert Humans even more