Rehumanising work: EI, for when emails and AI just don't cut it

How do you get your manager to be more emotionally intelligent – and when do we need face-to-face skills? **Kevin Norquay** asks an expert.

In a couple of years we'll be tracking back to face-to-face workplaces, simply so we can be certain we're dealing with real people, says Australian emotional intelligence (EI) guru Amy Jacobson.

After years of moving ever closer to electronic communication and now embracing AI, it's got to the point where we are less certain who we are actually dealing with, she says. When AI can replicate voices, be used to make fake videos, to doctor photos and to write letters, the human element is being lost in the murk – and if there's one thing humans crave, it's interaction with other humans.

There's a reason solitary confinement is used as discipline, and is a punishment that often causes serious mental distress, Perth-based Jacobson says.

Jacobson recently released *The Emotional Intelligence Advantage*, a book that shows how to embed emotional intelligence into your workplace, touting it as a vital skill for modern leaders. And rather than sensing a neverending move towards technical and electronic skills, she says emotional intelligence remains the secret to resolving workplace challenges.

"Human beings will always have their place, and they require connection and interaction, so we're never going to lose that need," she says. "If anything, we're going to need to reintroduce it, because we're, at the moment, following the shiny new AI toy down the rabbit hole. We're not quite going there yet. I reckon we'll go a little bit ... further into AI first, because AI is like the shiny new toy. So that is a good 12 to 18 months of really going to AI."

Once humans fully know what AI is capable of, they will reassess.

"Then our subconscious mind is going to go 'well, now I don't know what to believe, I don't know what's real and what's not, so therefore I need that face-to-face, live meeting for that belief point of view'."

Jacobson is an AI fan, saying it has its place. But there is a gradual realisation technology is a tool, not a replacement for people.

"We went through this whole thing before, when emails come out. We were doing everything via email and electronic messaging, then all of a sudden, all of these workplaces came out with this brilliant new idea – pick up the phone and call someone. We're going to see this again with AI ... we're going to get to the point where we go, hang on a minute. We've lost our way. The only way that we can believe again is to be live, and face-to-face with humans."

When you're face-to-face you need to know how to interact, to get the best out of yourself and your staff.

If you're the manager and your staff don't understand what you're getting at, that's your fault and you need to accept that your communication could be to blame.

"It's like hitting your head against a brick wall to try to force somebody to believe something ... the more that you force them, the more they usually stick in, digging their heels and fight it," she says.

Opposing views that differ from your own is human nature. The need to be "right" is embedded from childhood – the right answer, the right thing to do, good and bad, right and wrong. Emotional awareness is about being able to see what makes you tick, and what drives the thinking of others. Not about having to be "right".

"If I can get even one person's mind to open up and have some level of awareness ... for them to go 'huh? maybe I should do some work in this space, maybe I'm not always right,' ... that's what I'm doing it for."

Difficult workmates with strong opinions need not result in confrontation, she says.

"You don't have to agree with what they're doing. You can look and go, the way they're going about it ...this is not the smartest way... However, there is a reason why they believe it's right. There's a reason why they're doing what they're doing. Pushing back or telling them that they're wrong is not solving the issue at all.

"People that are going to be open, to see it from a slightly different point of view, they're more emotionally intelligent. They have the ability to dig deep into their minds and say 'OK, what value or belief is driving my thoughts right now, and is it still valid?' It might have been valid 20 years ago, but is it still valid today? I have the ability to change that and take control of it. People that don't have a lot of skill to tap into their emotional intelligence will just say 'it's all too hard, this is what I believe, you are wrong, I am right'. Minds are always going to look for the easiest and quickest solution. You have to understand how you are wired, what is driving you and what you're heading towards."

And she has a five-step framework. "Own it" involves self-awareness and accepting personal impact; "Face it" addresses managing emotions; "Feel it" focuses on empathy and understanding others; "Ask it" highlights effective communication; and "Drive it" is about decisive action.

Our brains like certainty, Jacobson says. We have an emotional brain and a logical brain. Our emotional brain can simply reject reality, and cause us to fight for things that may not make sense to someone else.

"Every time our emotional brain takes control before our logical brain kicks in, it is driven by a fight-or-flight mechanism. So it doesn't always have reality or logic coming into play, it's very emotionally driven."

Humans are prone to latching on to stories that make sense or make us feel safe. If someone challenges us, we push back. That was seen during Covid, when fear of the unknown, fear of loss of control, and fear of death kicked in.

"When we've got the fear of the unknown, we tend to latch onto anything, because our

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>
> **Amy Jacobson**

New Renaissance or Cold War 2.0, what can AI

Federico Magrin

An unprecedented period of economic prosperity or a new geopolitical world order – that is what the development of artificial general intelligence (AGI) could lead to.

A new research report by a US-based think tank showed how international politics and the global society could be reshaped by an artificial intelligence able to perform any intellectual tasks humans can perform.

Eight scenarios, ranging from a worldwide New Renaissance to a war between China and the USA were described in the RAND report. RAND national security research division vice president Barry Pavel said AGI's superhuman capabilities were like having a country full of geniuses. "And when you have those kinds of capabilities, and you set them to problems, or they set themselves to problems, the period of progress would be an explosion – a very positive explosion."

Pavel, who is also the report co-author, said this explosion included help fighting long-standing diseases, as well as changes to the job market and economy.

"It would be an upheaval, the likes of which we really haven't seen, if ever, since possibly the industrialisation era," he said.

Some of the latest progress in the AI fields question whether the blurry divide between AI and AGI has not been crossed already.

In June, world-leading mathematicians travelled to Berkeley for what was described as a "clandestine mathematical conclave", where they were asked to train and challenge a large language model – OpenAI o4-mini. While the mathematicians found 10 questions it could not answer, some asked whether large language models similar to o4-mini were not already closer to AGI than to the first predictive AI tools.

Pavel said the report provided informed speculation about whether AGI could be developed in the short-term. "When I read about what the experts say, it ranges between 18 months from now to 10 years from now."

The report, *How Artificial Intelligence Could Affect the Rise and Fall of Nations*, showed these new developments could be brought about through an international

Geopolitics expert Barry Pavel, right, said artificial general intelligence could shift the world order, favour a New Renaissance or trigger new wars.

cooperation of countries around the world.

However, concurrent innovation in different countries could trigger a similar situation to what the world experienced in the space race of the 60s, where geopolitcal actors and large companies compete for the latest technologies and use neo-protectionist strategies to prevent international coordination.

Large private companies or nations were most likely to be the first movers in the AGI field, as there were high costs associated with building data centres and powerful enough chips. "The nation or entity that develops and controls such systems could fundamentally reshape the global order and potentially guide the future trajectory of humanity," the report said.

The disruptive changes could also result in conflict.

"Nation states, it seems, ever since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, have acted in ways that have mostly been in their own self interest. And so you can imagine scenarios where nation states are... continuing to act in this way, and it leads to either miscalculation or aggression or some other form of geopolitical friction that leads to crisis and conflict," Pavel said.

One of the scenarios in the report is called Mushroom Cloud Computing and it describes the final moments before a war between China and the USA.

Pavel said this was the most dangerous and negative scenario examined.