

CHAPTER 1

The Case for Humanity

“Please give me a person. Connect me with a real, live, human being. Attendant. Customer service representative. CUSTOMER. SERVICE. REPRESENTATIVE.” I enunciated loudly, willing the chatbot on the other end of the call to hear me. I held my breath while it thought.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t get that. Please choose the option that relates to why you are calling today.”

I typically pride myself on being able to self-regulate in distressing situations, but after 25 minutes of being transferred to multiple departments with multiple AI systems, I was losing patience. The guttural noise I made must have really concerned my husband, because he came running into my office, assuming I needed serious help, only to find me pacing around my desk, repeatedly hitting zero and saying, “I would like to speak to a person, please.” While funny now, this moment of frustration reveals something profound and unavoidable happening in our economy.

We’re living in the most human moment in business history. Just as artificial intelligence rises to automate tasks, predict decisions, and optimize systems, something remarkable is happening: the workforce is demanding

to be seen, heard, and valued as human beings.¹ This isn't a coincidence; it's a revolution requiring human interaction to drive our work and life experience.

The Great Irony

At first glance, this seems contradictory. If machines can do more, we must need people less, right? If AI can analyze data, write reports, and even pass professional exams, what value do humans bring to the equation?

The answer becomes clear the moment you find yourself screaming in your office like me, or walking into an efficiency-focused business only to feel the absence of any warmth. As consumers, we don't just want solutions; we want connection.²

This isn't the first time society has feared technology would make people obsolete.³ The Industrial Revolution displaced farmers and artisans, yet created entirely new industries and opportunities.⁴ Electricity eliminated lamplighters but powered countless new professions, including unexpected niches like cinema and refrigeration. Each technological wave throughout the past century brought protests and predictions of mass unemployment, yet none successfully replaced our fundamental need for human insight, creativity, and connection.⁵

But today's AI uprising is different. Unlike previous advances that primarily affected manual labor, AI targets knowledge work: law, medicine, finance, and marketing.⁶ It's destabilizing the very jobs that built the middle class.⁷ AI can already create original music,⁸ diagnose diseases,⁹ and debug software,¹⁰ so it's no wonder people worry their expertise no longer matters.

Yet as we barrel toward societal Terminator status, giving more "thinking" and "doing" to machines, here's what the skeptics miss: We're being forced to rediscover what

makes us uniquely human. And those uniquely human traits are becoming more valuable, not less.

The Human Advantage

The traits that machines cannot replicate are suddenly the most precious. Empathy, ethical judgment, adaptability, and the ability to build trust are no longer just “soft skills”; they’re power skills that determine organizational success.

Consider the gap between AI and human intelligence. AI can generate a performance review in 60 seconds, but it can’t deliver feedback with genuine empathy and care. It can analyze customer data, but it can’t notice the fear in someone’s voice and respond with shared experience and compassion. It can optimize workflows, but it cannot inspire teams through uncertain times. It can create strategies, but it cannot build the team trust needed to execute them. This perceived irony is inviting organizations not just to replace humans with machines, but to reimagine what humans are uniquely good at and amplify that.

According to McKinsey, the top competencies needed in an AI-augmented workplace are emotional intelligence, adaptability, interpersonal communication, and leadership grounded in empathy.¹¹ The very skills we’ve often dismissed as secondary are now going to be the primary differentiators. Machines may drive efficiency, but humans drive meaning.

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Companies are already proving this truth. Microsoft’s cultural transformation, built on empathy and a “growth mindset,” didn’t just improve employee satisfaction. It drove measurable market performance.¹² Costco¹³ and Trader Joe’s¹⁴ invest heavily in wages and belonging, creating both higher returns and lower turnover. Patagonia¹⁵ built one of

the most admired brands in the world by anchoring everything in people and purpose. Prioritizing humanity is the new competitive edge. It turns out investing in humans is not only virtuous; it's strategically smart.

Case Study: The Third Place Versus the Fast Place

Starbucks' Costly Mistake

Starbucks revolutionized the coffee industry by creating the “Third Place.” This was known as a warm, inviting space between home and work, where customers could connect and pause.¹⁶ For almost 50 years, they anchored their brand in human-to-human experiences, with baristas trained to create genuine moments of connection.

Around 2019, Starbucks pivoted. They rolled out “Pick Up” locations focused on convenience and speed, banking on efficiency over experience.¹⁷ The results were painful: six straight quarters of declining store sales.¹⁸ Customers found these locations “overly transactional,” and the very demographics Starbucks depended on (Gen Z and Millennials) began seeking more meaningful experiences elsewhere.

Under the new CEO, Brian Niccol, Starbucks is now phasing out 80–90 pickup-only locations by the end of 2026, converting some back to more traditional cafés, and refocusing on barista experience and customer connection.¹⁹ The lesson is clear: Even in an efficient and technology-obsessed world, long-term success depends on how human your business feels.

The Bottom Line

The data supports what forward-thinking leaders are discovering. The World Economic Forum estimates that prioritizing employee well-being could unlock trillions in productivity worldwide.²⁰ Gallup research shows that companies with engaged employees achieve 21 percent higher profitability,²¹ 10 percent higher customer loyalty, and up to 51 percent lower turnover.²²

Meanwhile, the cost of ignoring humanity is mounting. Organizations that treat people as interchangeable resources are facing higher turnover,²³ lower innovation,²⁴ and damaged employer brands that make recruiting top talent increasingly difficult.²⁵ In an era where company reviews spread instantly online, every employee interaction becomes a reputation risk or an asset.

But here's what makes this moment different: The companies winning aren't choosing between people and technology. They're using technology to amplify human potential. Walmart's "people-led, tech-powered" vision illustrates this perfectly.²⁶ Instead of asking employees to fit into an AI-driven strategy, they invited their workforce to shape how technology would best serve them. The result? Employees aren't intimidated by AI. Integrating technology—like real-time translation tools to help multi-lingual teams communicate—helps make their work more human, not less.²⁷

The picture is becoming clearer by the minute. The companies that will dominate the next decade won't be those with the best AI; they'll be the companies that use AI to amplify human potential. While the machines will drive efficiency, humans will drive meaning. And meaning is what creates loyal employees, devoted customers, and long-term growth.

So as it turns out? The most important intelligence in business is human.

Chapter Key Insight

The rise of AI is not making humans obsolete; it's making authentic human connection the greatest competitive advantage. As machines handle more tasks, the traits that only humans possess become the most valuable assets in business.

Chapter Reflection Questions

- 1.** When was the last time you chose a business specifically because of how the people made you feel?
- 2.** What's one thing only a human could do in your role that AI couldn't replicate?
- 3.** Where are you tempted to automate in your company that should remain personal? How could you explore a "people-first; technology-led" strategy like Walmart to capitalize on the best balance of both?