SOON, AN ALGORITHM COULD BE YOUR BOSS

A WEEKLY PICK OF STIMULATING IDEAS AND OPINIONS THAT HAVE APPEARED IN OTHER MEDIA, ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Programs Written With Productivity And Profits In Mind Could Be More Ruthless And Devious Than Human Supervisors, Warn Experts

Every time you order a cab on an app, a computer program or algorithm connects you to a driver. For the driver, the invisible algorithm is their boss. This is normal in the gig economy, but digital sociologist Karen Gregory tells BBC Ideas the day is not far when your boss and colleagues could also be algorithms.

Mike Walsh, author of ‘The Algorithmic Leader: How to Be Smart When Machines Are Smarter Than You’ gives a concrete example of this in a Harvard Business Review article. He writes about a multinational marketing company that uses algorithms to team up managers, coders, designers and copywriters every time it gets a new project or client pitch.

As workers, should we be happy about this new leadership, or worry? If you’ve ever wrangled with your supervisor, been treated unfairly or harassed, you might think computer programs would be better. After all, they can’t be biased and exploitative.

Wrong, says Walsh. All algorithms are written by humans, so they are born with biases in their DNA. “Technology has the potential to bring out the very worst in us,” he warns.

For instance, think of a supervisory program that makes office light whiter late in the day to prevent staff from feeling sleepy. This may be great for productivity and profit, but it’s playing with workers’ body clock. The algorithm could also offer cash incentives to staff who agree to work in their off-hours, denying time to themselves and their families.

Companies are seriously developing such worker management tools, says Walsh: “Amazon, for example, has received two patents for a wristband designed to guide warehouse workers’ movements with the use of vibrations to nudge them into being more efficient.” IBM is thinking of drone-delivering coffee to workers whose pupils and facial expressions indicate they are tired, he writes. Isn’t that intrusive?

Such tricks can make workers feel they have lost control over their work and themselves, says Gregory, because the algorithm is invisible and inscrutable. “They don’t know what’s going into the algorithm and why decisions are coming out of it.”

It’s not that algorithms are bad, but their design is open to manipulation and abuse. Now that their widespread adoption as managers or management tools is inevitable, Walsh says, we should start thinking of ways to keep them fair. The best way to do this is to have the same algorithmic manager for everyone in the organisation.
“The fairest way to design a talent platform that encompasses the entire hierarchy of your company, from your junior positions all the way up to your top leaders, is to imagine that everyone, from top to bottom, has to be governed by the same principles,” he writes.

Ideally, algorithms should be used to get the most out of teams rather than individuals. “Your organisation will need to confront a challenging tradeoff: is it better to reduce the agency of human beings by directing their actions entirely by AI, or is it better to use AI to coordinate distributed, autonomous teams,” asks Walsh. For instance, a Dutch financial services company has decided against micromanaging people with programs because “people in large companies can lose their sense of purpose if complex projects are broken down into smaller components and the process is essentially turned into a virtual assembly line.”

Gregory says workers also need to think about forming unions again, otherwise, “in the absence of that kind of worker mobilisation and worker organising we may find ourselves back in the same old historical situation where management does have the upper hand.”

Walsh agrees: “Reliance on algorithmic management may end up creating unease in the workplace and broader social unrest. Industrial action may grow, in which case regulators will have to consider intervention.”

For more: Harvard Business Review & BBC Ideas

NOT A BETTER BOSS: Algorithms are not free from prejudice