

Staying human is the driving force of an AI world

In 1997, Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) brought many economies in South East Asia into depression. Singapore, who is known for her efficient system, is not immune to the external economic shocks as we have an open economy.

That year, my dad lost his job and my mum became so stressed in trying to maintain our middle-income lifestyle as well as coping with fights within the family. It was a torrid time for my mum.

That same year, she became schizophrenic. I was only 7.

Staying Human: Rationality is embedded with emotions

My mum's story is an outlier in an efficient society, problems that even the most efficient systems cannot have predicted or prevented. An efficient and AI robotic society does not mean no problems, and because of that, there will be a greater need to stay human for families and individuals to thrive under more adversity that comes with a complex world that we live in.

As I grew up, I learnt that she was not "spiritually crazy" as some would suggest, but schizophrenic. I wanted to know the backstory of my mum's conditions, so I consulted my aunt, who is my mum's elder sister.

She teared up when she heard my question in the car. Her voice shaking, she told me that my mum had called her mobile to ask for help. But it was 1997, everyone was fearful for their job. She had to take care of her 3 children and did not have the bandwidth to help. She told me she avoided the calls out of fear, that she may cause more harm than good especially when she has her own battles to fight.

Nobody could have foreseen how that decision would have played out today. It was a logical decision on my aunt's part, but I sensed that her rational choice was embedded and influence in large part by the emotion of fear.

If logic is embedded with emotions, then the more robotic - and by extension more logical - our society becomes, the greater the relevance of our humanness to guide our decisions in a more complex world.

Complex problem makes people more human

My Mum's conditions affected my dad and I and our way of life.

We do not share the same norms with other families. We seldom eat together or share in conversations about life as we each struggle with our own challenges

surviving in society. My dad focused on taking care of the family and my mum while I focused on doing the best I can with the limited resources I have to get us a better life in the future.

For 20 years, my dad quietly woke up at 6am, prepared breakfast and medication for my mum so that her condition would be stable enough to go to work. I only took over when my dad's health took a hit which I then realized there were a lot that went into my dad's decision not to involve me in the caretaking duties. My dad did not want to hurt me or burden me with the responsibilities of managing my mum's situation. It was certainly a logical decision but embedded with emotions like love, care and maybe a tinge of guilt.

As for myself, I had to learn to not be angry with my parents or feeling intimidated when I could not understand or explain how differently my family functioned from my friends' families. I grew up with more problems than my age was ready for. As a result, I craved for meaning and humanness as a coping tool to moments when I only saw problems and questions rather than answers.

I had to find my own answers to why my mum was robbed of her rationality before she turned 40. I had to tap on my human quality to question, to empathy and to self-care with my own well-being so that I can self-reflect and make sense of what life has thrown to me. I concluded that life is fragile. Time is limited and may not always be on our side. Some young people contract with HIV or Cancer and pass on prematurely. In a more trivial, I lost the physical fitness I had when I was a teenager.

What is certain is that a robotic world creates complex products like Facebook and Instagram and surfaces complex problems like cyber bullying, sexting and the like to the young before they are ready for it. Jeremy Hunt, the UK Health Secretary, claimed that the social media companies are not doing enough to protect the youth's mental health¹. Children as young as 4 are suffering from depression because of the prevalence of cyber bullying and sexual abuse made possible by social media².

The way out of it, as Drucker suggests, is to always question the conventional wisdom and debunk it. In Drucker's own words, "what everyone know is usually wrong"³. The way to do it, as Drucker would prescribe, is to look at the trends of social media and the increasing usage of it by the young, to learn what might result from it. It challenges the assumption that children are meant to be innocent. They can be innocent only if parents can shield the children from information that is not appropriate. Social Media and smartphone gadgets put a lot of power into the young, and this dramatically affected how fast children are inheriting problems that we once thought are meant for adults only.

¹ <https://www.healthcareglobal.com/public-health/jeremy-hunt-takes-social-media-titans-reduce-impacts-mental-health>

² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5568361/Pupils-UK-young-four-suffering-depression.html>

³ The Practical Drucker chapter 9 by William Cohen

What is certain is that where problems become more complex, we will have to tap on our human qualities, to ask why, to think through things and to find solutions to unprecedented problems. It is a survival instinct. New challenges help to reinforce our humanness as we tap on those qualities to solve problems.

Even as the world presented unfamiliar problems, Drucker's view would be to see such developments as opportunities that can result in innovation. In his view, it is in the unexpected experiences that one can draw strength from to innovate⁴.

Drawing on humanness to innovate

As an entrepreneur, I agree that unexpected experiences can result in innovation because it forces the individuals to tap on their human quality of resilience to think differently. For me, when I learnt that there is nothing I can do to cure my mum, I had two choices. Either sulk about life and go through life with a self-defeating mentality or I can choose to look at fighting back the mental health battles that affected my family. I chose the latter. In my head, I reasoned that since I cannot cure schizophrenia, the next best option is then to address the lack of easy access to care and the lack of reliable and safe pathways for my mum that did my mum in. I see opportunities in adversity and I believe ultimately if I can succeed in solving this problem, I can prevent other youths from having to experience what I had to go through.

Coincidentally, talking to my customers and beneficiaries further validated the problem of unreliable connectivity between sufferers and professional help. Sufferers often must make multiple calls, browse through the cluttered information on the internet and be referred to multiple different agencies, almost being subjected to a "trial and error" and "being bounced around" process before they can settle with someone who can really help them.

It made me realize that the solution has to be AI, that with the right data for both sufferers and help professionals, we can be an effective bridge between them.

This idea is so entrenched in my company that I name my mission and company name around this bridging idea. This is consistent with Drucker's advice, where the mission is what the organization will be remembered for⁵. My company's name is Acceset (pronounced as "asset"). It combines the word 'accept' and 'reset'. It is to remind ourselves that our mission is to empower sufferers to accept care, and when they are recovered and trained in empathy, they can then go on to reset the lives of other sufferers.

If you think about my situation and how I approached AI within the social sector, it seems that a robotic society, or a world driven by AI, must fundamentally

⁴ The Practical Drucker by William Cohen, Chapter 29 "Where the best innovation came from"

⁵ The Five most important questions by Peter Drucker

come from our own humanness; if we are to devote resources and be motivated to create an efficient system, it must be because there is a fundamental human need important to us that we hope to meet efficiently through AI. Hence, staying human is a crucial process in the evolution towards a more robotic society.

Barriers to innovation in the entrepreneurship journey

The world, however, is not perfect. Even as we evolve to be more innovative and robotic, everyone views this improvement with different lenses and emotions. The perception of whether innovation is beneficial or harmful for society is something that is as uneven as our unique humanness. In the context of trying to bring innovation to market and to address the mental health stigma, this presents unique challenges.

I remember applying for multiple business competitions, reaching out to non-profit organizations and door knocking on schools to get their attention and to look at what I have developed. I was surprised to learn that the decision-makers do not have incentives to solve the problems even if they know it to exist and even if there is already a product ready to go on trial, because it is risky.

Honestly, as an entrepreneur, I was very disillusioned about this until I read Drucker. Drucker said that quality is not what we think it is, but what the customers perceive of it⁶. Coincidentally, he used the school as an example to illustrate that there are many different stakeholders, such as counsellors, students, parents, principals and board members. These stakeholders can view innovation as risks and may act in fear to maintain the status quo. It gave a much-needed explanation for why there seems to be invisible barriers in bringing my product to market. The fact that logical decisions to decline a trial based on fear further reinforced the notion that rationality is rooted and embedded in emotions.

The theory of abandonment to overcome barriers

This is the real world I lived in. What could a fresh graduate with not much leverage do to push the buttons and agenda for the benefit of destigmatizing mental health? I have always assumed that joining and winning competitions can help raise my profile and credibility and I could have a stronger voice in negotiating with decision-makers for a better world. But I have not been successful in that regard too for the past 2 years.

Drucker gave a new idea to my dilemma. He suggested to abandon initiatives that are not producing results and focus on those that are delivering the output. I recalled my first school principal meeting came courtesy not from my door-knocking

⁶ The Practical Drucker by William Cohen, Chapter 17, "Quality is not what you may think"

but by means of introduction by my investor. It was a high-profile individual who opened the door for a fresh graduate. I realized if I want my company to be successful, I must abandon the idea that I can raise my credibility on my own, and instead leverage on the credibility of high-profile individuals. This meant I should stop applying for business competitions and spend the time on networking with high-profiled individuals and explaining why the project is important for society.

This approach led me to meet with board members of public institutions, who opened the door to important meetings that helped me to work closer towards my first customer trial. I suspect part of my narrative of trying to solve problems that affected my mum helped me to connect with these high-profile individuals. The credit of that connection owed less to AI and Robots and more to our common humanity. Because of that, I always believe staying human is part of our evolution towards an AI world, and even in that world, staying human will become even more relevant in our everyday life.

Conclusion

In my essay, I may have covered many seemingly unrelated areas, from my family, to mental health and to the challenges of entrepreneurship. But the common thread among these themes involve interaction with people and overcoming the challenges in each facet of life requires us to stay human and think in a human-centered approach as outlined by Drucker. Without humanness as a basis, it is difficult to deliver a robots or AI that would be useful enough for humans to use. A society would not have the collective strength to move from its status quo without humanness and staying human.

Professional Category: Entrepreneur