

We Are More Productive (and happier) With a Machine In Charge

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What if your boss was a robot? One with advanced artificial intelligence and human-like physical features, capable of assessing your emotions? Moreover, would more robots mean removing the need for human managers? Another science fiction fantasy? Not so, claim some scientists. In addition, what about the moral and ethical questions raised by the use of robots?

If you work at a company like Amazon and are not “productive” enough, it could happen! According to an April report from Business Insider (2019), the online retail giant terminated more than 300 employees over a yearlong span at its Baltimore facility. But instead of a supervisor sitting down one-on-one with the employee and, you know, talking things out like fellow human beings (because demanding and measuring production goals in and of itself isn’t a bad thing), an internal computer system simply issued the pink slip when the targets weren’t being met.

From Business Insider:

“Amazon’s system tracks a metric called “time off task,” meaning how much time workers pause or take breaks, The Verge reported. It has been previously reported that some workers feel so pressured that they do not take bathroom breaks.

If the system determines the employee is failing to meet production targets, it can automatically issue warnings and terminate them without a supervisor’s intervention, although Amazon said that a human supervisor could override the system. The company also said it provides training to those who do not meet their production goals.”

It is one thing to try to explain to your superior why you did not meet a deadline or had a slow week ... Maybe your girlfriend broke up with you, your cat died, or you had the sniffles. Hey, the company should be thankful you even showed up, right? Those “production targets” can wait another week until you are yourself again. Not so fast, slacker! Computer Boss is not quite as understanding as your boss is. Heck, what am I thinking? Computer Boss does not understand AT ALL. Miss the mark, pack your bags – you are out of here!

Nevertheless, Amazon’s mechanisms for exacting productivity are pervasive in many areas of its operations. For instance, drivers delivering Amazon packages have reported feeling so pressured that they speed through neighborhoods, blow by stop signs, and pee in bottles in the trucks or outside, Business Insider’s Hayley Peterson reported.

Computers are becoming bosses of the economy

In yet one more sign that robots are slowly but surely taking over the entire economy (becoming bosses), a computer programmer was accidentally fired by an automated system, and when he pointed out the mistake to his fellow humans, they found they were unable to reverse the decision. The programmer reported the story on his personal blog.

What happened was that the man had been hired for a three-year contract. Eight months into that contract, the company was acquired by a much larger one. During the transition, his contract was not entered into the new system because the manager who was responsible for doing so was laid off shortly after the merger. The automated system then went to work processing the programmer's termination. He, and his fellow humans, did not know he'd been terminated at first. He just thought that one day, his key card stopped working and he was locked out of the company's network.

His manager couldn't figure out what was happening, so they got the director involved, who made a call to have the error corrected only to then get back an automated message saying that, no, she cannot reverse the change. The director, puzzled, told him to come to work the next day. That was when he found himself locked out of every system and, a few hours later, escorted out of the building by security. Turns out the system found he was trying to use his badge while inside the building, and so sent a message to security to remove him.

Over three weeks he watched the situation go higher and higher up the chain of command, with the humans at first confident they can fix the error before realizing they could not. Eventually, they all concluded that no one could do anything about it. Instead, the company had to go through the formal process of rehiring him as if he were new.

Why Some People Would Prefer a Robot to a Human Boss

Automated processes now handle more and more functions of the economy. People, versus 60 percent done through computer algorithms, do about 10 percent of stock trading. Robot-advisors have tens of billions in assets under management. Nearly half of financial executives at large companies say artificial intelligence already plays a role in their organization today, and 30 percent are currently investigating its use. However, as the man who was fired by robot notes, while automation can be a boon to businesses, there must be ways for humans to effectively intervene when the machine gets things wrong. Otherwise, one day, our new computer lords could fire us all.

A study from the Human-Computer Interaction Lab (2009) at the University of Manitoba, suggests that you will probably obey a robot boss nearly as predictably as you would a human. The researchers found humans willing to take orders from computers, but much less readily than from other humans. Participants were asked to perform a menial task (renaming computer files) for 80 minutes, and a computer named “Nao” was able to exert enough authority to keep 46% of participants on task for the full 80 minutes even as they voiced a desire to quit. Humans were almost twice as likely —86%—to obey another human, in this case, an actor in a white lab coat. Still, researchers were struck that “even after trying to avoid the task or engaging in arguments with the robot, participants still (often reluctantly) obeyed its commands. These findings highlight that robots can indeed pressure people to do things they would rather not do.”

[Research](#) from MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Lab (CSAIL, 2014), show how groups of two humans and one robot worked together in one of three conditions: manual (all tasks allocated by a human); fully autonomous (all tasks allocated by the robot); and semi-autonomous (one human allocates tasks to self, and a robot allocates tasks to another human). The fully autonomous condition proved to be not only the most effective for the task but also the method preferred by human workers. The workers were more likely to say that the robots 'better understood them' and "improved the efficiency of the team."

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