Q+A: 'The Future of Work Is Not Work'

What does the world of work look like as Artificial Intelligence, algorithms, bots and big data infiltrate more of our lives? Ben Pring, co-leader of Cognizant's Future of Work Center, asks that question in "[What to Do When Machines Do Everything.](#)" His new book, co-authored with Malcolm Frank and Paul Roehrig, offers a realistic and optimistic view of the future of work. 360 sat down with Pring to hear about what his research reveals about our near, and more distant, future.

360: Let's start with what we all want to know: Is the [future of work](#) one with more machines and fewer people or people working side-by-side with machines?

Pring: That's the question du jour isn't it? People worry and think about that for good reason. Machine learning tools get more and more powerful all the time and they are going to do more and more of the work people do today. The crucial determining factor is time.

In the next 10 years, we think 10 to 15 percent of work people currently do will be automated away through machine learning and machine intelligence. At the same time, a big part of the story people are missing, is that about the same amount of jobs will be created through developing, deploying and optimizing these new tools.

From a commercial perspective, there's no point in worrying about 20 or 50 years away, you have to worry about 20 months away. As a business person, if you're not solving these issues and using these tools for competitive advantage in the next 20 months, you won't be around in 20 years to have these debates. We think that human wants and needs are infinite and unsatisfiable. Human ingenuity being what it is will continue to think of new things to do and new work to do. The idea that we're going to sit around and let the machines do everything is nonsensical.

360: What kinds of questions should leaders be asking to get themselves in position to be successful?

Pring: One question we pose to our clients as a provocative conversation starter is: Are you a HPPO (highest paid person's opinion)? Are you running your business on data? Or are you what we call a know-it-all business? Do you have good data and are you running your business on that data? Or are you still more in a subjective, kind of old school world where it's: This is how I think it should be done and this is how it's always been done, so this is how we should do it?
The companies who are really changing and are getting ahead are companies who are very very data-centric. They're companies that want the data, want to know what the story in the data says and are prepared to act on it in an objective, cold way. You'd be amazed how that simple question can be very incendiary in a meeting with people.

More specifically around AI is: Where are you hiring from? Where are you getting talent from? This is a huge issue in the marketplace at the moment. Getting top talent that can really move the needle in a business is non-trivial to put it mildly. Where are you recruiting from? How are you recruiting? How are you training? What relationships are you putting in place with partners? What new vendors are you working with? That's a big threshold test for companies.

You see big companies, GM is one, putting in place relationships with the likes of Lyft and companies you might think are a strange or risky bet, but in ways these are acqui-hires, they are ways of getting talent. Because even though machines are doing more and more, it's still going to be people, the ultimate x-factor, and you need very, very good people to act on the opportunities and not be completely swamped by the threats.

360: Do you see an increasing need for creativity and innovation as machines take over more mundane tasks from people?

Pring: The good news in this story is that if the machines are going to do the rote stuff, then conceptually that frees us up to do more interesting work. There's a nice quote from Mark Cuban, who was just at SXSW, he said he'd rather have a degree in philosophy than be a CPA at the moment.

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BEN PRING | co-leader of Cognizant's Future of Work Center

People need to be able to ask good questions, to think differently and unusually, to be able to put together different aspects of a solution, which are non conventional. I'm reminded of Steve Jobs. Part of his genius was that he had an interest in calligraphy and supply chain management. That odd combination of interests was very much at the heart of what a company like Apple was able to do. Think about beauty and aesthetics, but at the same time think about the pragmatic fundamentals of creating a global business and supply chain. That sort of odd, hybrid combination of these disparate skill sets is the future of work where we'll get all the new ideas.

I think people who can exist in that world and be creative and see what's next and aren't settling just to do what they've always done, will do very, very well in this brave new world created by machines and systems of intelligence. That's why we're optimistic because we think this will unleash creativity rather than stifle it. I'm reminded of the phrase: "If you do a job you love, you'll never work a day in your life." The future of work is not work.

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360: With the changing world of work and the advancement in AI, AR, VR, how do you see people's days at work changing?

Pring: I think the changing dynamic in the physical workspace is really interesting. We have an entire floor in New York that we call "The Collaboratory" where we explore the future of work with clients. To us, space is very important even in the machine world. Our authors live in three different cities. We did a lot of virtual work. But, we realized there is magic that happens in the room especially in the creative process.

Making spaces that are conductive for that type of creative work – the aesthetic of the room, nature of the room, vibe of the room – is still extraordinarily important. It's going to be interesting to see how the creative experience is reshaped by the hybridization of the virtual and physical. I feel strongly about the importance of the role of the physical environment one is in.

Pring co-leads Cognizant's Future of Work Center. Prior to his work at Cognizant, Pring spent 15 years with Gartner as a senior industry analyst researching and advising on areas such as cloud computing and global sourcing. His co-authored book "What to Do When Machines Do Everything" was published in February 2017.

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Rebecca, an Emmy-winning journalist, reports on global research impacting the places where people work, learn and heal. Over her career, Rebecca spent 17 years covering local and national news events on television and a variety of digital platforms. She directed a digital news group in Kansas City for three years before becoming news director in Grand Rapids, Michigan for more than five years. Prior to Steelcase, Rebecca worked with one of the four largest media groups in the United States to coordinate news coverage among 48 newsrooms from the east to west coast.

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