The Work Couch

Navigating today's tricky people challenges to create tomorrow's sustainable workplaces

RPC

Episode 15 – AI (Part 3): The role of emotional intelligence and AI's impact on wellbeing, with Patrick Brodie and Jake Wall

Content note:

Please note that all information in this episode is correct at the time of recording on 21 May 2024

Ellie: Hi and welcome to the Work Couch podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment. Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people. My name is Ellie Gelder. I'm a senior editor in the employment equality and engagement team here at RPC, and I will be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curveballs that it brings to businesses today. We hope by the end of the podcast, you'll feel better prepared to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial and inclusive way. And to make sure you don't miss any of our fortnightly episodes, please do hit the like and follow button and share with a colleague.

To mark London Tech Week, running from 10-14th June this year, we are thrilled to bring you our 3-part miniseries on the ever-evolving and exciting topic which is Artificial Intelligence.

So far, we have explored the impact of AI on litigation, how to best use it responsibly and how to regulate AI, including discussion of the EU's AI Act and we've heard how AI interacts with and affects employment law, specifically looking at privacy, bias and discrimination.

Today, in the third and concluding part of the mini-series, we're going to look at the role that emotional intelligence plays and the impact of AI on employee wellbeing.

And with me to share their expert insights and provide us with their top tips, I am thrilled to welcome back to the Work Couch Jake Wall, Policy Manager in Skills and Future of Work at techUK, and Patrick Brodie, RPC partner and head of Employment, Engagement and Equality.

Hi both, thank you so much for joining us today!

Patrick: Thanks, Ellie, it's great to be with you.

Jake: Thank you, Ellie.

Ellie: As I said we're looking at the role of emotional intelligence, which is often considered a human trait. Jake, if I can come to you first, how do you think we can address the issue of integrating emotional intelligence into AI systems, especially in sensitive workplace environments?

Jake: It's a really interesting question. When we talk about emotional intelligence, I think we should probably remember that AI systems can really only mimic emotion and empathy and not actually feel it. In some cases there will be no functional difference and a minimal risk, perhaps like how you can already use AI to change the tone of your social media post to be more cheerful and we've also seen the announcement of ChatGPT 4.0, which has the ability to see, hear and respond in real time, which means users can have a more genuine interaction with an AI system, with some noted quite impressive use cases in education and tutoring. However, I wouldn't go as far as to say this equates to emotional intelligence.

I think emotional intelligence is a uniquely human thing, and it has always been a really important skill at work. The ability to manage relationships, social and self-awareness are all key components of emotional intelligence, and it's linked to better decision making. And it actually matters more to a manager's success than IQ or technical skills. So in

the age of AI, as employees take up more tasks that probably can't be automated and require those human skills, it's only going to become more important.

And, there was a study by our member Capgemini, that found that 74% of executives and 58% of non-supervisory employees believe that emotional intelligence will become a must-have skill. Humans still need to prompt and then apply anything generated by AI, and it doesn't operate without human intelligence. So human emotional intelligence is needed in understanding outputs and then applying them in a context dependent situation.

So emotional intelligence is clearly something that's hard to automate and in demand. So while AI might not be emotionally intelligent itself, can it help humans to be more emotionally intelligent? It's an interesting question. As organisations have access to more and more customer data of different kinds, AI powered textual sentiment analysis and other forms of ex-post analysis can equip workers with insights to help them be more responsive to customer emotions and attitudes, for example.

And organisations can also use sentiment analysis to understand trends in employee attitudes and identify common concerns as well as signs of burnout. So some aspects of emotional intelligence may be enhanced by AI. I think when it comes to things like biometric emotional recognition and classification systems, AI can only assess perceived expressions of emotion and not actual emotions.

It discerns emotions based on data, and probabilities, which can't account for the full complexity of human emotions filtered through personal, social and cultural factors. So while it might be an indicator, it's not infallible. And groups of people such as those with neurodiversities may not be well represented. We've seen in the EU the AI act prohibits the use of biometric emotional recognition systems in sensitive areas like workplace and education, except when that use is for medical or safety reasons. In the UK., the IO recently confirmed in their strategic plan that they will this year seek views on how biometric classification technologies should be developed and deployed. And the EHRC have also stated that AI and AI recruitment specifically will be key focus areas for 2024-25. One thing I thought was notable from the ICO strategic plan was that they said existing data protection law can mitigate many of the risks that initiatives like the EU AI Act seek to address.

And they highlight the fairness principle that requires organisations not to undertake data processing that has unjustifiably adverse effects on individuals. So we see the cross-sector principles based approach to AI regulation being borne out, which is encouraging. But it's clear that more regulator resource will be required and organisations are going to need to be realistic about what technology can achieve and if it will help them meet their needs, balancing the benefits with the risks.

Ellie: Thanks, Jake. And Patrick, staying with the topic of emotional intelligence, how do you view this within the sphere of AI? Do you think AI systems can have that emotional intelligence?

Patrick: I think I'm going to come back to a first, but in many ways, both challenging and equally important question, Ellie. What skills and experiences will remain unique to or the preserve of humans such that will still outcompete AI and other technology in these areas? Howard Gardner, a psychologist, put forward the theory of multiple intelligence. He proposed seven, covering linguistic, musical, spatial, logical, mathematical, and physical. The final two, adding to those five, were interpersonal intelligence. So that's understanding and responding to others, and intrapersonal intelligence, understanding ourselves, our motivations, our feelings, and responses. Now of the seven types of intelligence AI is currently able to replicate the first five, leaving interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence to the preserve of us. Work by various academics propose that there are three bottlenecks to AI automation. First, there's creativity. Now, I don't mean the ability to simply analyse and synthesize and generate text and images from existing source material, irrespective of how real, brilliant, and novel the product might be. Rather, it's about distilling ideas and concepts from a broad spectrum and range of experiences, often personal, unavailable to an algorithm, creating something that's, in my mind, capable of holding cultural appreciation. So that's creativity. The second bottleneck is the breadth and depth of our human sensory and cognitive perception. There's an interesting and valuable line of scientific research that considers what happens to our human interactions when we treat and observe AI, say chat bots or digital voice assistants as a human with consciousness. Broadly, and appreciating this is still really early-stage research, there's evidence that suggests how we treat AI when ascribing it human qualities can carry over to how we treat others. This works both ways, offering either social benefit or social harm. I'm intrigued and slightly worried about the push for ever more human chatbots.

For example, the chat bot that is able to flirt with the user. Now, how will this advance or detract from our real human interactions? The final bottleneck is AI's inability to replicate our social intelligence that's underpinned by our interpersonal skills. For now, AI is really poor at analysing the subtle nuances of human society and behaviour and will be challenged in operating in a truly human environment.

So that gives a feel for, I think, the limitations in relation to AI and equally picking up some of Jake's observations in relation to the qualities that might be distinctive and advantageous for us moving forward in a hybrid world where human interactions are augmented by technological capability. Naturally, within that world, to thrive, people will have to understand data and statistics at some level. And that's because of the interaction with technology. But roles and especially leadership roles will require a human understanding and appreciation. That's qualities of empathy, sympathy, respect. Those will still remain critical to highly functioning organisations because with simply AI, the environment is clinical. Indeed, it might even feel slightly cold, but I think if we can maintain human qualities woven into and augmented by AI, I think that's a really exciting place.

Ellie: So another topic, Patrick, which reflects the influence of AI on human emotion and responses is how its adoption might affect people's sense of wellbeing. And I know it's a topic that you frequently talk about. So what are your thoughts about the challenges and how those might be answered by companies?

Patrick: Yeah, potentially really big actually, and that's because as AI becomes an increasing feature of a company's operational capabilities, workers will want to know what this means for their future. If employees don't understand this, especially if they don't have control over its adoption and effects, then anxiety about long -term employment and economic insecurity increases. And in turn leadership teams across organisations will be worried about the mental health of their people. And there'll be many reasons for this. I'll probably just touch on three. First, if the impact of AI on an organisation isn't understood by workforces, this risks building communal vulnerability with all its very human negative side effects, anxiety, fear, distraction, and anger. Second, if AI removes the routine tasks, with the consequence that roles become more complex, complicated, and ever more challenging, then where does a person even in the setting of work reflect and rest? And without that rest, how do employees keep going at this increasing pace? Third concern is if companies maintain their hybrid and flexible working arrangements supported by AI and technology, and look, there are really good reasons why they should, there's a risk of increasing isolation for some. But again, it's not all bleakness. There's a... growing appreciation that our human uniqueness, and that's our capacity for empathy, sympathy, kindness, sometimes even directness, will become more important, especially for leaders. And leaders must increasingly look to rely on their emotional intelligence to communicate a clear vision of the future, emphasising ambition, but appreciating the concerns of their workforces. And then to break down fears about AI, leaders should also build a workforce culture that embraces and seeks to exploit the potential of AI. I think this might be achieved in a few ways. Workforces ought to be encouraged to be inquisitive about AI, looking to genuinely understand its possibilities. And that might be best achieved by employees working in collaborative groups, treating the acquisition of AI knowledge as part of a continuous learning exercise rather than just a simple one -off event. We should be encouraged to, when working with AI, I think people should be encouraged to sometimes take risks and experiment with it. It's my idea of sort of embracing our sense of childhood fun where we learn different skills and celebrate new experiences. It's worth, I think, also acknowledging that the early-stage development of AI, it may lead to failure. And sometimes this is okay if sensible guardrails are put in place. And I reflect that learning through experimentation with the inherent risk of failure, often that's a key to innovation.

Ellie: Absolutely. And I'm going to end with a final question for you both. If you had to give one tip to businesses on how they can navigate this evolving landscape of AI in the workplace to ensure that they're complying with existing employment laws while also harnessing the benefits of AI technologies, what would it be and why? If I can ask you first, Jake.

Jake: I would say that you need to have. And it kind of touches on what Patrick was saying. I think you need to have the right internal policies and processes in place to support the responsible adoption and use of AI. This is actually one of the five key actions of businesses highlighted by the Responsible Tech Adoption Unit to help build their AI assurance, in their helpful Introduction to AI Assurance Guide.

So in that guide, they also point to the key role that AI assurance plays in the broader AI governance and regulation landscape in providing those processes for making and assessing verifiable claims for which organisations can be held to account supporting organisations to measure whether systems are trustworthy and demonstrate this to government regulators in the market. So I guess my top tip to businesses is they should be thinking about AI assurance to set themselves up for success. And I think that Responsible Tech Adoption Unit Introduction to AI Assurance Guide is probably a good place to start.

Ellie: Fantastic. And Patrick, what would you say?

Patrick:	In many ways, it echoes Jake's observations. The first thing I think I'd suggest would be I'd seek a broad understanding of the technology. And that's the different forms of AI systems, whether it's supervised, unsupervised reinforcement, machine learning, that could include deep learning, artificial neural networks, and their capabilities. And it's with that understanding are reflecting the organisation's ethical AI values, because this then helps an organisation describe its attitude to AI, including risk. And with that, those two features, I think ultimately that allows organisations to be deliberate in their adoption of AI.
Ellie:	Well, thank you both for providing some really valuable insights into AI, not least those key tips which you've just mentioned. An excellent starting point for all businesses as they navigate this ever-changing world of AI. So thank you both for joining me.
Jake:	Thank you very much Ellie
Patrick:	Thank you, Ellie.
Ellie:	Well that marks the end of our 3-part miniseries on AI, thank you to all of our fantastic guests for shedding some much needed light on the hottest topics within AI. If you would like to revisit anything we discussed today, you can access transcripts of every episode of The Work Couch podcast by going to our website: www.rpc.co.uk/theworkcouch. Or, if you have questions for me or any of our speakers, or perhaps suggestions of topics you would like us to cover on a future episode of The Work Couch, please get in touch by emailing us at theworkcouch@rpc.co.uk – we would really love to hear from you. Thank you all for listening and we hope you'll join us again in two weeks.