

What Is the Point of Me?

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Recent developments in technology often beg the question whether certain jobs, services or even entire industries has any place in the modern world. Why do stockbrokers exist if artificial intelligence and algorithms can make trades? Why do we hire taxi and truck drivers if vehicles can drive themselves? Why have a customer service department if chatbots can handle most requests from customers?

Each new development challenges our perceptions of the world, our ways of thinking and how we interact with each other. However, the past few weeks' announcements from Google's IO conference have triggered a bigger, more worrying question. What exactly is the point of you and me? Not just our jobs but also our very nature.

Ridiculous? Consider this: Google's new messaging app Allo features inbuilt Google Assistant that will suggest responses; based on where you are, what message you send and receive and even the time of day. Google Assistant will analyse thousands of different variables and come up with the most pertinent reply. Very soon you will be able to talk to your friends, family and work colleagues without even needing to think. Google's got that covered for you. It is not beyond imagination to think that in the very near future entire conversations could be conducted with both sides using responses suggested by Google Assistant. First technology came for floor sweeping, then technology came for parking and driving, now technology is coming for you.

The death of human interaction has been predicted after many technological developments. We may still be talking but not actually thinking, just pressing send to automated responses.

Already we have seen something similar to this happen. Anyone who has reached a work anniversary, a birthday or got a new job on LinkedIn will have received multiple messages. All saying 'congrats. Hope you're well!' Charming? Not really.

We are entering a world where these suggested responses become the standard of human interaction.

But is this totally a bad thing? I remember a friend talking to me the first time they got a PA at work. This friend spoke in panic that they would have nothing to do at work because all the diary bookings, meeting responses, phone calls and the like had been taken over. More than half their day's work was now someone else's responsibility. The tasks that filled every day were no longer there.

Within a few short weeks this panic had been replaced by a sense of 'how did I ever survive without a PA?' We are incredibly adept at shifting mundane, finding new tasks and applying ourselves to better things.

So many messages we send take time out of our lives, away from work, away from real interaction. Is it really a good use of our time to craft bespoke replies to every question we are asked?

With that time freed up our interactions with each other can become more meaningful. We can even achieve a measure of competitive advantage.

I recently reached my 16-year anniversary of working for DataArt. Cue the flurry of automated messages on LinkedIn. Out of the many messages I received, the ones that stood out, which I remember, were the personalised ones. Including messages from recruitment agency and an office supply company.

I wonder whom I will go to if I need to hire in a hurry or need some new things for the office?

New technology always throws up difficult questions. The expansion of suggested responses does pose the question what is the point of you and me in a world when Google can think and speak for us. But equally it gives us the opportunity to re-define what it means to be human in the modern world. It gives us the chance to gain an advantage in interactions that matter. But most importantly it allows us to connect on a deeper level, replacing the mundane question, answer conversations with ones, which really matter.

Technology can change our lives, it can change nearly everything about our world but it cannot change human nature. What is the point of me? Same as before, but soon with less mundane things to do.

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