

The future of women in business

Ian Pearson, Futurologist, April 2007

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We are now into the millionth year of the gender wars and in these technologically turbulent times, people are reasonably wondering where it will all go next. The equality battles are almost over, and I think BT is very good in that area. But equality is about value, not about being the same. The 80s feminist concept that men and women are the same thankfully seems to have been scrapped. I learned a lot from my own daughter, who at age 3 screamed at me in Toys R Us "Daddy, stop trying to buy me things with wheels on!" and then dragged me to the Barbie aisle. We are different. Great! Vive la difference. Let's appreciate each others' merits, and move on together. I love women, and working with women, and I don't want them to be the same as men. And women should not feel that they have to try to be like men to succeed. They won't have to in tomorrow's world.

The fact that we are not the same means that there are some situations where one gender will have an advantage. Before the age of machines, men had an advantage via physical strength but now we have power tools. A size zero woman can sit in a JCB just as well as the world's strongest man. The overall strength difference is then pretty marginal. The next decades will see computers catch up with people across a wide range of intellectual skills and quite soon there will be little commercial advantage in being smart. Human interpersonal and emotional skills will then dominate, and there are very well established gender differences there.

It seems very likely to me, as someone working in the field, that computers will catch up with human in overall intelligence terms between 2015 and 2020. That sounds ridiculous to most people, who look at their PC on their desk, which even in number crunching terms is about 2000 times slower than the average human brain. But exponential progress has a habit of going slow for ages and then catching up overnight. More than half of the progress to a superhuman conscious machine will be made in the last year, the first 60 years contributing less than half the progress. Already, computer speed is doubling nearly every year, and the rate of growth is increasing. Women are especially quick to point out that there is more to intelligence than number crunching, but of course engineers are well aware of that and are already making some good progress on tools for reverse engineering the brain. Neuroscientists are learning a great deal about how the brain does things, including emotions, consciousness, sensations, memory and thinking. We already have some

basic ideas of how to start designing conscious computers with millions of emotions. But it is very clear that the emotions side of it will not make the machines human, and their emotions will be different from ours in many ways. However, analytical intelligence is about analysing input data and arriving at a conclusion and computers will be very good at that.

So what? Well, jobs that are essentially analysing, creating information, processing information, and even creativity, will be largely automated within two decades from now, in many cases much earlier. Some jobs that require some emotional involvement and interaction might also be automated. However, jobs that require the job-holder to be human will be done by humans. There are some obvious situations where only humans will do: child care; nursing; teaching; hairdressing; waiting; leadership and motivation; sales and marketing; policing; jobs that need empathy or sympathy or indeed any deep understanding of where the customer is coming from, how they are likely to be feeling, or anticipating how they might react. While some men can do many of these jobs perfectly well, it is generally the case that these types of jobs are dominated by women today, and are likely to be even more so in the future. The notable current exceptions in this list are leadership and motivation and policing. Policing will become more gender neutral because of improving technology that removes any physical strength disadvantages. We tend to associate leadership and motivation with senior managers, but actually these are often secondary reasons for why people are in senior management. There are a wide range of qualities that get people there. However, as jobs become increasingly interpersonal, and as the workforce becomes more involved in interpersonal work, these senior management roles will follow. Today's workforce resembles a lot of cogs in a big machine. Tomorrow, machines will be the cogs in the machine, and the people will focus on people stuff. The managers will be managing a different kind of organisation. Tomorrow's company will be much more of a community, with relationships dominating the value within the company. In actuality, a great deal of senior managing is about people skills already. Playing a round of golf before shaking hands on a big deal is hardly rocket science, but the directors get paid a lot more than the rocket scientists. The simple fact is that rocket science is just a lot of equations and is easy to do on a computer. Understanding the client, seeing exactly how to package the deal, how to sell it to the client, and seamlessly delivering it just the right way that it is accepted, understanding all the body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice nuances in real time, is much harder. Delivering a message to a sceptical workforce so that they feel motivated instead of cynical isn't easy either. And handling external agents such as government regulators is as much understanding personalities as interpreting rules. I am sure it is very difficult. At least I hope so. I'd hate to think we pay so much if these people don't do hard jobs.

So automating jobs by throwing massive amounts of artificial intelligence, even superhuman conscious intelligence, at them, will only work so far. When the purely intellectual and physical stuff is all taken away, what we are left with is the fundamentally human side of work. Community, relationships, emotions, empathy. There are still some areas in this world where men can feel at home and make a

good living, though less than today. But are there any women that don't feel more confident in such a future? I suspect not.