THE HUMAN QUESTION
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What Should We Never Outsource to AI?

If machines can replace what we do, have we confused our work with who we are?

People say they are afraid that artificial intelligence will replace them.

But what, precisely, are they afraid of losing?

A job? An income? A title? A sense of usefulness? Or the quieter, more comforting belief that what we do is inseparable from who we are?

Perhaps our fear is not simply that machines are becoming more capable. Perhaps we are recognizing how often human beings have already been valued as though we were machines: by our speed, our output, our availability, our consistency, our willingness to work without complaint or interruption.

If those are the terms of the competition, why would we expect humanity to win?

This edition will not try to convince you that artificial intelligence is a monster or that it is nothing to worry about. Both stories are too easy, and easy stories rarely survive contact with the truth. Instead, it asks a harder question: What, exactly, do we believe would be lost if a machine could do our job as well as we can, and did that thing ever really belong to the job in the first place?

The Fear Beneath the Fear

Say the word "AI" in a room full of working adults and watch what happens to the temperature. Someone will laugh nervously. Someone will change the subject. Someone will mention, a little too casually, that they've started using it themselves, just to see.

Underneath the general unease sit several very different fears, and we rarely bother to separate them. There is the fear of losing a job. There is the fear of losing income. There is the fear of losing status, the quiet social currency of being needed. There is the fear of irrelevance, which is not the same as unemployment; a person can keep their paycheck and still feel replaced. And beneath all of it sits something harder to name: the fear of losing control over a life that already felt only partly in our hands.

These are not the same fears, and they do not call for the same response.

A policy that protects income does nothing for a person's sense of purpose. A retraining program does nothing for someone who has already concluded that their contribution was never really about skill, but about being available at the right hour for the right price. Before we can answer whether AI threatens us, we have to be honest about which of these losses we are actually afraid of, because the honest answer is rarely just "the machine."

The Mirror

Here is an uncomfortable possibility: artificial intelligence does not lower the bar for what counts as valuable human work. It simply reveals how low the bar had already been set.

Long before a chatbot could draft a memo, plenty of institutions had already reduced human beings to something machine-shaped: measurable output, predictable behavior, continuous availability, minimal deviation. The call-center script. The algorithmically timed warehouse shift. The performance review built entirely around numbers a spreadsheet can read. We did not need artificial intelligence to start treating people like inputs. We had already been practicing.

If we define human value only by speed, output, availability, and obedience, we should not be surprised when a machine appears better suited to the definition.

That sentence is worth sitting with, because it relocates the danger. The threat is not only that AI might replace human beings. The threat is that we may have already agreed, long before the first model was trained, to compete on terms a machine was always going to win.

When the Human Becomes the Script

About a month ago, I ran into a problem in a government portal that had become partially automated. I couldn't resolve it myself, so I did what most of us have been conditioned to do when technology fails us. I looked for a human being.

I called the help desk and was redirected to an online chatbot. It wasn't entirely useless. The information it gave me was relevant, but it kept taking me in circles. I didn't need more information. I needed someone who could understand the particular problem in front of me, shorten the process, and tell me what to do next. So, I asked for a live representative.

I remember thinking that I would finally get somewhere. Instead, the representative began sending me the same links the chatbot had already given me. I explained that I had already reviewed them. I tried narrowing the question. The responses only grew more closed-ended. I kept trying anyway. This went on for roughly forty-five minutes.

Eventually, she told me something that changed the entire interaction. She didn't know the answer. Strangely, that was the moment my frustration disappeared.

"I don't know" was more useful to me than another link.

It was also the first moment in the exchange that felt unmistakably human. So, I tried something else. I asked AI. I described the problem, asked the specific question I needed answered, and worked through its response. I solved the problem in minutes.

Then I sat with what had just happened. I had gone looking for a human, been redirected to automation, and eventually found the human constrained by much of the same script that had already failed me. In the end, I turned to artificial intelligence for the contextual help I had originally expected from a person.

That left me with an uncomfortable question. Was I watching AI replace a human job, or was I watching a human job become replaceable? The distinction matters more than it first appears. I don't know what instructions that representative had been given. Maybe she was required to follow a script. Maybe she didn't have access to the information I needed. Maybe she was measured on compliance rather than on solving the problem in front of her. If so, the failure wasn't simply human. It was organizational.

That reframes the question of displacement. Perhaps AI will not first replace people because machines have suddenly become more human. Perhaps certain jobs become vulnerable because we had already engineered the human contribution out of them: judgment, curiosity, discernment, adaptability, empathy, the ability to notice when the script no longer fits the situation, and the intellectual humility to say, I don't know, let me find out.

Maybe our advantage over artificial intelligence does not begin with knowing everything. Maybe it begins with knowing that we don't.

Myths, Facts, and Convenient Narratives

That story from the government portal is one encounter, not a dataset, and it would be a mistake to build an argument on a single frustrating afternoon. Some of what circulates about artificial intelligence is documented risk. Much more of it is marketing, mythology, or the kind of confident prediction that history reliably punishes. It is worth separating the three.

The claim that AI will replace everyone is not supported by the evidence we currently have. The more defensible position is that AI is likely to replace, reorganize, or redistribute tasks unevenly across occupations, complementing some workers while displacing others. The IMF estimates that almost forty percent of global employment is

exposed to AI-driven change, with some work likely to be complemented and some displaced. Updated research from the International Labour Organization finds that one in four workers globally is employed in an occupation with some exposure to generative AI, while emphasizing that transformation remains more likely than the wholesale elimination of most occupations.

The claim that AI is just a harmless tool is also incomplete. Technology does not exercise power in isolation. Its power comes from the institutions that deploy it, the incentives that shape its use, the data that inform it, and the people authorized to act on its conclusions. A workplace system that measures every pause does not merely observe productivity. It redefines what productive human behavior is allowed to look like.

The claim that early adopters always win, and late adopters are always doomed, flatters urgency more than it reflects reality. Early adopters gain knowledge and influence, and they also absorb immature technology, costly mistakes, and the reputational risk of being first. Late adopters may avoid those early errors, but waiting too long carries its own costs: dependency, skill atrophy, and the loss of any say in how the technology arrives in their profession.

And the claim that AI is objective simply doesn't hold up. It reflects the data it was trained on, the choices of the people who designed it, and the incentives of the organizations that deployed it. Objectivity is not an inherent property of AI. It is a quality people often project onto its output.

Who Benefits From Fear?

That question is no longer confined to technology laboratories or speculative conversations. It has entered national politics. Former President Barack Obama has called for government to take a more proactive role in shaping how AI is developed and used. Former Vice President Kamala Harris has urged a responsible slowdown in the development of frontier AI so that public safeguards can catch up. President Donald Trump has rejected such warnings, arguing that additional restrictions could weaken American competitiveness. The disagreement is political, but the question beneath it belongs to everyone: should the speed of technological development determine the pace of human consent?

It's tempting, and a little satisfying, to imagine a single group orchestrating all of this, quietly deciding what the public should be afraid of and when. The truth is less cinematic and more useful: there isn't one agenda. There are several running at once, each perfectly rational from where it sits.

Many technology companies want investment, adoption, market position, and data. Employers want productivity and lower costs. Governments want competitiveness and administrative capability. Media organizations are often rewarded for both excitement and alarm, sometimes in the same news cycle. Workers want security and a meaningful role. Educators want useful tools without surrendering human development. Regulators want protection without smothering innovation.

Fear is marketable. So, it turns out, is inevitability.

Tell people that AI is unstoppable, and rapid adoption starts to look unavoidable rather than chosen. Tell people that AI is inherently monstrous, and someone is always ready to sell protection from it. The more useful investigative question is not who invented the fear. It is this: who benefits when the public is offered only two choices: surrender to AI completely, or reject it completely?

The Ancient Impulse Behind a Modern Machine

Stepping back from the headlines and the incentives, it helps to ask a quieter question. How new is any of this, really? I want to be careful here, because it would be tempting and wrong to claim that artificial intelligence has existed as long as we have. It hasn't. Modern AI has a traceable, fairly recent technological history.

But there is a deeper truth inside that overstatement. AI is new as a technology. The impulse behind it is ancient. Writing extended memory. The wheel extended movement. The telescope extended sight. The calculator extended computation. The printing press extended the reach of a single voice. Artificial intelligence extends pattern recognition, language production, prediction, and a certain kind of reasoning. In every case, the tool was new. The desire behind it was not. We have always tried to externalize some portion of human effort so that we would not have to carry it alone.

My own encounter with that impulse began long before generative AI. As a high school student in Jamaica, I learned BASIC and word processing on a Commodore computer. I did not experience the machine as a rival. It behaved more like a new language between human intention and technological response. The computer could execute an instruction. Someone still had to imagine what the instruction was for.

That distinction matters. This moment is not a rupture in the human story. It is a continuation of one, arriving with higher stakes and considerably less patience.

What Machines Do Not Carry

Artificial intelligence does not experience fatigue. It does not become embarrassed, defensive, or emotionally overwhelmed by a bad day. It can process information continuously and produce fluent, confident output at a scale no human ever could.

That confidence rarely wavers, even when it should. A model will produce an answer whether or not it has one worth giving. It doesn't feel the pause that comes before a person says, I don't know, and goes looking for the truth instead of the nearest plausible answer. That pause is not a weakness. It may be one of our most distinctly human advantages.

Its absence of a nervous system is an advantage in some tasks and a profound limitation in others.

Today's AI systems do not experience care, remorse, responsibility, or the consequences of their own decisions. They cannot assume moral responsibility for an outcome, bear its consequences, or answer to the people harmed by it.

As I considered in *Sensibility: Where EI Meets AI*, emotional intelligence is not merely the ability to produce an appropriate response. It is also the human capacity to perceive, regulate, interpret, and take responsibility for what moves between us. AI can participate in that exchange, but participation should not be mistaken for possession.

So, the question is not simply what AI can do better than a human being. It is also this: What can AI do faster, without ever understanding why the work mattered in the first place?

AI may assist a physician, a teacher, an auditor, an attorney, a counselor, an executive, an artist, a member of the clergy, or a parent. It may perform pieces of their work extraordinarily well. But performing a task is not the same as occupying the role to which that task belongs.

Capability is not authority. Prediction is not judgment. Fluency is not wisdom. Assistance is not accountability.

The Adoption Divide

That experience also changed the way I think about early and late adopters. Perhaps the important divide is not simply between those who embrace AI and those who resist it. It is between those who learn to work with it consciously and those who allow it to quietly redefine their work without ever examining what is being surrendered.

The usual advice is to adopt AI early, before you're left behind. I don't think that's the right frame. I don't think the opposite, wait and see, is either.

Early adopters do gain something real: faster learning, institutional influence, a clearer sense of where the technology's limits actually sit. But they can also automate a flawed process before anyone notices it was flawed, expose information that should have stayed confidential, and build dependency on a tool before the governance around it has caught up.

Late adopters avoid some of that risk. They benefit from better tools and more established norms. But waiting too long can cost more than market position. It can cost the ability to shape how AI enters a profession at all, leaving that decision to whoever moved first.

The real divide may not be between early adopters and late adopters. It may be between conscious adopters and unconscious ones.

A conscious adopter asks what a tool is actually for, what it will change about the work, and what it should never be allowed to decide. An unconscious adopter simply lets the tool arrive and lets its convenience make the decisions no one got around to making on purpose.

None of this, though, should be mistaken for an argument that individual attitude is enough. It isn't, and saying so plainly matters. Telling a worker to "be more human" does not protect their income. A person cannot, by force of mindset alone, prevent an employer from automating their role. Some people will be displaced. Some will lose bargaining power. Some will be monitored more closely than they ever agreed to be. And these consequences will not land evenly: they will fall hardest on the people with the least power to negotiate the terms.

Human adaptation cannot become an excuse for institutional abandonment.

Employers, technology companies, educators, and governments carry obligations of their own: retraining that actually leads somewhere, real transition support, transparent decisions about what is being automated and why, accountable deployment, a genuine seat at the table for the workers affected, and a fairer distribution of whatever productivity gains the technology produces. Asking people to become "more human" while ignoring who controls the terms of their employment is not wisdom. It is a distraction dressed up as inspiration.

What Must Never Be Outsourced

If capability is not authority, and fluency is not wisdom, then some things were never AI's to take, not because a machine couldn't imitate them, but because imitation isn't possession.

Purpose is one. A person can be assisted toward a goal; a machine cannot want the goal on anyone's behalf. Responsibility is another: the willingness to be answerable when a decision turns out to be wrong, in a way that costs something. Moral judgment under ambiguity, the kind that has no clean formula and depends on lived context, is another. So is the human relationship itself: trust that is earned, care that is rooted in an actual relationship rather than a simulation of one, and the legitimacy that comes only from another person's consent.

In *Echoes of Consciousness*, I returned repeatedly to the relationship between awareness and choice. Consciousness is not merely the fact that we are awake. It is our capacity to notice what is shaping us, to question the story being presented, and to decide whether we will continue participating in it. If we outsource that awareness, AI will not have stolen our agency. We will have surrendered it through inattention.

Beneath all of this sits one more thing that cannot be delegated: the authority to decide what progress is actually for. That authority cannot be handed to the thing being evaluated. A tool does not get to define its own success.

The Human Question

I don't think I can honestly promise you that AI will not replace humans. That promise cannot be made in good faith, and I would not deserve your trust if I made it.

The question is not whether we can outsource more of our work. We can, and we will.

The real question is whether, in outsourcing the work, we also surrender the judgment, the responsibility, the relationships, and the meaning that made the work human in the first place. Those were never guaranteed to survive. They survive only if we decide, on purpose, to keep them.

If artificial intelligence is becoming a mirror, reflecting back exactly how much of ourselves we had already reduced to speed, output, and availability, then the more urgent question isn't really about the mirror at all.

Perhaps the future does not depend on whether artificial intelligence learns to become more like us. Perhaps it depends on whether we remember how to become more fully human.

It is worth asking that question honestly, together, before the answer is decided for us by default.

A Constructive Answer

Can we develop and use AI without surrendering ourselves to it? I believe we can. Doing so requires us to remain conscious of what we delegate and accountable for what we deploy. AI can collaborate with us. It should not determine who we become. That decision must remain ours.

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