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# The IT department: Where AI goes to die

Ethan Mollick on why employers should treat AI as what it is: weird

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A SYSTEM DESIGNED to predict the most likely next word in a sentence can also write good computer code, offer strategic advice and respond with remarkable empathy to human problems. We don't fully understand why. And yet the dominant instinct across the corporate world is to treat artificial intelligence as if it were just another piece of enterprise software: slot it into existing processes, assign it Key Performance Indicators and hand it to the IT department for management.

This is a profound strategic mistake. Companies are racing to de-weird AI, and in doing so they are squandering what makes it transformative, turning it into just the latest wave of office automation. To be clear, making AI easy to use is important, and building it into familiar tools and workflows is just smart engineering. The mistake is letting those smooth interfaces flatten your understanding of the technology's possibilities.

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The urge to de-weird is understandable. Executives are trained to normalise new technologies and fit them into familiar categories. So AI becomes a fuzzy-logic processor built into a workflow or a tool that shaves minutes off a task. Normal technology gets normal rollout plans, like requiring that 90% of employees must use a new software package each week.

But when you set that target for AI, what actually happens? Employees use AI to transcribe meetings, or produce an endless stream of “workslop” in the form of dozens of extra memos or PowerPoints. Treating this technology as another software deployment is like receiving a mysterious alien artefact and

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The de-weirding impulse produces a second, deeper failure: it leads companies to default towards automation rather than augmentation. When leaders see studies showing productivity gains of 30% from AI, their instinct is to cut 30% of the workforce. That arithmetic is simple. What is hard, and requires genuine imagination, is asking a different question: what does it mean to rebuild an organisation around the fact that a single programmer can now write a hundred times more code? What new products become possible? What new markets open up? No vendor can answer those questions for you. No consultant has a playbook (much as they might claim they do). The hard strategic work of reimagining what your organisation could become is precisely the work that de-weirding AI allows companies to avoid.

And there is a natural place where de-weirded AI goes to die: the IT department. This is not a criticism of IT professionals, who do essential work. But in most firms their mandate is to minimise risk. If they could take away your keyboards, they would sleep better at night. Every creative thing an employee does on a computer leaves the firm potentially vulnerable. AI, by contrast, demands that organisations embrace risk by experimenting wildly, tolerating failure and accepting that nobody yet knows the right way to use these tools. Handing sole control over AI to a department whose core mission is risk elimination is a category error.

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So what should firms do instead? In my work in this area I have come to advocate a three-part model: Leadership, Crowd and Lab.

Leadership means that direction must come from the top. The CEO and other senior managers cannot delegate AI strategy to middle management or IT. They must articulate a vision for how AI changes what the organisation *is*, not merely how it operates, and they must create incentives that make experimentation safe. And they have to lead by using these systems

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if they do, they can inspire the Crowd, a company's employees, who, when given access to AI tools and genuine permission to experiment, will figure out use cases not even the AI firms expected. Since AI is most effective in the hands of experts, the Crowd is where the best ideas come from.

Those ideas then go to the Lab, where a team of technical and non-technical employees work on generative AI full-time. These are people whose job is to push boundaries, develop new workflows and feed discoveries back into the organisation. I am shocked by how many large companies still lack even this. Without it, they have no mechanism for learning what AI can actually do for them. They are flying blind, relying on vendor demos and conference keynotes instead of building institutional knowledge.

There is one more problem that de-weirding creates, and it may be the most consequential. When companies fail to create the right incentives, employees respond rationally: they hide their AI use. Some fear punishment. Some do not trust that productivity gains will be shared with them rather than captured by the firm. Some quietly work 90% less and see no reason to volunteer that information. The result is an enormous information gap. Managers cannot see the true impact AI is already having inside their own organisations, which makes it even harder to develop a real strategy.

### **Weird AI, the stage is yours**

Resisting the de-weirding trend does not guarantee AI will go well. There is no default good outcome. But a failure to see AI for what it is—a profoundly odd, risky and powerful technology—will guarantee bad ones. Firms that sand down AI's strange edges will veer towards automation and layoffs, as that is all they can see. Those willing to confront the technology head-on can find something far more interesting, including ways to help make their people, and their organisations, capable of things that were impossible a year ago and will be impossible to predict a year from now. Nobody knows exactly where this is going. But you don't navigate strange territory by pretending your old maps will work. ■

*Ethan Mollick is an associate professor at the Wharton School and the author of "Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI".*

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