

Is there room for me in the AI-driven future workplace?

Artificial intelligence is more likely to complement our capabilities rather than replace us entirely. Humans are still crucial to provide oversight, critical thinking, creativity and empathy. BY JANSON YAP

THE world has an estimated 3.3 billion people in the workforce today. According to the World Economic Forum, Gen Z will constitute 27 per cent of the workforce in member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development by 2025. (Gen Z is a term generally used to describe those born during the late 1990s and early 2000s.)

Speculation has been rife about artificial intelligence (AI) – large data sets and self-learning language models – augmenting or taking over our work since ChatGPT took the world by storm. What will the future of work look like?

For sure, the disruptions wrought by those technologies will have an impact on the future workforce significantly and fit the criteria for a “wicked” problem – one that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory and changing requirements that are often hard to discern when the problem first manifests itself. It exhibits social complexity, an indeterminate end point, and presents complex interdependencies. Solutions, if any, are not yet properly developed.

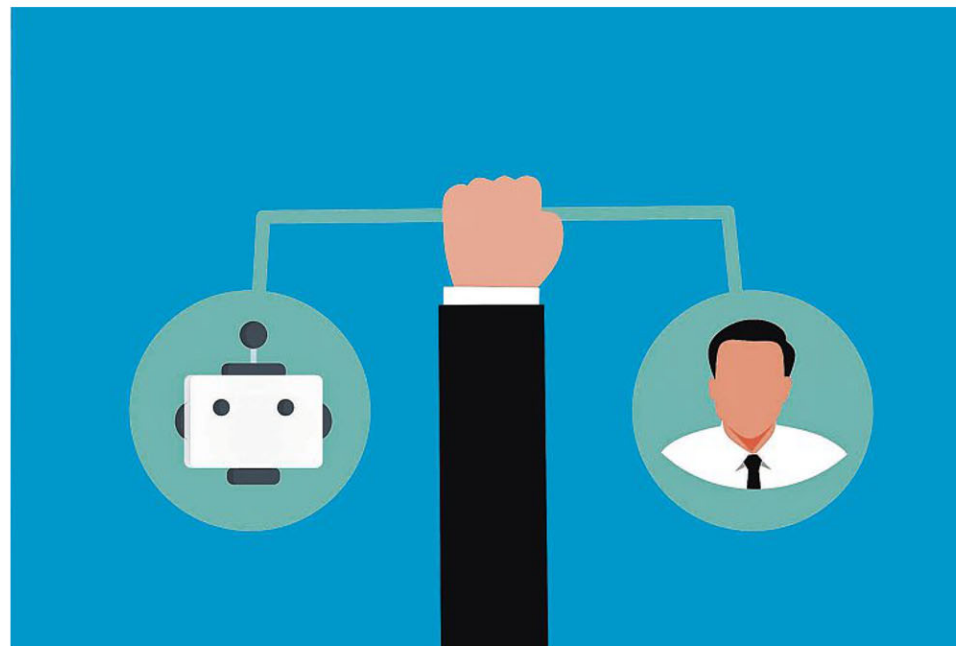
A way to approach the problem

One way to examine this wicked challenge is through the lenses of social capital, human capital and technology capital. Social capital refers to the networks, norms and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation between people as individuals and in groups. Human capital refers to the knowledge, skills and abilities that individuals generally possess. Finally, technology capital refers both to intellectual property as well as to the knowledge, skills and abilities required to use machines and tools effectively.

Mauro F Guillen describes the future world in his book *2030* in the chapter “The Clock is Ticking”, in which fewer babies will be born in most parts of the world, leading to further ageing of the population. Part of this demographic shift is driven by women who are bearing fewer children because they are remaining in school and pursuing careers outside the home. With this, perhaps, comes the rise of more female millionaires. Wealth is also becoming more concentrated in urban areas, with the population of cities growing at 1.5 million per week. Different generations of people are displaying divergent longings and aspirations. Millennials are spearheading the sharing economy.

In terms of social capital, Gen Z workers are known for their collaborative nature and their ability to work well in teams. They are also known for their strong communication skills and their ability to adapt quickly to new technologies. These skills will be essential in a future where remote work is more common.

Laurence Lien, founding CEO of the Asia Philanthropy Circle, believes that a more caring and inclusive society would mean building social capital. Capitalism needs to be reformed, and companies should foster a more meaningful corporate purpose than in the past. It is not just about making money, but about whether products are made in a socially responsible way. In his essay, “Notes Towards a Few Breakthroughs to True Unity” published in *One United People*, Lien said that a key govern-



The focus should be on leveraging AI to create a more beneficial and symbiotic relationship between people and machines.

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ment policy is to build stronger communities, and several critical success factors are involved in creating a society with a greater sense of togetherness.

The ingredients include: first, a belief in the strengths of the people in a community to initiate positive action without depending on state help or external resources; second, genuine empowerment beyond consultation to grow and share power; and third, good community leadership and facilitation within the community. Together, Lien believes, these ingredients will foster more horizontal relationships among residents and imbue a sense of ownership and engagement. The goal of these bold experiments is to narrow income and wealth gaps, and reduce any spillover social tensions in the workplace.

Human capital is the cornerstone of an organisation's asset base. A leader should estimate the value of human capital resources and goodwill that the organisation has amassed. Robert Kaplan and David Norton, the duo behind the concept of the balanced scorecard corporate performance metric, classified intangible assets into human capital, information capital and organisation capital.

In terms of human capital, Gen Z workers are highly educated and value continuous learning. They are also known for their entrepreneurial spirit and desire to devote themselves to meaningful work. Many Gen Z workers are drawn to jobs that require creativity and innovation.

As for technology capital, Gen Z workers are digital natives who have grown up with technology. They are comfortable using technology for work and are quick to adopt new tools. They would be primed for jobs that require digital skills.

AI tools, such as ChatGPT, can play a significant role in technology capital. AI-powered systems can analyse vast amounts of data, identify patterns and generate insights that assist decision-makers in understanding the complexities of global affairs. They can provide valuable perspectives, generate creative solutions and simulate scenarios to anticipate potential

outcomes. While these tools and systems can perform impressive and amazing feats, their work products are also quite generic. At best, they offer a point of view, with insights drawn from the rich data set on which they were trained. It is important to recognise AI as a capability but not a substitute for human judgment in the foreseeable future. Not yet, at least.

While AI systems such as ChatGPT can enhance the capabilities of writers and thinkers, they must be used with caution. Users must rigorously fact-check the output of these systems to weed out hallucinations and bring important ethical considerations to bear. Because the complexities of our world demand a nuanced understanding of the diverse perspectives and interests at play, it is the responsibility of humans to harness the power of AI in a manner that serves the collective good.

Given that technological advancement is accelerating exponentially, the future of AI tools is not so easy to predict. This is particularly evident from their profound impacts on the world even in just six months since November 2022, when ChatGPT was first released. However, this is only the beginning. The challenges and opportunities of digital capabilities will further affect how we live, work and play, especially after the Industry 5.0 phase of industrialisation goes mainstream.

Limitations of the technology

Despite their potential, it is unlikely that these AI capabilities will completely replace humans in the foreseeable future. AI has its limitations. While it can perform specific tasks exceptionally well and assist people in various domains, it lacks the broader understanding, common-sense reasoning and consciousness that humans possess. It also lacks the emotional intelligence and empathy needed for many complex human interactions.

There are also ethical considerations and societal impacts to take into consideration. Concerns about job displacement and the concentration of power in the hands of AI developers and corporations

White-collar jobs typically involve knowledge work, professional skills and cognitive tasks, making them prime candidates for automation and augmentation by AI technologies. It's essential to approach the integration of AI into the workforce thoughtfully. Instead of fearing mass job displacement, we should focus on how to reskill and upskill the workforce to thrive in an AI-powered world.

Tools to navigate a complex world

By emphasising lifelong learning, creativity, critical thinking and emotional intelligence, workers can better prepare themselves for the changing job landscape and find new ways to collaborate effectively with AI technologies.

The successful integration of AI in white-collar jobs will likely involve a combination of automation, augmentation and upskilling, resulting in a more efficient and productive workforce.

Finally, the world we inhabit today is undeniably complex and multipolar. Advancement of technology, the rise of new powers, the influence of non-state actors, interconnectedness and divergent ideologies all contribute to this intricate global landscape. The disruptions of global supply chains, the technological landscape and evolving trade dynamics have required organisations and individuals to adapt, collaborate and navigate landscapes that are now far more complex than in the past.

Cultural intelligence, virtual collaboration skills, adaptability and ethical considerations have become vital to thrive in this ever-changing environment. As organisations and individuals embrace these changes, they can build resilient work cultures that foster innovation, inclusivity and sustainability in the face of the challenges brought by a complex multipolar world and geopolitical tensions.

I am confident the technology will be further enhanced over time, and the response can be more nuanced depending on how the tool is used and for what reasons or purposes. We have to adapt. In short, there is still room for me.

The writer is chief people officer at the National University of Singapore, where he oversees the university's human resources strategies, policies and operations. His latest book is *Room for ME* (a sequel to his previous book *Why ME?*), where he further explores the current and future work challenges from seven perspectives: well-being, expectations, leadership, culture, operations, motivations and engagement.