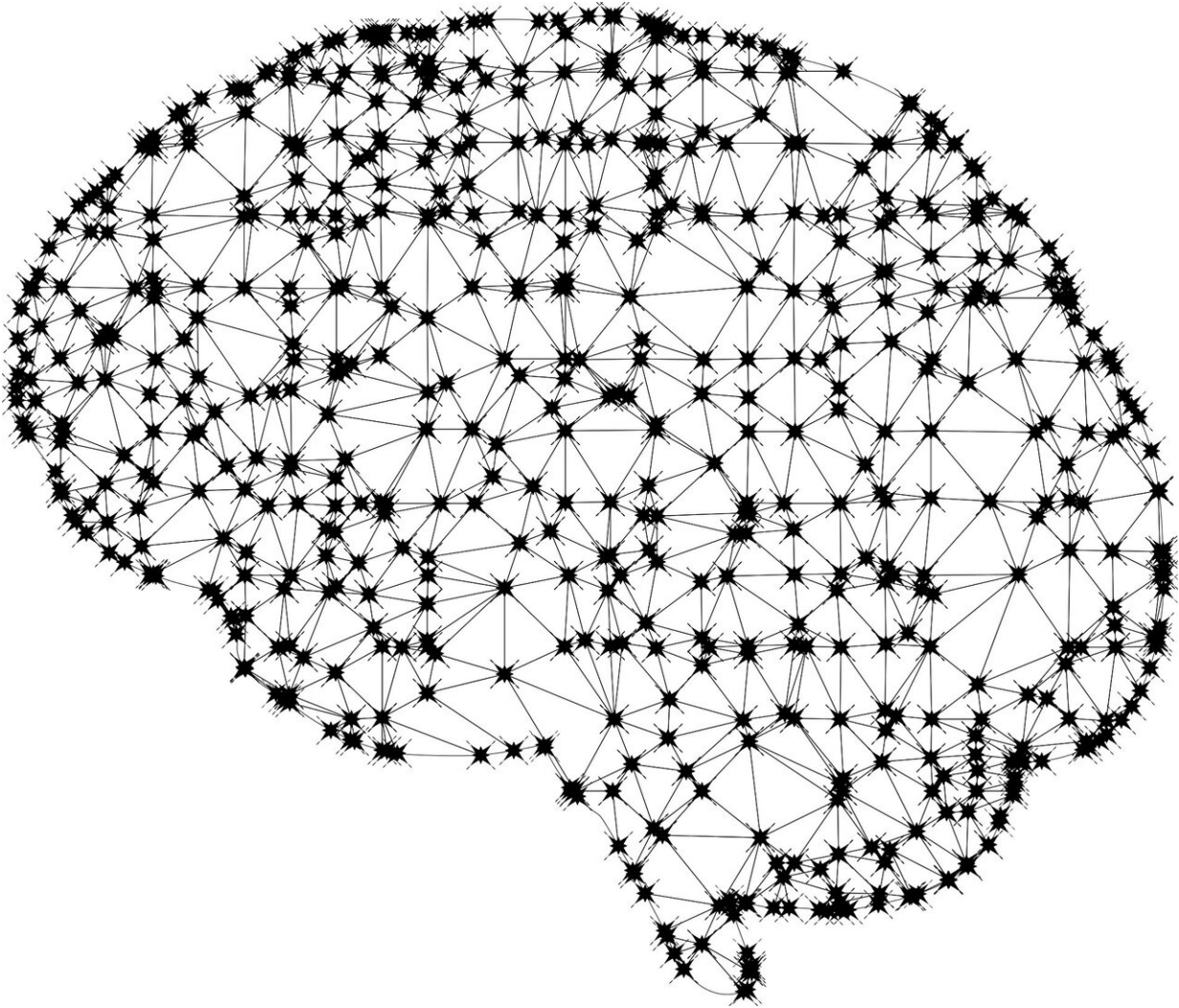


AI at work: Machines are training human workers to be more compassionate

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"You are speaking faster than usual," reads an alert on a computer screen. The call center agent on the phone with a customer can see a speedometer icon.

The conversation with the customer continues, as does the computer feedback. "Think about how the customer is feeling. Try to relate," the artificial intelligence-powered tool interjects. The agent receives other notifications, from "extended silence" to "empathy cue," which suggests the worker is not showing enough empathy.

For about 1,700 agents at the call center of Humana Pharmacy, the software called Cogito is becoming part of their work lives. It listens to most of their phone calls with customers nationwide and guides the agents on how to better communicate by analyzing vocal cues in conversations such as pitch, tone, and rhythm of voices.

In recent years, global industries have seen considerable transformation brought by automation in the workplace. One-third of activities in about 60% of occupations worldwide could be automatable, according to a 2017 report by management consulting firm McKinsey & Company.

As the technology advances, AI has gained increasing presence. It could perform a widening range of tasks that were previously done by humans and has been used in recruiting and management processes.

The increasing prevalence of AI has boosted efficiency and reduced costs for companies but has also drawn concerns about job losses and hidden discrimination. Reuters last year unveiled that Amazon abandoned an AI recruiting tool in development, as the tech giant cannot fix its bias against women. Uber's facial recognition technology reportedly didn't process and recognize transgender drivers. A study published by New York University's AI Now Institute in April shows how many AI systems favor white people and males.

Talking about such concerns around AI, Joshua Feast, Cogito Inc.'s co-founder and CEO said its software doesn't mean to replace anybody. "We're a coach," he said. "We're sort of proud as a company that we're helping workers do well on the job, helping customers have better experiences on the phone and helping our clients keep those customers."

The company, which works with call centers of large insurance companies, including MetLife and Humana, retail banks and credit card issuers, says it has more than 25,000 users.

It helps to minimize bias that Cogito's algorithm analyzes biological signaling mechanism, which is largely independent on language and culture, Feast said. The company has also deployed a secondary algorithm and a human annotation team to check for bias, he added.

AI comes into play when humans get tired sometimes and suffer from "compassion fatigue," according to Feast. "What the AI is really doing is helping somebody be more consistent in the course of the day." The software also provides tools for supervisors to track the performance of team members and guide workers accordingly, though Feast said Cogito doesn't function as "a performance management system."

A customer agent at Humana handles 30 to 40 calls a day on average, according to Mark Morse, vice president of Humana Pharmacy's service operations. "When you're tired or on any given day, what happens at home and frustrations in life can come into the contact center," he said.

But showing empathy is always important as the customers of life insurance companies are usually "in the midst of some of the most challenging moments of their lives, from going on disability to the loss of a loved one," said Kristine Poznanski, head of global customer solutions at MetLife.

Using Cogito is not compulsory at Humana, but the company is considering integrating Cogito's assessment into its bonus mechanism to promote the software's usage, said Morse.

When asked if human customer agents would one day disappear, Feast said he doesn't think so, though the trend of automation has been growing—the share of customer service interactions completely handled by AI will reach 15% by 2021, according to research company Gartner. That's a 400% increase from 2017.

"I don't think they (human [customer](#) agents) will be completely replaced," Feast said. "Humans will always want to talk to other humans," Feast said. "The reason is that only other humans really understand us."

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