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Should your CEO be worried about AI?

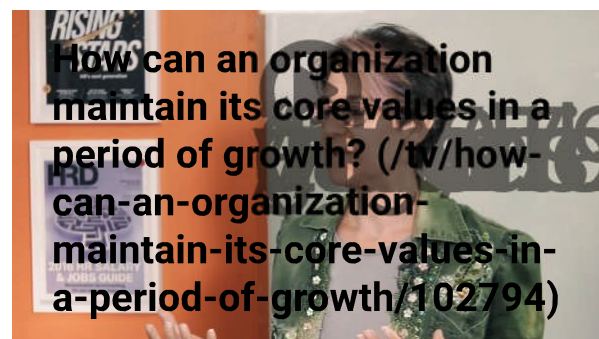
by Rachel Ranosa
05 Oct 2018

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In 2016, Eric Schmidt of Alphabet unveiled one of his visions of artificial intelligence: a personal digital assistant named "Not-Eric".

This “digital thing that helps me” would be part of a new generation of AI that would someday solve “the hard problems” of the world, the former Google (/companies/google/96659/) executive said.

But Schmidt’s idea of an AI future – in which both Eric and Not-Eric thrive – entails more than just the digital assistance that Siri and Alexa offer today.

The AI of tomorrow is designed to assist C-suite executives in making tough management decisions.

Imagine having an AI-powered business intelligence tool that models data and shows adverse impact, or how a decision could spell success or disaster for a company.

AI in executive decisions

With the way algorithms are written to tune out the noise of impulsive and irrational human decision-making, AI might even prove better than humans at making judgments, said Daniel Kahneman, who specializes in the psychology of judgment.

While there’s a commonly held notion that AI and automation would wipe out mostly blue-collar jobs, the sophistication that AI-powered software demonstrate could also be “very threatening to the leaders,” those in executive roles, Kahneman said at a people analytics conference in Wharton.

This is partly because the “godlike feature of human

judgment is eliminated,” he said. When you pit algorithms against professional judgment, for instance, formulas and rules “beat the experts”.

This should come as good news for organizations making an effort to reduce bias in areas such as recruitment, learning and development, compensation, or succession planning.

With the notion of AI “outsmarting” business leaders, will Not-Eric someday replace Eric?

Kahneman said humans are more likely to resist AI. Before Not-Eric takes over, “Eric will fire Not-Eric,” he said.

‘Reducing complexity’

Resistance to AI comes from a misconception that AI would replace workers, said Michael Martin, senior executive at IBM (/companies/ibm/96680/) Canada. People perceive the use of AI tools as a risk despite the fact that they were built to augment work.

“One of the problems that we have – not just in HR but in many industries – is the lack of knowledge of artificial intelligence; it’s based on mythology,” said Martin. “They think it’s very complicated.”

This lack of understanding may also stem from the fact that the power over AI at some organizations is concentrated on the few: the CIOs, data engineers, and data scientists.

“What we’re trying to do at IBM is: we’re reducing complexity. We’re bringing AI down to the manager level, the director level, so that anyone can use it, anyone can understand it, and anyone can accept the power of these things and make it work for them.”

Martin believes in empowering executives across all levels of the organization – and it starts with democratizing access to AI.

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