Ask not what AI can do for you
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Ask not what AI can do for you

What you can accomplish with the technology – and the time it frees up – matters more

By Flocy Joseph

I CONFESS I am old-school.

For years, colleagues and friends have regarded me as someone slow to embrace change, particularly technology. This observation is not entirely misplaced.

Yet something unexpected has happened. I find myself taking to artificial intelligence with an enthusiasm that has surprised even me.

More amusingly, some who once considered me technologically challenged have yet to embrace it to the same extent.

I have been reflecting on this irony. Perhaps our ability to benefit from AI has less to do with technological proficiency and more to do with our willingness to learn, the questions we ask and what we choose to do with the answers.

We have spent considerable time asking what AI can do for us. Let's reframe that question.



When people identify a genuine pain point in their work and explore how AI might help them address it, the learning becomes purposeful. PHOTO: MAGNIFIC

Learning begins with wanting to learn

My work in executive education brings me into conversations with leaders and organisations across industries and geographies. I have come to recognise an important distinction: Teaching someone AI is not the same as making that person want to learn AI.

There is a saying that leadership cannot simply be taught; it must also be caught. Something similar may apply to AI.

In the Singapore Management University's public programmes, participants who self-enrol often arrive with curiosity and questions. In customised corporate programmes, participants may be nominated by their organisations.

Many are enthusiastic, but others have yet to discover why the learning matters to them.

Increasingly, I see greater value in beginning not with the technology, but with a problem. When participants identify a genuine pain point in their work and explore how AI might help them address it, the learning becomes purposeful. The problem belongs to them, along with the desire to solve it.

Organisations can provide access, tools and training. But they cannot mandate curiosity.

The advantage of youth and the value of experience

I marvel at how effortlessly my son, who works in professional services, uses AI to analyse complex data sets, identify patterns and generate insights for his managers. My younger colleagues display the same fluency.

Watching them, I sometimes wonder whether those who developed expertise the hard way have been overtaken.

When a doctoral candidate recently described how AI was accelerating her research, I felt a twinge of envy. My years of doctoral research were difficult, spent poring over papers, wrestling with competing arguments, and enduring frustration, tears and self-doubt.

Yet, that time taught me something invaluable: to question assumptions, recognise inconsistencies and exercise judgment when answers were elusive.

Today, when AI produces convincing responses in seconds, that experience helps me recognise what is missing and ask better questions.

I do not wish those struggles on today's researchers. Removing drudgery is progress. But removing the intellectual effort through which judgment develops is another matter.

The challenge is to ensure convenience does not replace thinking.

Real magic happens when the digital fluency of the younger generation meets the lived experience and judgment of the older, creating outcomes neither could achieve as effectively alone.

Where empathy makes the difference

Recently, two friends faced deeply distressing circumstances. One lost a life partner. Another was diagnosed with a terminal illness. In both situations, AI proved useful in helping me navigate unfamiliar terrain, gather information and consider ways of supporting their families.

But there were moments when information alone fell short. AI may suggest words of comfort, but it cannot take our place beside a grieving friend.

At the workplace of our terminally ill friend, senior leaders took time to speak with the family, help them navigate complex arrangements and explore ways to ease their financial burden. Colleagues quietly assumed additional responsibilities.

What moved me was the genuine concern that drove these actions. People chose to go beyond their roles because a colleague and their family needed them.

We often speak of empathy as a soft skill, something desirable but perhaps secondary to intelligence and productivity. I argue otherwise.

Empathy makes us pause before acting, consider another person's circumstances and recognise that the most efficient solution may not always be the most compassionate one.

AI can help organisations make informed decisions, allocate resources and improve efficiency. But human leaders must still decide what matters, whom their decisions affect and when compassion should take precedence over convenience.

Imagine a world where AI enables us to do more in less time, but we become less willing to give that time to one another. What, then, have we really gained?

Technology can expand our capacity to help. Empathy gives that capacity a human purpose.

The question that matters

Much of public discourse about AI centres on whether machines will replace human beings. The concerns are real. Some jobs will change significantly, and some tasks may disappear altogether.

But our preoccupation with replacement may be distracting us from a more immediate responsibility.

Are we becoming better thinkers because of AI, or merely faster producers of answers? Are we using the time it saves to exercise better judgment, deepen relationships and solve meaningful problems?

I am grateful to be living through this transformation at this life stage. The years spent studying, working, making mistakes and learning from people have given me a foundation from which to engage with AI in ways I could not have earlier. I am also learning from younger colleagues who approach it with admirable openness and confidence.

I will probably remain old-school in many ways. But if that means valuing hard-earned knowledge, sound judgment, human relationships and empathy, I am content to carry those qualities into the new world.

AI may help me accomplish more than I ever imagined. But what I choose to do, why it matters and whose lives I touch remain questions that I must answer for myself.

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