AN EMPLOYEE'S ECOSYSTEM – (DE)HUMANIZING EFFECTS OF AI

As the printers hum for the millionth time and keyboards seem to click for eternity, I see a man profusely sweating, even in a fully air conditioned office. As I notice him from a distance, he is an employee waiting to meet the Head-Human Resources (HR) with a thick file in his hand. I keep looking, wondering what this anxiety is all about. He goes in and I get called in a minute later. I heave a sigh of relief because I feel helpless outside, not being able to know the reason behind his chagrin and not being able to help him in any way.

I am a Human Resources professional. I design and implement practices which enable people to perform to the best of their abilities at workplace.

This man's name is Vinay. He lives with his two daughters and aged parents in Nagpur, a tier-II city in the western state of Maharashtra in India. His job involves soliciting new customers for the organization's business and building on existing relationships through innovative ideas. He has been a consistent good performer and is with the organization since 12 years. He has recently been transferred to another location in the country, to the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where he is expected to shoulder higher responsibilities and lead a big team. He has come to discuss about the transfer with the HR team since his mother was recently diagnosed with cancer and is undergoing treatment at the city hospital. He has brought all the relevant documents to support his case.

Vinay is among the selected few in the organization, who according to the most intelligent talent system in the organization have shown the highest potential and are ready to be groomed for leadership positions. The data emerging from this system informs the HR department that his performance has been excellent in the recent few years, his commitment and loyalty towards organization's goals are unmatched, his personality and managerial traits are suited for team mobilization and he shows immense potential to lead some of the organization's important business units. However, the data does not tell the human resources group that he is undergoing agony of the worst form in his personal life – being responsible to take care of an elderly parent while the latter fights a life-threatening disease.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Human Resources is the new mantra for organizations. As I scroll through my Linkedin feed every day looking for insightful knowledge bytes from across the world and professions, AI and Gamification top the list among the most widely shared articles – both at conceptual and implementation level. Predictive analytics in HR is changing the course of the science behind managing human resources – one can literally predict how humans will behave in a given situation and what will motivate them to perform in varying situations. I get to attend various HR conferences, the focus of most of them being how data driven technology, people analytics and artificial intelligence can improve not only the administrative functioning of human resources department but also the strategic focus of the function. I always go to these conferences with an open mind as to how we, as an HR function, can drive value for the organization and its people through increased intelligence. For example, I find the entire concept of chat bots – which talk to employees every morning when they log in to laptop/computers and ask about the well-being very intriguing. They even ask an employee about the reasons behind feeling sad or happy on a particular day and go on to suggest ideas on how they can be more productive at work by managing their feelings.

Technological innovations are good for HR in that they provide increased understanding of moods and emotions of employees. HR departments can create engagement experiences which are personalized to the extent that they are tailor-made for the particular role of an employee. Human behavior analysis, skills development, onboarding, selecting and developing – you name it and technology can help you provide more insights. There is an argument that when HR functions with better insights, it takes more 'humanistic' decisions, however I feel that instead of humanistic, it takes more mechanistic decisions because it takes the human element out of decisions.

Personally, I feel that the technologies and advanced systems cannot ever replace the personal touch when an HR Manager sits across on a table with an employee and asks him about his well-being. I still remember the gleam in a sales manager's eyes when I told him about all the benefits he was eligible for but not availing. He thanked me profusely and even went on to ask me for suggestions on how could he develop better professional relationship with his supervisor. The interaction went on for 2 hours and he walked out of

my office extremely satisfied. I believe that this is the job of HR Professionals and the management by large – understanding the pulse of the organization through meaningful interactions with employees. No chat bot can ever understand the gleam on the face, the frown, the raising of eyebrows, the anxiety, the surprise, the disgruntled or the surprised look which we experience on day-to-day basis while interacting with employees on shop floor or in the offices. I come to office for these experiences.

Peter Drucker, in his article (1992), The New Society of Organizations, mentions that organizations and societies confront tensions like the need for stability and the need to destabilize, organization's need for autonomy and society's stake in the common good. He goes on to say that society, community and the family are all conserving institutions, trying to maintain stability and avoiding change. But, the modern organization, according to him, is a destabilizer. It must be organized for the systematic abandonment of whatever is established, customary, familiar and comfortable, and that includes human and social relationships. He recommends that organization's function is to put knowledge to work – on the design of work or on the knowledge itself.

I feel that even after 16 years, his thoughts are very relevant because they are the foundational basis for functioning of organizations and the society as a whole. We must adapt to changing nature of business and new technologies available to help us provide greater insights into workforce challenges. But, the value which human intelligence brings in the entire process is being able to draw a line around where technological innovation should stop and where human interface should take over.

Peter Drucker, in his HBR article, "They are not employees, They are People" talks about how technological innovations should free up managers to manage people. Machines should take up routine chores while leaders should spend time looking for people's potential and developing it. I feel that leaders have an even greater role to play in organizations when technology forms a critical part of how employees operate. For example, Vinay was not turned down or coaxed into taking up the new position by the Head-HR. Instead, his concerns were patiently listened to. The Head-HR accepted that the new role suggested for him by the management did not take into account his personal constraints and thus gave him time to tide over the difficulties in his life. "New roles could

wait", he said, "but your family needs you at this point of time. And rest assured, this will not have any adverse impact on your career." I was then advised to help the employee in every possible manner. Talking to him more, I realized Vinay did not want to leave the organization, most Indians who belong to tier-II cities want job stability for the sole reason that unemployment rates are typically high and finding a new job is time consuming and requires lot of effort, something he could not afford due to his current situation.

Vinay would not have been helped if we had mechanically shifted people from one role to another. This brings me to the most important aspect responsible for sustainability of organizations in long term – the values governing business leaders. AI can tell the leaders what to do and why to do, but the 'how' to do it is still governed by the emotions and feelings behind humanistic approach to people management.

The leaders need to create systems and processes on solid foundations upheld by strong values, ethics and integrity. If we have to do better than an intelligent machine, then we need to ask ourselves, "why are we doing what we are doing and how should we reach there". Another reason I feel that values and ethics are important is because AI can easily be misused in organizations. Values of leaders and of those in charge of institutionalizing systems associated with AI will determine how far an organization wants to go in exploiting the potential of AI.

Secondly, I feel that in Vinay's case, the leader had to bring forth many capabilities – emotional intelligence to understand the employee's concerns, decision making in the face of a dilemma, empathy to understand the context and deliver through charismatic leadership qualities and effective communication to help the employee feel supported by the organization. The Blake and Mouton managerial grid developed in 1950s which orients leaders into two styles – people orientation and task orientation is still relevant today. While task orientation can be expected of AI led machines, it is the people orientation which makes leaders' role important because that is one thing which cannot be and should not be outsourced to a machine, how much ever intelligent it is. This is the basis on which human race is surviving and should continue to do so.

Thirdly, another role of leaders which I feel important in the wake of technology being a prime force in the organizations and society is to help the workforce develop their capabilities and promote an organizational culture of continual learning. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world". In order to promote learning, leaders need to walk the talk, embrace change with an open heart and continuously seek to develop their own knowledge about contemporary technological innovations. Only then, leaders can enable employees to see the value which AI has to offer yet help them remain true to their values and intent.

If one looks closely, Vinay's case seeks to present newer insights for the role of human resource professionals in organizations. While the HR managers should intend to use predictive abilities of machines based on various data points for enhanced understanding of people's motivations and decision making styles, if regular face-to-face conversations with employees on various subjects is maintained, trying to know their aspirations, their deeper feelings about what they feel while at work and their expectations from management, then it will offer a truly fruitful employee experience.

I feel that the management of an organization has a higher responsibility towards employees with the advancements in technology. This responsibility is of creating a culture of transparency and objectivity as employees gear up to using and being managed by AI led systems at workplace. When Vinay came visiting, we discussed about his leadership potential and the data supporting the facts. The Head-HR considered it his responsibility to be transparent with Vinay and this opened up newer lines of communication with him. He was ready to support the organization, from the sidelines. He agreed to shadow a high-potential officer in his own city while being in his regular job and learn the rules of the game till the time he could take his own proposed position. This leads me to believe that transparency with employees is the key.

I recently had the opportunity of being present in a forum where World's first robot citizen, Sophia was being interviewed. Sophia is a social humanoid robot who is also United Nation's Development Programme's first ever Innovation Champion. She embodies the spirit of mankind's quest to create intelligence in machines, so much so that humans can completely outsource all the thinking functions to a robot. I wonder, what kind of society

would that be, what would the humans be left to do? The human brain is a beautiful and most complex thing and the bio-scientific community has till date, not been able to find the connection between how brain's functioning leads to specific behaviors in human beings. I mean, there are explanations of various chemical processes that take place when we experience a feeling, however how that feeling gets converted into a behavior is still under active research. I hope that even if research is able to point to an answer to this question, the research community should withhold the full information for the danger of it getting replicated at the humanoid level. The uniqueness of human brain is the only viable competitive advantage with the human beings in the present scenario.

With Vinay's situation, there is a heightened awareness now about how to integrate the employee's aspirations and constraints into their professional journey. It is the need of the hour to create personalized solutions for the workforce so that they feel integrated into the entire ecosystem of the technological innovation and its applications at workplace. One size-fits all approach would not be sustainable for the long term engagement and productivity of the workforce.

There is no doubt that AI is the future of the work and it will help employees and leaders be more productive. However, there is an increased responsibility for leaders and the management to instill new values, capabilities and mindsets among their own ranks and among employees in order to maintain and leverage on one unique capability that human beings possess – the ability to empathize and take emotion centered people decisions. If that was not the case, Vinay would have moved to Southern part of India without his parents, leaving them in the hands of strangers in their worst times. He would have managed to perform at a good rate, given his capabilities, however the organization would have missed out on the loyalty and trust that he placed in the organization in the first place – something that the organization and leaders should return to him.