



### **Humans are Underrated**

What High Achievers Know That Brilliant Machines Never Will  
by **Geoff Colvin**

A commitment to developing an individual's primary Knowledge, Process, and Behavior skills and attributes has long formed the core of the CIMBA learning and development philosophy. We have expressed the concern that while Knowledge (axioms, theorems, formulas, and principles) are important in that we all want technically competent leaders and followers, the education and training communities have overvalued their importance at the expense of the individual's critical thinking and behavior development. We have both expressed our concerns and focused our resources on providing our university and executive students with significant personal development opportunities in these key areas. However, in both expressing our concerns and in understanding our basis for those concerns, we have largely focused our attention on the present situation:

- Our students have heard us lament that while Knowledge (essentially IQ) will get them hired, they will most likely be promoted or fired on the basis of their critical thinking (RQ) and behavioral (EQ) skills. By “critical thinking” we are essentially referring to an individual's decision-making and problem-solving abilities and receptivity to the influence of cognitive biases, measured by the individual's Rational Quotient. By “behavior” we are essentially referring to an individual's self-awareness, social awareness, and self-regulation abilities, measured by the individual's Emotional Quotient (known more generally as Emotional Intelligence);
- While recognizing the benefits of technological advancements over the past 250 years, we have expressed our concerns about the detrimental impacts they are having on interpersonal skill development (See our TEDx talk here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guXWKAox-Iw>). Technology is not only changing the nature of work, it is also clearly changing us and the way we interact with others;

- We have shown, and continue to show, how that same technology can be used to develop important interpersonal skills (See our "Teaching Leadership with the Brain in Mind" here: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263298382\\_TEACHING\\_LEADERSHIP\\_WITH\\_THE\\_BRAIN\\_IN\\_MIND](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263298382_TEACHING_LEADERSHIP_WITH_THE_BRAIN_IN_MIND));
- Our data has shown a marked decline in empathy over the past 15 years, a finding confirmed by the research of others. We attribute this decline in empathy to Smartphone technology, a technology that is leaving many individuals virtually isolated and has carried with it dramatic increases in loneliness and depression, and decreases in important social institutions such as marriage and family. Through that technology, texting has become the dominant means of communication for many young people. Research surveys have found that more than 60 percent of young people say they text every day; only 35 percent say they socialize with friends face-to-face outside of work or school every day. Our evolved ability to sense the feelings and thoughts of others is based on seeing their faces, seeing their body language, and hearing their voices, none of which are available to us when texting or using social media. In other words, it is adversely affecting our social worlds and our ability to interact with others;
- With reading considered an important vehicle for developing empathy, nearly 30 percent of adults did not read a book in any format over the past year;
- Leading academic scholars who have placed a critical eye on the MBA have implicitly shared our concerns but expressed in a slightly different manner: "How many accountants do you know who do not have a degree in accounting? Virtually none, so it can easily be assumed that what is being taught is indispensable to success; it represents the 'codified knowledge' of the profession. By contrast, how many managers do you know who do not have a degree or if they have a degree it is not in management? Thousands. So, whatever is being taught in the name of management (or administration or leadership) is clearly not the 'codified knowledge' that defines success in that profession";
- We have heard a chorus of Chief Learning Officers from leading multinationals state largely the same concerns as they confront the consequences of these technology trends in the young people they are hiring: "If we hire the best and pay the best, why do we observe a normal distribution in performance?" This is, while college graduates are more knowledgeable than at any other time in history, they are seemingly less capable. Clearly, "Knowing" is not translating into "Doing."

There is clearly a definitive need to move beyond providing mechanical, rote learning; the education and training communities need to provide growth and development opportunities that

encompass more of the critical thinking and behavior skills that convert such learning into functional proficiency in the workplace. If the expectation of such proficiency is based on the completion of mechanical, rote learning alone, success becomes defined more by an individual's ability to adapt to the workplace environment - something we referred to internally as "survival of the fittest." In the case of management and leadership, success depends far more on the individual's ability to adapt to the social environment of the business entity than on the learning imparted through the formal education process. Proficiency in sales is not predicted by success in a mechanical sales training course but rather by an individual's social intelligence - survival of the fittest in the sense that you somehow either have or acquire it or fail. While this perspective of the world made logical sense in the present, we had not seriously followed this trend in technology to its logical conclusion. Geoff Colvin in his book *Humans are Underrated: What High Achievers Know that Brilliant Machines Never Will* does that for us. And his message is clear: By focusing on present circumstances, we are not seeing the urgency of our learning mission. So let's follow Colvin into that future to get a better sense of the urgency.

Increasingly, "Knowledge" will be performed by machines. If your current job or preferred career path involves employment in an industry based on numbers, words, or symbols you are going to be replaced. In contrast to the old paradigm that saw capital and labor as being compliments, the new paradigm does not. For the first time on a large scale, technology will not only eliminate mid-range jobs, it will also eliminate both low and high-skilled jobs. Lawyers as well as shop floor workers are just as likely to be replaced by technology. While many younger students at first see this as yet another alarmist call that the "end is near" by an out-of-touch older generation, they fully sense its reality when told that it is very likely their children will never learn to drive a car. Still, we have seen the number of people who believe (wrongly) that they could never be replaced by a machine or computer -- essentially a robot -- grow slower, not faster.

So in this technological environment in which we will find ourselves in the very near future, what skills are likely to be of the most significant value to organizations and companies? Social skills, interpersonal skills, the ability to interact effectively with others. In the broadest of senses, empathy. "Empathy is the foundation of all the other abilities that increasingly make people valuable as technology advances." In the past, office, factory, and other workers could go through their workday without engaging in social relations at all. But as computers and machines rapidly take over the non-social roles of work, our most valuable roles will become increasingly social in nature.

As we developed our Social Brain Theory of Leadership, we saw that the research clearly supports our core notion that we are "Wired to be Social." We evolved into creatures that cannot survive or approach happiness or be productive without social relationships. In past ABCs from Prof. Matt

Lieberman's Social to Prof. Kelly McGonigal's The Upside of Stress we have seen this notion repeatedly confirmed from a wide variety of perspectives and points of view. And these are skills that machines do not possess.

Colvin supports his thinking with a wide variety of compelling anecdotes and supportive research. The core notion is that developing empathy, and particularly the ability to understand and appreciate the perspectives of others (something Prof. Lieberman called "mentalizing" and social psychologists refer to as "Theory of Mind") significantly enhances both an individual's and a company's likelihood of success.

- In most major wars since 1776, the first battle has been a disaster in terms of lives lost, injuries, and soldiers captured. But the military learned that moving training beyond the mechanical use of equipment to encompass training soldiers on how to read the enemy and one another, significantly and dramatically improved results. Similar "social skills" training for fighter pilots moved the probability of pilot loss on their first sortie from 40 percent to 5 percent. As we see in business, the military learned that by focusing on mechanical training — how to fly the fighter jet or shoot the rifle — without more meant that the learner might never get past one early mistake — "survival of the fittest."

He provides significant research findings showing that team success is most significantly influenced by social skills and social sensitivity, although we continue to place emphasis on the mechanics of leadership and other technical skills. Success comes from sensing and understanding the thoughts and feelings of those around us:

- Surgeons who work consistently with a team make significantly fewer mistakes than surgeons who move from team to team in serving multiple hospitals.
- More than 74 percent of airline crashes involve teams working together for the first time.
- Steve Jobs knew to keep his teams together, some of which were together for more than 10 years.

It is perhaps in the functioning of teams where Colvin provides the most significant insights. To be truly effective in developing an "interactive culture," a culture consistent with that described by Prof. Paul Zak in his book *The Moral Molecule* (cultures where individuals are more sensitive to social cues create more successful organizations; they are more willing to help others, particularly if the other person seems to need our help) and by Prof. Adam Grant in his book *Give and Take* (success is increasingly depend upon how we interact with others), we need to develop and use

processes that encourage deep human interaction. He places significant attention on After-Action-Review (AAR) processes, facilitated by open and honest communications. While LIFE has given us a powerful personal development vehicle, we have been looking for an "after-LIFE" methodology to better assist LIFE graduates in bringing their learning to the workplace. We have experimented with a modified form of the AAR process, in the form of a "coaching circle," with impressive results. We see its integration into trainings, meetings, and issue resolutions as being that "after-LIFE" methodology we have been searching for over the past 2 to 3 years. Colvin provides the verification that we are headed in the most productive direction.

We see the top hiring priorities of the business community in the next 5 to 10 years as being co-creation, cultural sensitivity, relationship building, teambuilding, and collective thinking — something we refer to as "interactive jobs." Importantly, we believe businesses cannot begin to be more productive until leaders acknowledge that interpersonal skills are the key to competitive advantage. As Alfred P. Sloan, CEO of General Motors, made clear more than 70 years ago, performance and character are the only two criteria relevant in assessing an individual's contribution to the company. However, that assessment very quickly focused almost solely on performance — objectively gauging operating efficiencies was (and is) relatively easy; measuring character was not (and is not). Now we must be willing to accept that the development and measurement of character will likely involve unfamiliar processes and approaches. We need to move towards an understanding of how our own actions mesh with others in achieving company goals, rather than on focusing on our own individual responsibilities and contributions. We are wired to be social, human interaction rules our lives. And in the words of Geoff Colvin, "It holds the key to our value. ... Being a great performer is becoming less about what we know and more about what we are like."