The Hidden Cost of Technology Transforming Nearly All Aspects of Life

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Technology has transformed our lives in numerous positive ways. Yet, we often forget how technologies have removed facets of life that make it rich, that make it meaningful — and at one time gave us an edge.

Whether it is our smartphones, laptops or a voice assistant like Amazon Alexa, we have come to rely on technological devices and systems that perform numerous tasks that we once did manually. Many of these tasks now simply fly under the radar and effortlessly get done.

The list of examples is near endless, with so many younger people not even aware that many tasks once required human attention. For example, paying a bill in person at a bank or writing a check that is mailed is no longer an option that most people consider. Such bills are typically delivered electronically and paid automatically, often as a direct withdrawal from our bank account. Such a transformation is why, in part, the U.S. Postal Service delivers less mail today than it did two decades ago, with the downward trend showing no signs of abating.

Technology has created efficiencies that allow more tasks to be completed, with less effort and in less time. It also has given us more tasks to fill, as our technology-driven self-service society has become the norm.

As much as technology provides significant benefits and is valued, there is a price to be paid for in the reduction of human interactions and the associated erosion of personal relationships.

When we buy insurance online for our automobile or home, we are unable to develop a rapport with the representative. As such, when we need to file a claim, everything is done electronically, with little, if any, human interaction. This degrades the art of communication and negotiation since technology dampens the emotional content of messages, focusing purely on data and information.

One area in which this shift is particularly disturbing — where technology has dampened human interaction — is in medicine.

At the core of medical care is the relationship that physicians build with their patients. The rise of electronic medical records (EMR) has created a demand on physicians to spend a good part of their time during patient visits in front of their computer or tablet, recording information in real-time that populates their medical notes.

This technology-centric experience is driven by how physician visits are paid for, namely, coding for their services so that health insurance companies will pay them.

EMRs appear to help physicians be more efficient, so that they do not have to re-transcribe their notes during patient interactions. One price paid for such efficiencies is an erosion of the physician-patient connection. For example, it may mean the physician makes no eye contact with the patient, focusing entirely on their electronic device during the office visit.

Generative AI like ChatGPT is positioned to potentially further erode how people interact and human connections, albeit in more subtle ways.

For example, if people use generative AI to draft letters of recommendation or evaluation, the human element necessary to gather such information gets lost, even becoming superfluous.

People are more than their resumes and records. The intangible human aspects are difficult to capture, making generative AI outputs (although they may be accurate and complete) come across as verbose and sterile.

Much like the character HAL 9000 in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, an artificial intelligence (AI) computer that possessed a number of human-like properties and even feigned emotion when it infamously said, "I'm sorry, Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that." Although HAL was programmed to operate the film's Discovery One spaceship and follow crew commands, ultimately, it overrides the judgment of the human crew.

By shifting so many of our tasks, work and responsibilities to ever-advancing technology, generative AI can dehumanize information and minimizes the very best aspects of people: kindness, generosity and love.

Technology has many benefits and will continue to evolve and develop. AI is at the fulcrum of such advances, and rightly so. This means that all directions for advancing AI must continue to be developed.

Yet, when technology begins to erode the human connection, questions must be raised as to these costs and if they are justified based on the benefits accrued.

No one wants to go back to paying our bills at banks or writing checks and dropping them in the mail. At the same time, as we move into higher levels of technology, the cost of losing human interactions must be added into the risk calculus. When such factors come into play, the problem becomes more complex to analyze, with a "more is better" mentality not guaranteed to provide the most value.

With each new generation of technology taking the reins in society, we lose sight of some of the simpler aspects of life. Technology has just as subtly removed some of the humanity from our daily routines such that we haven't even noticed this loss.

In the end, assuming that unlimited technology is a panacea for all is naïve. Perhaps we would benefit from consciously finding ways to turn off some of the technology at times, even if we do not need to, with the hope of enhancing something that should remain important to everyone: the human experience.

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