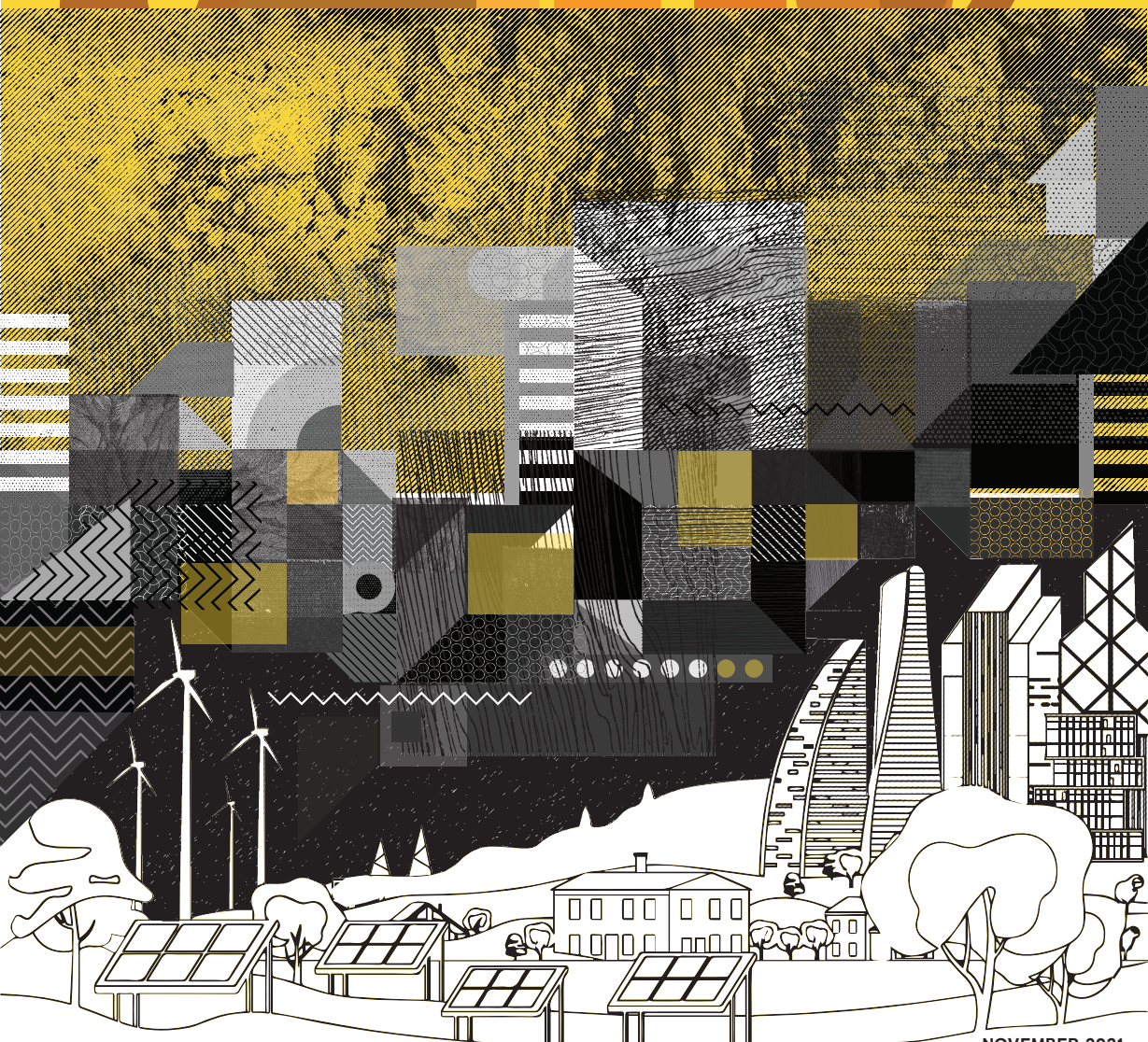


THE JOURNAL OF BUSINESS AGILITY

# emergence

in unexpected places



in this  
issue »

Space Force  
Emergent Agility

p04

The Neurophysiology  
of Agility

p32

Healthcare in the  
time of Covid-19

p58

Agility in  
Unexpected Places

p20

Business Agility:  
Making Work Better

p41

Time to Really  
Rethink HR?

p75

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# Aligning Business Agility with AI Opportunity



Agility has historically been a word in the business world emphasized only in startups or technology companies. However, the concept of agility in the business world has evolved significantly since the new century ushered in a wave of both business and digital transformation that has grown larger with each passing year. Agility is everywhere now and extends into a myriad of functions - marketing, sales, finance, human resources, etc. - as leaders have learned how to apply agile practices effectively across larger teams.

But how we think about business agility must evolve once again as artificial intelligence (AI) trickles its way into everyday corporate activity. For many, business agility is a human-oriented concept. Agility is when people have the capabilities and understanding to respond quickly to disruption, capitalize on new opportunities and address threats. Automation, on the other hand, is what we achieve through AI. Automation is when we use machines and algorithms to automate repetitive tasks that would otherwise fall to humans.

When we think about agility and automation in these ways, they appear to be mutually exclusive. Or they come across as different ways of operating entirely. However, the reality is that businesses can pursue agility through digital transformation and simultaneously leverage automation to create value. Agility and automation should complement each other when implemented effectively. The challenge lies in figuring out how to accomplish this considering outdated business management beliefs that prevail to this day.



## WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS HOLDING US BACK

Perhaps the biggest barrier standing in the way of automation today is human trepidation. People are fearful of how AI and automation will affect their careers. They are concerned machines will displace them or render their skills obsolete. Many are worried they won't understand how to interact with and leverage technology in the digital age. And some are losing motivation to develop their skills or continue their professional development given how quickly technology is advancing.

Adding complexity to this is the fact that a lot of leaders don't understand AI and automation. They tend to oversell what AI can do or send the wrong messages to employees about the choices ahead of the enterprise. The conversations in offices today are often an either-or in nature that pit humans against machines: organizations must prioritize agility or automation, but can't do both well, or all at once. But we need to be speaking in AND terms. It's agility AND automation that will unlock human and organizational potential.

The truth is that AI-enabled automation can be a catalyst for growth and innovation that gets people excited. Leaders mistakenly believe that automation is solely about cutting costs (i.e., human workers) when its real value comes from freeing people to discover higher value uses for their time. Automation is a powerful tool that can augment human skill rather than replace people entirely, so long as we're willing to view it in this light.

When we change how we perceive automation, it transforms how we see the future. Tomorrow stops being something we're wary of and becomes a reality we're excited to experience. The need for such a change is vital right now given how few workers are excited about what they do for a living.

## THE NEED FOR A NEW MINDSET

What we need is a new creative mindset around the relationship between business agility and automation. Only then can we proactively uncover new opportunities rather than wait for them to appear in the marketplace. The problem is that this approach runs counter to how executives have operated for decades. Too many leaders take an "I'll believe it when I see it" posture, but the world now changes too rapidly for reactive management philosophies to survive long-term.

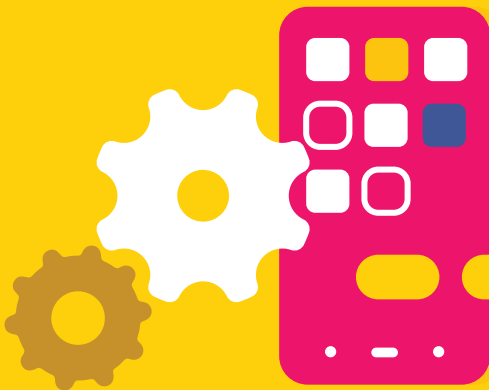
Looking ahead, successful leaders will be those who constantly find new ways to work, learn and empower their workforces. They will be able to see beyond legacy mental models, cognitive biases and blind spots and search for ways to drive growth in unexpected places. Additionally, they'll operate from an "I'll see it when I believe it" mindset, which they can then validate with fast feedback from employees, customers and other key stakeholders without slowing down progress.

It is this mindset that will help give organizations the "edge" needed to thrive in the world of tomorrow, which will be unlike anything we've ever experienced. Furthermore, this mindset is crucial if business agility and automation are to coexist in harmony at a time when people are worried about their usefulness to their employers.

According to a June 2020 Gallup report, less than a third (31%) of survey respondents were “engaged” with their work, which was defined as being “highly involved in, enthusiastic about and committed” to their responsibilities and employer. A big reason for this is so many people execute the same set of tasks day in and day out with little opportunity to learn and exercise their creativity. The pandemic brought some of these anxieties to the forefront, leading many employees to question their career choices.

AI-driven automation can address this problem by taking on the work that leaves human employees wanting. Automation should create capacity that can be allocated to the more complex problem-solving and abstract thinking that humans are better at than computers. Plus, automation can increase the impact humans have at their organizations, giving them a stronger sense of purpose and accomplishment for their efforts.

But in this shift in how we view automation, we can't leave agility behind. That fact that we can execute certain tasks with near-perfect accuracy at scale should not diminish the value of agility in our fast-paced world. It's wrong to assume that if processes are automated, human workforces don't have to be as agile for one reason or another, which brings us back to why adopting a new paradigm is critical for future success.



## HOW HUMAN INTELLIGENCE SHOULD DIRECT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

As we've established, humans and AI are not in competition. By the same token, agility and automation are not different sides of the same coin. We don't have to choose one over the other as we journey through the digital age. However, maximizing the value of agility and automation under the same roof requires a deep understanding of what role human intelligence will play in the future.

Keep in mind that AI on its own is not capable of achieving human goals. AI isn't motivated to increase profitability, attract customers or cut costs. AI doesn't come up with original product ideas or decide which new markets to enter, at least not without having background information first. In this way, AI is much more limited and narrow in its capabilities.

Machine learning algorithms need massive volumes of data before they can generate useful insights. Personalized recommendation engines don't work well without having millions of transactions to study. Chatbots are useless without an engineer to code in the logic that determines how the computer should respond to human inputs. Put simply, without guidance from humans, AI is an abstract concept with little real-world application.

It's how humans apply AI and automation that leads to value creation. It takes sound human reasoning, data insights and a clear understanding of what customers want before we can harness automation successfully. Human minds are an essential part of the equation because it's people who come up with the business models, products and services within which AI operates. Without human intelligence, there is no use or purpose for machine intelligence.





## AGILITY AND AUTOMATION: THE PILLARS OF FUTURE SUCCESS

Bringing all these ideas together forms the recipe for future success. The world's work is only moving faster and growing more interconnected. Billions of people are gaining access to the internet and starting to participate in the global economy. All these new minds coming online also means innovation will accelerate, and with it, disruption.

To navigate such a world, leaders need both agility and automation. Businesses must be agile to respond to volatility, seize short-term opportunities and pivot when circumstances change. They also need to be agile to experiment with new technologies, iterate on offerings and incorporate customer insights into product development cycles. Even with AI entering the mainstream, agility is still immensely valuable.

Similarly, automation is how enterprises will execute increasingly complex workflows at scale, minimize human error and eliminate operational inefficiencies. Automation will empower humans to accomplish more with limited resources and create space for them to find what truly excites them in their work. Automation will also be the key to solving really hard problems that involve countless, ever-changing variables.

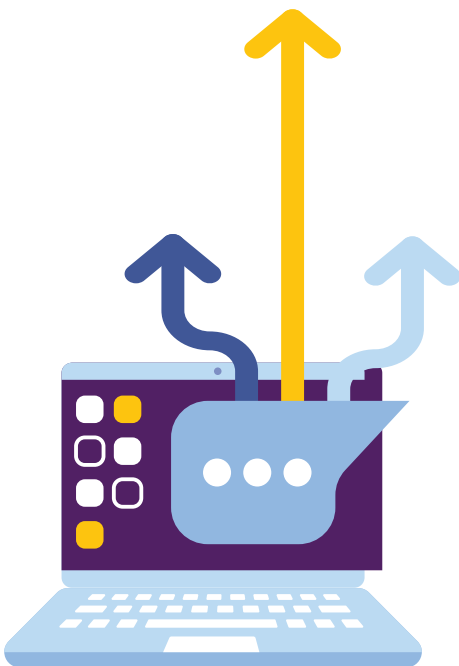
In promoting agility and automation, leaders can't forget that AI is a means to human ends. AI exists to help us accomplish our goals and unlock employee potential. Without direction from people, AI and automation are aimless. In fact, a recent survey from Emergn found that the majority (55%) of the top barriers preventing organizations from seeing the most positive impact from intelligent automation are related to people—including resistance to new workflows, managing new processes, and skills gaps. But with the right mindset and approach, automation bolsters agility, setting organizations up to thrive in the marketplace of tomorrow.

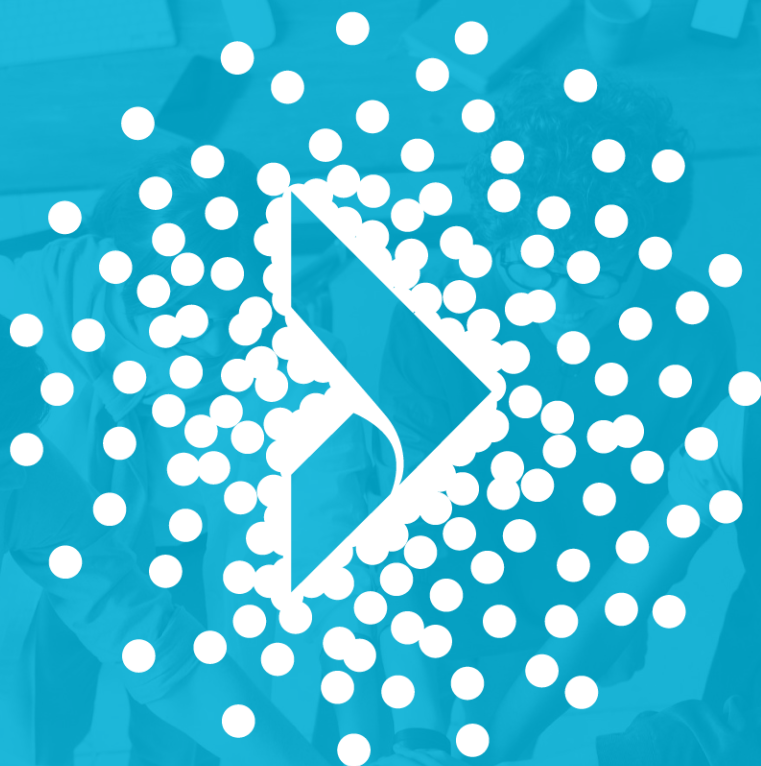
It's time to move past outdated ways of thinking that position humans against computers, and it's paramount for executives to understand that the future will be dominated by those who can learn, grow and innovate by finding new ways to combine human and artificial intelligence. Perhaps the most exciting takeaway is that leaders don't have to wait to get started. Opportunities to innovate, increase agility and optimize performance are all around us. ©



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