

American professor Ethan Mollick on the rise and impact of AI

17 May 2024, 11:22

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"Waiting on the sidelines is actually no longer an option"

With his new book 'Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI' (just a month after its launch, Mollick urges each of us to embrace AI as a full-fledged colleague/assistant. His vision of the future revolves around four possible scenarios, which in the short term all lead to the same conclusion: "AI is here to stay... and companies must adapt to that new era. Sooner rather than later."

US professor Ethan Mollick, keynote speaker at our “AI:Unboxed” event on Wednesday 29 May 2024, is an associate professor of innovation and entrepreneurship at Wharton, the world-renowned business school of the University of Pennsylvania. One of his main areas of focus is the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on various domains of our work and life, a theme in which he is regarded as a global thought leader due to his thorough empirical research and numerous publications in leading media.

During “AI:Unboxed”, Ethan Mollick will zoom in on the current state of the field of artificial intelligence through examples and live demos. What are AI Agents and how can you use them in your business? Why is generative AI (GenAI) such a game-changer for a lot of jobs? Specifically,

what does it mean for a company when employees start using AI? Or more on a macro level: how will all these developments affect our dealings with jobs and work in general? With over 1,300 registrations, the event is fully sold out. As a warm-up, below are Mollick's answers to some of the questions we were able to ask him during a brief video call, and as a bonus, three tips to get your people to join you!

On Reddit recently, there was much discussion about a post by someone who wrote: "You know what the biggest problem with pushing all-things-AI is? Wrong direction. I want AI to do my laundry and dishes so that I can do art and writing, not for AI to do my art and writing so that I can do my laundry and dishes." In other words, some people are afraid. Are their fears justified?

Ethan Mollick: Somehow I can understand that fear, because never before in history have we massively automated creative or intellectual tasks. Today this does happen, and the uncertainty about the consequences makes some people uneasy. However, I also want to add some nuance... AI isn't about 'choosing a direction' as if one direction would exclude all other possibilities. On the contrary, as humans, we still hold the reins. We're at the beginning of an exciting new era with new technologies and possibilities, and we have freedom of choice. We can choose to purposefully use AI, primarily for tasks we don't enjoy or that hinder us. This gives us space to invest more time in the things we're good at and passionate about.

To stick with the artist analogy: it's not that you can't create art anymore because more and more art is generated by AI. No, AI can help you explore new (and maybe better?) forms of art or create a website that helps sell your art, etc. There's optimism that AI will enhance human creativity and productivity rather than replace it. Also, don't overestimate the current capabilities of GenAI. It's a technology in development. The current level of GenAI compared to humans for most creative tasks ranges somewhere between the 50th and 80th percentiles. It will improve—how quickly, nobody knows... but the role of humans is certainly far from over.

Extending this to the workplace for a moment.... Almost all jobs in the future will somehow overlap with the capabilities of AI, it seems. How can companies foster a culture that incorporates both the capabilities of people and the power of AI so that employees feel empowered by AI rather than threatened?

Ethan Mollick: A job that overlaps with AI's capabilities is not necessarily a job that is replaced by AI. In fact, every job consists of different tasks, and AI is especially a great tool to support the worker in specific tasks so that he/she can have room to pay extra attention to other tasks for which AI is not or less suitable. My own job, namely Business School professor, ranks 22 in the ranking of jobs that most overlap with the capabilities of AI. Still, I am not worried. On the contrary, I am happy that AI will support me in things that now take me an enormous amount of time and do not actually contribute to my job satisfaction or productivity. Administrative tasks, for example, while I would much rather be busy with my students.

To employers, I would recommend that they also approach AI that way and promote it internally. Not as a replacement for human labour or an opportunity to cut costs, but rather as a tool to free up human capital so that those valuable brains can be used more effectively and contribute more to the growth of the organisation. If you are transparent about that and you are an employer who enjoys the trust of its employees, then that message is bound to catch on. In the other case, well ... then it becomes very difficult to remove that distrust.

A clear AI policy can help?

Ethan Mollick: An AI policy for individual employees should primarily provide a supportive framework within which people can experiment with AI. It could include ethical rules too, for instance. The important thing is that the policy is clear, explicit and encouraging. A policy that only states what is not allowed and what sanctions exist in case of violations, in my opinion, is rather counterproductive. And I see a lot of those...

On the other hand, privacy of data and protection of company secrets are rightfully significant concerns for many businesses. However, these concerns should not lead to paralyzing fear. The only way an AI system can train on your data and thus provide real value to your company is by granting it access to that data. Most AI vendors do offer solutions with privacy guarantees, so that issue (which tools are allowed/not allowed) can be addressed at the company level.

There are now numerous free or at least 'affordable' AI tools on the market, which accelerates the growth of young startups and smaller companies. What does this mean for established players?

Ethan Mollick: Many traditional companies will face new competitors in their sectors who have much less human capital but fill that gap by intelligently and intensively using AI. This trend is already underway and will only accelerate. However, that doesn't mean the role of traditional companies is over. They too would do well to jump on the AI train and reap its benefits. They already have a significant advantage over newcomers because they have more scale and strong ties with the world, with their customers. But for these established players, it's crucial to teach as many employees as possible how to work most efficiently with AI and grow from there. It's the opposite of using AI as a reason for cost-cutting.

In your new book, you describe four possible scenarios about the future of AI, ranging from a situation where today all AI developments would stop immediately, to a futuristic new world controlled by an artificially intelligent "Machine God. In between are a scenario with continued exponential growth of AI capabilities, and a scenario with slower, rather gradual growth. Which scenario seems most realistic to you and what conclusion should I draw as a business leader?

Ethan Mollick: I assume one of two least extreme scenarios. The first scenario, stopping or even slowing down AI developments immediately, seems practically impossible from a pragmatic standpoint. The genie is out of the bottle, and existing models, often open source, are becoming increasingly powerful. Trying to halt this evolution would also be undesirable, given the incredible solutions that AI potentially offers humanity.

The plausibility of the other extreme scenario, that of the Machine God, is difficult to accurately assess at this moment because it's clear that the upper limits of technology are not yet known. I often speak with AI developers who are seriously working on artificial general intelligence (AGI, a hypothetical form of artificial intelligence that would be capable of successfully performing any intellectual task that a human can). Half of them believe they will achieve this in the foreseeable future, while the other half is not convinced yet. We simply don't know.

So, I think we're probably heading towards either further exponential growth of AI or slower, gradual growth. For a business leader, this essentially means the same thing in both cases: "There really isn't much time left to passively wait on the sidelines. It's better to explore the possibilities of AI today rather than tomorrow. See it as a great opportunity to make your processes and your people more efficient, to unlock new opportunities, and to position your company at the forefront of the new world."

Who is Ethan Mollick?

- Associate professor at Wharton School, studying AI, innovation and startups.
- Academic director at Wharton Interactive.
- Influential voice on the impact of AI through:
    - ‘One Useful Thing’: his own newsletter (+145k subscribers)
    - ‘Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI’: his newest New York Times bestseller
    - Frequent publications in news media such as Forbes, The New York Times & The Wall Street Journal

How do I get my people to join me? 3 tips!

In his book "Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI' Ethan Mollick writes that the best way for a company to benefit from AI is to engage the most advanced users as ambassadors, while encouraging a larger number of employees to use AI. Three tips:

1. **Your AI "super users" can be anywhere.** So start looking for them in all levels of your organisation as well.
2. **Make it a positive story**: if your employees do not believe that you care about them, they may not dare admit to using AI (because then they will feel "expendable"). Provide big rewards for the employees who come up with the best ideas or realize the biggest productivity gains thanks to AI. The more employees get excited about AI, the greater the benefits to your business.
3. **Embed AI in your systems and processes.** Don't make them stand-alone and uncontrollable initiatives, but an integral part of your business operations (which may fundamentally change as a result).

This article also appeared on Agoria's website.

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