KORN FERRY

Powering Human Potential Through AI

Generative AI's disruption gives companies a chance to reimagine how technology can help humans thrive

Thought Leadership

Much of today's conversation about generative AI (GenAI) and the future of work swings between two extremes: existential dread or breathless optimism. Yet, both extremes miss the real opportunity: when thoughtfully designed and implemented, GenAI can expand human capability, becoming a catalyst for deeper learning, creativity, and growth.

GenAI critics often focus on loss—of jobs, of professional relevance, or even the qualities that make us uniquely human. AI evangelists, on the other hand, predict humans will be replaced by artificial general intelligence (AGI), overlooking the critical point that intelligence—human or machine—only matters through its impact.

Those who narrowly frame GenAI in terms of its extremes fail to see the technology's true potential as a catalyst for expanding human capabilities—if, of course, we design and use it wisely.

HOW TECHNOLOGY FUELS HUMAN GROWTH

As companies rush to adopt GenAI, some have made it mandatory without stopping to ask: How can we use this technology to help people stretch, grow, and thrive at work?

Psychology research shows that humans develop new strengths as we face challenges. According to Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization, we're naturally driven to grow and strive towards our full capabilities—something GenAI isn't designed to do currently. Humans are motivated to continuously adapt to their changing environments in seemingly miraculous ways. In fact, neuroscience research confirms that the adult brain remains plastic across the lifespan, capable of learning, evolving, and even transforming. Studies on growth mindset further reinforce that by simply changing our way of thinking about the world, we can surprise ourselves, accomplishing more than we originally thought we could. When designed and applied thoughtfully, GenAI can activate this stretch of human potential at scale.

After all, as history shows, progress often follows disruption. From agriculture to the internet, specialization and new technologies have both challenged and advanced us as a society. Growing crops disrupted hunting and gathering but paved the way for farming and, eventually, the rise of marketplaces and trade. As a species, we move forward and expand what we're capable of through technological innovation.

Yet, as today, each change has often been met with reluctance and concern.

Take the printing press, which critics believed would erode memory. Instead, it sparked a literacy revolution. Or the internet, which, for all its faults, has helped improve information literacy and critical thinking. Some view GenAI as an existential threat to the workforce, but we can reframe it instead as the next evolution, freeing humans from routine labor and enabling more strategic, creative tasks. Unlocking this potential through GenAI won't happen automatically. Leaders will need to shift their own mindsets about the role this technology plays in unleashing their talent's potential and pave the way for others to do the same. After all, how leaders approach generative AI will shape how organizations design, implement, and support the use of AI systems at work.

REIMAGINING HUMAN POTENTIAL IN THE AGE OF GENAI

What does it look like when GenAI is applied to expand our potential rather than replace existing capability?

Psychologists Gabriella Kellerman and Martin Seligman's PRISM framework outlines five capabilities for flourishing in volatile work environments, like those currently being reshaped by generative AI. These psychological strengths—Prospection, Resilience, Imagination, Social Support, and Meaning—are not vague ideals but measurable skills that can be developed through intentional effort. And with GenAI, we may finally have a widely accessible tool to elevate these capabilities across the workforce.
Here, we examine how the technology could strengthen and expand each one:

Prospection: Humans, as research shows, are notoriously bad at predicting how we will think or feel in the future—a phenomenon known as affective forecasting. But that kind of mental time travel is a valuable skill for innovation, creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making. The complexity of today's work world makes it increasingly difficult for people to navigate their careers with intention. The current capabilities of GenAI can help us imagine and plan by simulating scenarios and visualizing outcomes. Projects like MIT's Future You use GenAI to help people converse with simulated versions of their future selves, improving present-day decision-making.

TRY THIS
Think about a potential career shift you want to make in the future, either focusing on advancing in your current role or switching to something new. Using your favorite GenAI tool, input the following prompt: "Please ask me questions to get to know me, including what I like about my current and past roles, my financial and personal goals, and what I'm looking to accomplish in my career. Then act as my future me, 5 years from now, after making a career transition. Describe a typical day in my life."

Resilience: Active coping strategies like cognitive reappraisal and reframing help us manage environmental stress and maintain stability during challenges. GenAI could scaffold resilience through prompting reflection and cognitive reappraisal after difficult workplace situations, helping people reframe their experience and build self-awareness. While not a replacement for human insight, GenAI can offer a neutral sounding board to pause, recover, and respond more adaptively.

TRY THIS
Next time you feel ruffled after a tough meeting with a colleague, use your favorite GenAI tool to input the following prompt: "Here's my interpretation of what happened, what might I be missing?" or "What are some reasons behind that person's reaction?"

Imagination: Long considered uniquely human, imagination may flourish when partnering with AI. A 2024 Science Advances study found that people using GenAI produced more original and higher-rated ideas, particularly those who didn't consider themselves creative. Research also shows that robotic tutors encourage children to seek help and embrace mistakes, which are critical behaviors for imagination and innovation. GenAI lowers the barrier to divergent thinking, making creativity more accessible to everyone.

TRY THIS
Most of us experience many ineffective meetings at work but aren't sure what to do about them. Using your favorite GenAI tool, input the following prompt: "Suggest 5 strategies for helping me think creatively about making my meetings more engaging. For each idea, explain the reasoning behind it and how it challenges conventional thinking. Feel free to use metaphors, analogies, or examples from nature, art, or science to inspire me."

Social Support: Social support, which requires empathy, trust, and belonging, remains central to team and organizational performance. GenAI, if used well, can improve collaboration by improving team dynamics and prompting inclusive behaviors. Early evidence suggests that human-AI collaboration can improve empathy and team culture, but poorly implemented GenAI risks eroding genuine human connection.

TRY THIS
Think of someone in your life who is experiencing a challenging situation. Using your favorite GenAI tool, input the following prompt: "A friend of mine is going through [brief description of the situation, e.g., a breakup, job loss, burnout]. I want to be supportive, but I'm not sure what to say or do. Can you help me come up with a few thoughtful messages or actions that would show I care and help them feel seen and supported?"

Meaning: Meaning is what connects our daily efforts to something larger than ourselves, transforming our work into an invigorating source of purpose. By automating repetitive tasks, generative AI can free people to focus on connecting their authentic selves to the impact they'd like to have on the world. GenAI can help employees establish guiding principles, craft a mission statement, and identify the necessary resources to realize that mission, supporting meaningful job crafting at scale.

TRY THIS
Consider writing a short, moving mission statement to anchor your daily activities in meaning. Using your favorite GenAI tool, input the following prompt: "I want to write a personal mission statement that reflects who I am, what I value, and the impact I want to have. Ask me a series of deep, reflective questions to help me uncover my core values, strengths, passions, and purpose. Then, help me synthesize my answers into a concise, inspiring mission statement I can use to guide my life and work."

THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPAND HUMAN POTENTIAL

Korn Ferry research suggests that by 2030, human capital will drive more economic value than physical capital—a trend that GenAI is only expected to accelerate. The technology can either undermine or augment our human potential, depending on how organizations use it. This will require companies to redesign not only tools and workflows but also the systems and cultures that support GenAI in people's day-to-day work.

Our "Try This" examples hint at what's possible with today's chatbot tools. Now imagine a next-gen AI agent not waiting for prompts, but proactively offering real-time, embedded nudges that guide us through our work. This shift could redefine what it means to have an active coach or mentor, with far greater potential for impact.

It's time to rethink what hybrid human-machine workforces can be—and what it means to achieve a new level of human capability through technology. Doing so demands that we ask ourselves a new set of questions:

- Are we using GenAI to amplify what people do best, or to replace it?
- What types of human capabilities can we use GenAI to strengthen or expand?
- How is GenAI helping people grow the skills they need in the future, and not just perform in the moment?
- How can we leverage GenAI proactively in daily workflows to augment and unlock the full potential of the workforce?

Ultimately, the deeper question isn't how smart our machines will become, but how much more fully human we're willing to let ourselves be.

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