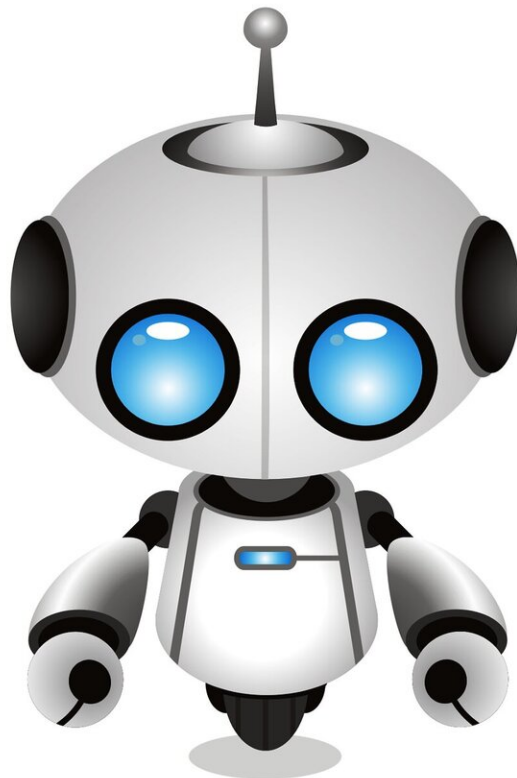


Why soft skills could power the rise of robot leaders

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What would the world look like if socially skilled robots stepped into the roles normally reserved for humans?

Recruitment experts have long predicted that AI technology will make "uniquely human" [soft skills](#) such as emotional intelligence and creativity more highly prized in the workplace.

But Dr. Jamie Gloor, Senior Lecturer in Management at the University of Exeter Business School, argues that robots may have some of these soft skills, too—thought to be vital for successful [leadership](#) as they enable leaders to motivate, unite and inspire their employees.

Writing in the [European Business Review](#), Dr. Gloor and her co-authors illustrate this by demonstrating robots' growing ability to understand and use [humour](#).

They give examples of a number of existing humorous robots, including Sophia, an AI-powered [humanoid robot](#) that can observe and understand [human emotions](#), which had the audience in stitches as a guest on the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon.

Other humorous robots include Data, an AI stand-up comedian who responds to audience feedback, and the irony bot, skilled at dishing out original sarcasm.

Dr. Gloor said: "Funny AI is impressive because humour requires several soft skills—creativity to combine seemingly unrelated concepts in a funny way and [emotional intelligence](#) to deploy it in an appropriate context, as well as to evaluate and respond to feedback.

"If robots can master humour, this suggests that they could be positioned

to step into more-human roles that require exemplary soft skills, like [leadership roles](#), instead of just the management and organisational roles for which they're more widely recognised as suitable candidates."

Delivering negative feedback with humour

Dr. Gloor explains that the irony bot's German designers armed their [robot](#) creation with sarcasm to make it more likeable so that humans would react more positively to its delivering negative feedback—a difficult task even for human leaders.

Its design capitalises on research showing that bad news, when delivered with humour, disarms people and ultimately eases the blow.

"Humorous robots are tapping into an effective social strategy that makes them able to handle difficult situations," said Dr. Gloor, adding that humour could open up new doors that were previously thought shut for robot leadership, "from providing critical feedback as part of an annual performance review ... to arbitrating a conflict between co-workers, to employee on-boarding and team-building".

The authors add that if robots can master humour it would increase people's willingness to work with and be led by machines, as research shows that leaders who use humour well are viewed as more leader-like and effective.

"Because successful humour exemplifies a soft skill that also requires a mastery of multiple other soft skills, it is a behaviour that increases success in specific leadership tasks while also improving leadership perceptions and performance more broadly," said Dr. Gloor.

"Based on this evidence, robots that can skilfully use humour are more likely to be both perceived and responded to as leaders."

Pros and cons of robot leaders

Considering what the world might look like if socially skilled robots assumed leadership positions, the authors say one of the key benefits could be cutting down human leaders' to-do lists by taking on the less-desirable tasks.

Robots could also step in for "bad" managers who perform below par or help humans confront the mistakes they make at work by being more ready to admit their own shortfalls.

It's also possible that robot leaders are more fair and transparent than humans in terms of gender and race-based biases, the authors suggest.

However, they also found potential disadvantages: robot leaders could make human leaders (in some areas) obsolete, and human leaders may prove to be a source of social support—especially during the COVID era—that robot [leaders](#) cannot entirely replace.

And if robots' new-found socio-emotional skills and humour lack authenticity, they could have less of an impact.

The authors say that unless robots can learn and improve by themselves—as machine learning rather than pre-programmed artificial intelligence—there is a risk their jokes will fall flat over time.

In the end, they conclude, it all comes down to how and if organisations choose to take advantage of these technological advances to ultimately improve leadership.

Provided by University of Exeter

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