

SOFTWARE AND TECHNOLOGY

## Evaluating the viability of AI in the workplace

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*Artificial intelligence is becoming a key feature of customer service, on its way to rivaling the human kind. Image credit: iStock, Chief Outsiders*

By **Christa Martin**

It is becoming increasingly important for organizational leaders to consider the potential impact of artificial intelligence on company culture.

Recent research estimates that **one in five employees** will have an artificial intelligence (AI) system as their coworker by 2022.

As workplace applications of artificial intelligence become the norm, organizational leaders will face a bevy of new challenges, ranging from resource allocation to effective implementation.

However, achieving topline objectives remains most organizational leaders' top priority.

A **recent study** from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business states, "Executives variously defined culture as a company's tone, operating style, standard of behavior and even the invisible hand that guides a firm."

As organizational leaders steer their companies into increasingly competitive labor markets while keeping a close eye on the achievement of topline results, one of their most pressing questions will become, "How can humans and AI work together while maintaining a cohesive company culture?"

Here are three key considerations corporate leaders will need to address to craft and progressively strengthen flourishing company cultures in which humans and AI systems are able to work in tandem:

Conduct cost-benefit analysis

As they prepare to roll out their AI solutions, corporate leadership teams must be sure to conduct careful cost-benefit analyses.

This should not only evaluate the potential capital investment and ROI of implementing artificial intelligence in the workplace as precisely as possible, but should also weigh the cultural costs and benefits of choosing to deploy or forgo such solutions.

An AI system's cultural costs and benefits may include its value-add to customers, users' perceptions of its interface, interoperability with existing operational systems, overall reliability and embodiment of a company's cultural beliefs (e.g., "collaborative problem-solving is valued within this organization").

For example, one of Amazon's top cultural beliefs what the ecommerce giant refers to as **Leadership Principles** is "Customer Obsession."

The Seattle-based company's **customer service chatbots** can conduct natural, colloquial, real-time text exchanges with customers seeking to make returns, find lost orders, or inquire about products.

These bots serve as a prime example of artificial intelligence being harnessed in a way that not only drives positive business outcomes, but embodies an organization's cultural beliefs.

Further, it is crucial for organizational leaders to conduct additional cost-benefit analyses of specific AI applications within their organizations.

AI should be viewed not as a one-time fix for all operational problems, but as a tool to be leveraged only when it will be cost-effective, efficient and culturally valuable to do so.

For instance, an AI system may be able to streamline the talent acquisition process by vetting applicants' resumes and filtering out unqualified candidates.

Alternatively, an AI system may be able to reduce labor costs on the production line at a manufacturing plant or drive conversions for a retailer by providing consumers with the information they need.

However, in a context such as the middle of the sales pipeline where a salesperson's role is **as much about establishing a human connection as it is about closing the deal** an AI system may not provide an organization with much tangible value.

In many cases, the inherent dispassion and mechanical nature of an AI system may hinder an organization's achievement of its desired results.

These types of systems will improve over time and eventually become the "sales whisperers" that all sales representatives will need to compete soon.

It is up to leaders to take stock of various job functions and potential AI applications and conduct thorough cost-benefit analyses to make decisions that will promote their organizations' cultural beliefs and, in turn, drive results.

#### Maintaining control over AI-driven results

A **2018 study** by Oracle and research firm Future Workplace found that 93 percent of people would trust orders handed down by a robot. This indicates not only a fundamental shift in social dynamics, but a potential crisis of leadership for organizations looking to implement artificial intelligence in the workplace.

While AI systems programmed to reflect an organization's cultural beliefs may function as highly trustworthy and accountable colleagues, most organizations are ill-prepared to be led by such systems. At what level of the organization does the AI directive break down?

Taking a step back, it is critical to consider the intended role of a leadership team within an organization.

Great leaders do not command teams blindly, rejecting employee feedback in favor of rigid protocol and critically not creating dialogue. Nor are they micromanagers who do not trust employees to remain responsible for delivering desired results.

Rather, great leaders encourage collaboration, candid feedback and creativity, remaining open to possibilities and empathetic to unique perspectives.

Most importantly, strong leaders steer teams toward a set of shared objectives, the achievement of which would offer collective benefits.

These objectives, also known as OKRs (objectives and key results), are the three to five meaningful, measurable and memorable "must-deliver" business outcomes that define organizational success.

Throughout the journey toward OKR fulfillment, leaders must maintain their adaptability and openness to innovative ideas and viewpoints.

And while AI systems may succeed in fulfilling several valuable functions within an organization and may even advance OKRs they may struggle to adapt their approaches to achieving results in the face of changing circumstances.

By now, you should have a better understanding of how AI can be used to improve your organization's performance. AI

It may also be challenging to ensure these systems maintain an organization's cultural integrity, though AI innovators are increasingly exploring the development of traditionally "human traits" (such as empathy) in AI, which may equip emerging systems to serve as more effective leaders.

On the flipside, if members of an organization have not gained a sufficient understanding of how an AI system works, they will be unable to guarantee that the system is promoting both the achievement of OKRs and intra-organizational cultural cohesion.

Eventually, employees may even find themselves torn between following conflicting orders from human organizational leaders and AI systems.

Fostering a collaborative culture

**Collaboration** is the cornerstone of a thriving company culture.

As Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors Co., states, "You've got to create a climate where people feel that they can speak up, that there's not fear in the organization. So, we work really hard to not be hierarchical; clever ideas can come from anywhere."

In a collaborative culture this now extends to people, AI, bots and more.

All "members" of an organization need to continually reaffirm their commitment to executing on OKRs and take proactive measures whether inside or outside the strict boundaries of their individual roles to ensure they honor this commitment.

This will not be an easy transition for some: learning to trust AI, and to objectively review data and patterns will still be in the human court for a long time to come.

Since collaboration is a crucial component of long-term organizational success, artificial intelligence should be deployed in the workplace if it contributes to the improvement of customer experience, gleans new insights faster and enhances employee productivity.

Leaders must thoroughly vet potential AI solutions to ensure that they are able to assist employees in seeing critical performance or information gaps early.

AI should benefit the employee's role and make results more achievable with the goal of streamlining productivity to meet company and customer needs.

FOR CORPORATE LEADERS wrestling with if, when, how and why to implement artificial intelligence, cultural considerations should be reviewed for the readiness of an organization and their employees.

Only a thriving culture rooted in collaboration and led by flexible, receptive, collaborative leadership teams will remain viable in rapidly evolving, highly competitive markets.

Leaders should deploy AI solutions for business when they feel confident that the systems reflect their organizations' cultural beliefs, and add value to the customer, employee experiences and productivity.

Enabling AI allows organizations to remain agile in their approach to execution and empower all members of their organizations to reach new heights in achieving results that matter most for the entities and their customers.





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