

## AI and leadership – getting it right

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The use of AI in organisations is increasing exponentially, and potentially without any limits. Organisations are naturally keen to benefit from the efficiency and cost savings that AI can bring, however – as with any new innovation that is sweeping the world – there is a risk this is the ‘in’ thing to do, and may often be pushed faster than is appropriate.

People are rightly concerned about whether it genuinely makes sense to replace as many traditionally manual or human-directed activities with AI as is already happening, or is on the horizon in their sector. It is essential we all question and challenge this in our particular areas of expertise so the best AI solutions can be adopted and the worst avoided.

One area where AI is growing rapidly is in people selection and assessment. All the time, more AI-powered tools to assess someone’s personality, critical reasoning, values, motivations and many more factors are being introduced to the market. These solutions promise to effectively replace approaches that take longer to complete, are slower, more resource intensive and complex to enact. Indeed, there do seem to be many ways in which AI can improve selection and assessment for both the organisation and the individual. Confidence will grow, even among AI naysayers, if and when future longitudinal research shows that it can be proven to lead to even better ‘job-person fit’ and greater success in roles than what is used currently.

However, the latter point is absolutely key – evidence of greater effectiveness. Benefits to both organisations and candidates will be negated, and potentially reversed, if AI-powered assessments aren’t actually providing at least as equally effective data or decision making. There is also the issue, as with traditional approaches to selection and assessment, of potential adverse impact against minoritised groups. After all, we must never forget that an AI system is only as



unbiased as the humans who wrote the initial algorithms, and the data used for its learning.

One area I would argue could never be replaced with AI, or rather, should never be fully replaced by AI, is leadership assessment. This is because to assess leadership effectively one has to gather information well beyond the leader’s own self-assessment, and not enough of this essential information is captured or held electronically.

To address the first point – self-assessment – research over decades consistently shows our own perceptions of our leadership effectiveness tend to be biased. Typically, each of us has both positive and negative blind spots about our behaviour and impact. Given this, we are not well placed to accurately gauge whether we are doing enough to positively influence

those around us – our manager, colleagues, team members, other stakeholders – or indeed, if we are having a negative impact on them.


Nor are we particularly effective in assessing whether we are nurturing the type of culture in our teams that will enable our people to realise their performance potential. For example, whether we are creating a supportive environment, ensuring psychological safety and social support, maintaining wellbeing, self-confidence, resilience, and so on. Personality assessment is great for exploring many things, but leadership outcomes such as these are not one of those, so we must specifically enquire about others’ experience of our behaviour.

To address the second point – the data needed – AI, like us as humans, needs data input in order to analyse and generate

predictions. However, AI needs this to be captured electronically. The problem here is the data needed to assess truly effective leadership isn’t sufficiently gathered electronically. Some is, such as emails, messaging, videocalls, web-based phone calls, etc. But the culture organisations need – particularly in an era of increased AI adoption and the change that brings – results as much, if not more, from offline experiences of one’s leader such as feedback, conversations, off-chance meetings and chats, planned meetings, informal coaching or guidance provided, the leader’s tone, their level of genuine interest in a person, choice of language, wellbeing check-ins, and so on.

The bottom line is these offline interactions are an absolutely critical part assessing leadership capability and they cannot be effectively assessed, analysed or used to generate models by AI because AI doesn’t have access to them. Even if a company tried to introduce sophisticated and in-depth behavioural observation and analytics as a basis for assessing leader behaviour in these interactions, it is very likely that a number of adverse outcomes would emerge.

These observations and analysis would need to be extensive and intrusive in order to be of use, therefore we can predict push back from employees on the basis of privacy concerns, increased stress commensurate with increased surveillance (real or perceived), loss of key talent to places that are more ‘human’, and potentially lawsuits for wrongful use of information and the like. At the simplest level, it is very far from certain this would be in any way positively correlated with employee engagement, commitment, wellbeing or motivation, and therefore, performance.

Circling back to the start of this article, there do indeed seem to be many benefits AI can offer in selection and assessment of leadership. However, if we understand that leadership is our greatest positive leverage for improved performance in today’s increasingly challenging and complex times, we need to be firm and clear that leadership assessment is an area in which relying solely on AI would do more harm to organisations than good. 



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