

Augmented writing technology: a writer's friend or foe?

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As a self-proclaimed skeptic of HR technology, Aubrey Blanche was reluctant to compose job posts using artificial intelligence that generates text.

But the [software](#) produced by Seattle-based Textio worked, said Blanche, whose title at software company Atlassian is global head of diversity and belonging. Not only did the writing technology help Atlassian diversify its candidate pool, it also identified gender-biased language used in the company's performance assessments. That's helped the representation of women in technical roles at Atlassian nearly double to 19 percent since the company started using Textio in 2015, she said.

"Textio has been a core part of how we've moved the needle on representation," Blanche added. "(It) helps move our culture and build awareness about the impact of the language."

Now Textio has expanded the software's tools from identifying biased language in job posts to helping writers express their ideas. Last week, Textio

launched a new product called Textio Flow that Blanche anticipates will help Atlassian further strengthen its identity.

Textio Flow works by learning the phrases companies and individuals use to discuss jobs from a database of published documents. The software then deepens its understanding of the user's personal voice with every keystroke, enabling it to craft original language that reflects the customer's brand.

Like paramours who know each other so intimately they finish one another's sentences, the software takes a simple phrase or sentence typed into the text box and offers to transform it into a rich paragraph. The writer still wields control of the document by choosing whether to implement a suggestion or edit the text.

In a trial run of the new product, Textio employees' default language style was used to create a software-engineer job listing. After choosing the role and job location from a drop-down menu, the user then types a word or phrase into the text box to describe the position and candidate qualifications. To help managers recruit diverse talent, Textio uses a database of phrases shown to attract qualified candidates.

For instance, when Textio Flow saw the sentence, "We are looking for an innovative software engineer to join our team," a pop-up box indicated that the phrase "our team" attracts more female candidates. Textio Flow expanded the job description with the suggestion of adding: "We believe that the future of business documents is knowing how they'll perform before they're published. Textio builds the service that powers this revolution. Our platform is delighting customers, and we're looking for creative and passionate frontend engineers to help lead our Seattle team."

While it might sound like Textio Flow simply helps

its customers plagiarize or repeat a company's standard jargon, co-founder and CTO Jensen Harris is quick to say the software will not replace humans. "It's not automated writing – it's what we call augmented writing," Harris said. "It's not designed to take the human out of the loop."

Textio seeks to evolve the [creative process](#) by helping its users focus on innovation and to leave the tedious writing to its software, he said.

The 130-person Textio team was founded by Kieran Snyder, a former product leader at Amazon and Microsoft with a Ph.D. in linguistics, and Harris, who was previously the Microsoft Mobile Labs director. The private company won't disclose its revenue, but a spokesperson said more than 25 percent of Fortune 100 companies use its products.

Customers including McDonalds, Nestle and Johnson & Johnson have jumped on the augmented writing train to create a consistent language style that can be replicated companywide.

While Textio Flow is currently aimed at businesses, Harris said it has the potential to be applied everywhere, including by students completing college papers. The new software can be accessed on the Textio website with a subscription and is also embedded within extensions on Gmail and LinkedIn. A Textio Flow extension will also be available for Microsoft Outlook next month.

Artificial intelligence technology in the workplace has long drawn the ire of skeptics who fear their jobs could be replaced by a bloodless program. With its far-reaching applicability, the rollout of Textio Flow raises the question of whether writing jobs could be phased out completely. Harris downplayed that possibility, instead highlighting the software's ability to empower humans.

"We're about making writers better and about making the feeling of writing feel powerful and impactful," Harris said. The goal is that "you would be able to use augmented writing to help you create better stories, to write faster, to feel like you're able to spend more time thinking about the ideas and the content."

For the vast majority of people who don't write for a living, he said, the tool helps them find the words to accurately express what they want to say.

Blanche said the program has helped enhance her ingenuity by eliminating writer's block. With a click of a tab, the suggestions that appear on the screen get her creative juices flowing.

"The language that we use really shapes our reality," Blanche said. "Investing in this kind of technology is important as part of a broader strategy to create equitable, balanced organizations."

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