

Never Trust a Robot

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Humans Are Underrated

by Geoff Colvin

1 **G**enerations of parents have faced this dilemma: You want to give your kids career advice, but what, exactly, will be the in-demand and well-paid jobs of the future? In "The Graduate" (1967), the answer was "plastics"; more recently people have suggested professions that seemingly could not be automated, such as nursing or law. Yet if technology improves exponentially, "it's dangerous to claim there are any skills that computers cannot eventually acquire," according to *Fortune* editor-at-large Geoff Colvin. Computers can drive our cars, search legal documents, and probably write serviceable book reviews.

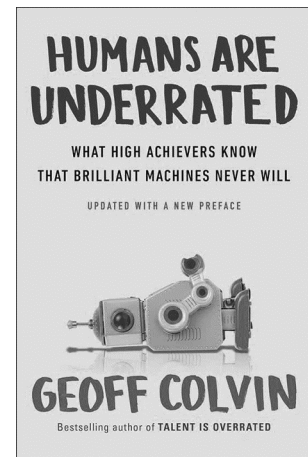
2 So are we doomed to uselessness? In *Humans Are Underrated* Mr. Colvin starts with a litany of our weaknesses, including his own defeat by IBM's Watson computer in a "Jeopardy!"-like showdown, before he inserts this twist: "In finding our value as technology advances, looking at ourselves is much more useful than the conventional approach, which is to ask what kind of work a computer will never be able to do."

3 Humans, it seems, are 19. We want to work with people and have conversations with people. Even if computers can do things better, there are some actions that we "will simply insist be performed by other humans." And so "the most valuable people are increasingly relationship workers."

4 The rest of the book offers examples of how this relationship-orientation will preserve (or create) future jobs. Algorithms can predict criminal recidivism better than judges, but "it's a matter of the social necessity that individuals be accountable for important decisions" like sentencing.

5 20, even high-tech-oriented companies such as Google, Mr. Colvin notes, now hire for empathy and people skills. The author details the U.S. Army's research on the "human domain" — how to get troops to trust each other and their commanders, and how to understand and defuse situations in hostile territory. "To look into someone's eyes — that turns out to be, metaphorically and quite often literally, the key to high-value work in the coming economy," writes Mr. Colvin.

6 As big idea business books go, this one is pretty good. Mr. Colvin weaves original reporting and humor into an intelligent narrative. Of course, as with all such books, it's easy to overstate the big idea.



- 7 Think about IBM's Watson again. Mr. Colvin asks us to assume that a "perfect mechanical imitation of a human being does not exist in our or our grandchildren's lifetimes." But that's a dangerous assumption, especially as we are still learning what happens on a mechanical level when humans interact. One major finding Mr. Colvin covers: We read nonverbal emotional cues that show up in pupil dilation. What if some inventor can produce a robot whose pupils dilate appropriately as it gazes into a human's eyes? Then, as humans do, we will anthropomorphize like crazy. We will believe the machine can read our souls.
- 8 Then there's this common business-book foible: The author's big idea leads, conveniently enough, to currently trendy management advice. Teams are great; collaboration is the future (though Mr. Colvin seems to have written his book without six co-authors). We need more humanities majors for their empathy and storytelling abilities (though employers peskily keep preferring math and science majors).
- 9 Mr. Colvin deems Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer's decision to end work-from-home arrangements to be an innovative choice, even though research finds that working from home can be more productive. That companies need both innovation and productivity gets ignored when overeager leaders assume workers can invent brilliant new products while standing next to one another at the ladies' room sinks. And yes, I mean the ladies' room, as Mr. Colvin devotes a whole chapter to how women score higher than men on measures of social sensitivity. The best-performing teams, he assures us, will be those with the most women. How could companies attract and keep more women? Well, they could let people telecommute but ... hmmm. Maybe Watson can sort that out.
- 10 Nonetheless, Mr. Colvin is a shrewd student of human nature. He freely admits that for us underrated humans, "rationality is not our strong suit." In other words, for those smart enough to understand that our brains don't change as quickly as technology, there will be many economically valuable niches still to be exploited. In the future a lawyer may not make money by scanning documents, but by "understanding an irrational client," and "forming the emotional bonds needed to persuade that client to act rationally." There may even be jobs for corporate poets. Mr. Colvin thinks this is "wonderful news" because what we're being asked to do in this brave new world is "become more essentially human" – telling tales around the campfire, or the boardroom table, as the case may be, while the machines are still out in the cold.

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