



Are Humans Underrated?

Nick Collison discusses how a failure to acknowledge human factors in content searches and service can result in higher costs without improving quality or productivity — or user engagement.



Collison

In 2018, no less a champion of automation than Elon Musk acknowledged that a missed Tesla manufacturing target was attributable to an over-automated production process, stating that “humans are underrated.”

Driverless vehicles may promise safer roads but also raise the spectre of eliminating jobs. Goods are paid and delivered at the sound of your voice — or, if you’re unlucky, your six-year-old’s voice. Smart houses can offer energy savings, but also offer bad actors a chance to hack your coffee maker – or worse.

You see it every day in the news: excitement about the promise of automation on the one hand, and anxiety about its drawbacks on the other. Indeed, your main source of news may be an automated, customized alert pushing notifications to your email or personal device.

The efficiencies and convenience of automation have an understandably powerful allure and the potential to positively transform the ways we live and work. Paradoxically, they also have the potential to generate novel inefficiencies of their own. How do you reap the benefits of automation while minimizing headaches?

The Hazards of Over-Automation

In Tesla’s case, robots overlooked elements of the final assembly process which created significant quality control issues — issues which other manufacturers routinely flag and correct using human intervention.

Over-automation may be defined as any automation that creates inefficiencies. Usually these inefficiencies arise from a failure to consider human factors. Those factors can be ones which promote efficiency by contributing to the successful outcome of a process, as in the case of auto workers on a factory floor.

Human factors can also be drags on the efficiency of an automated product or process which works exactly as designed but nonetheless creates inconvenience or discomfort for its users, such as a status indicator light on a baby monitor inadvertently waking a baby.

A failure to acknowledge human factors when automating can result in higher costs without improving quality, productivity, or user engagement.

Finding the Right Balance

Nonetheless, study after study shows that users prefer the convenience which self-service affords — and which automation empowers — when it's done right. Here are five tips to keep in mind when you want to make its power available to your users while remaining in the driver's seat.

Know your audience. Are your users eager early adopters, or does it take a lot to motivate them to step out of their technology comfort zone? Polling them to learn about their habits, peeves and wish lists may provide more insight into how automation may support their work or be a drag on it (or both).

Know your process. Are your procedures and workflows documented or do they live inside your users' heads? Are there ways in which your business process can be optimized to the benefit of users without the expense and churn of introducing automation? Automation needs to be implemented over a stable process to ensure that it's not errors which are being automated.

Know what makes sense to automate. If it's not already glaringly apparent, a better grasp of your process will likely reveal its inefficiencies. Any area where there is a significant commitment of users' time for tasks which add little value are prime candidates for introducing some form of automation.

Know where you need intelligent controls. Whether it's getting content from various sources or systems to play nicely together, or making sure that a priority customer gets the personal touch to problem solving that they expect, automation simply can't deal with complexity, inconsistency, or empathy in the way humans can. What are the elements of your process where people are indispensable, and how can automation of other elements better support those people?

Know when to get help. Your Couranto senior account manager can work with you to identify opportunities to improve efficiency and cut costs by optimizing certain operations, as well to adjust the degree of automation to the needs and comfort of your organization.

Interested in what Couranto can offer your business?
Contact [Nick Collison](#) for more information.

Nick Collison is Couranto's Director of Business Strategy, Market Development, Library & E-Content. He has decades of experience in managing information access, budgeting, strategic planning, and knowledge services. Collison is a Fellow of SLA, the Special Libraries Association.

