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Can AI Replace Thought Workers?

Andy Jordan - August 9, 2023

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Topics: Artificial Intelligence

Andy Jordan is President of Roffensian Consulting S.A., a Roatan, Honduras-based management consulting firm with a comprehensive project management practice. Andy always appreciates feedback and discussion on the issues raised in his articles and can be reached at andy.jordan@roffensian.com. Andy's new book *Risk Management for Project Driven Organizations* is now available.

In recent years, we have witnessed an exponential growth in the capabilities of artificial intelligence across various industries. One area where AI is making a profound impact is project management. As organizations strive for greater efficiency and productivity, they are turning to AI-powered solutions to streamline processes, enhance decision-making, and revolutionize project delivery.

One of the key benefits of AI in project management lies in its ability to automate mundane and repetitive tasks. AI-powered project management tools can handle routine administrative duties such as scheduling, resource allocation, and progress tracking. By automating these manual tasks, project managers can free up valuable time and focus on more strategic aspects of project execution. This not only improves productivity, but also reduces the risk of human error, leading to more accurate and reliable outcomes.

Okay, hang on a minute. AI is a really hot topic right now, and I'm not going to ignore it, but I'm also not going to buy into all the hype. Let me explain why.

Confession: I didn't write those first two paragraphs. ChatGPT did. I asked it to write a brief article on AI in project management in the style of Andy Jordan, and those were the first two paragraphs that it produced. I'm not sure that it's really my style (although it's idea of "brief" was over 450 words, so it has that in common with me)—but I'm not exactly a famous author, so I'll forgive it that.

Look back at those paragraphs knowing that they are computer generated. They're accurate, if a little excessive in places— is AI really having a "profound impact" on project management? The heading of the response was also that "AI revolutionizes project management," and, well…no. But is there any real content there? It's all very generic. I didn't post everything because of the length, but the other aspects it mentioned were data analysis, collaboration and communication, while it also acknowledged that there is the risk of bias in AI algorithms. The collaboration piece is perhaps the most interesting—and the furthest away from the generic. ChatGPT says about that:

"Virtual assistants and chatbots powered by AI technology can facilitate seamless communication, ensuring that team members have the information they need at their fingertips. These AI-powered assistants can answer questions, provide real-time updates, and offer guidance, fostering a more cohesive and efficient work environment."

TRENDING ARTICLES

Are You Doing Your Job Search Homework?

by Andy Jordan August 3, 2023

With the amount of information available today, it's inexcusable for anyone considering a company or department move to not have a solid understanding of their potential new home. Yet many candidates just don't see the need.

Then it went on to explain why collaboration was a good thing. I'm not sure that AI has quite such a big role to play in collaboration as ChatGPT seems to think it does. Effective management already puts information *where* it's needed, *when* it's needed—and I haven't yet met a stakeholder or team member that didn't want an update from a PM rather than a piece of software. If the sponsor checks in with me on the accuracy of the status report that I just signed off on, then they're going to check in with me on the accuracy of what a virtual assistant just told them!

The value of thought workers

What was my point with this exercise? Well, you could argue that it was to get AI to write some of my article for me (or perhaps an attempt to demonstrate to the editor that I can't be replaced by software just yet), but the truth is I wanted to see how close AI could get to the capabilities of a thought worker. Writing isn't about fingers on a keyboard, it's about finding a way to get the thoughts and ideas out of my head and onto a screen in a way that other people can understand.

In my case, writing here, I'm trying to provide a different perspective on different topics, to present an alternative view and to perhaps get you to think about things in a different way. As such, I view myself as a thought worker, someone who makes a living from the ideas that they have and their ability to communicate them. I view project managers in exactly the same way.

Projects succeed because PMs are able to build and lead strong, engaged teams. They succeed because PMs are able to communicate clearly with stakeholders in all roles and levels. They succeed because project managers are able to solve problems themselves and facilitate collaborative problem solving among others. All of these are examples of thought work.

What sets a great PM apart from a merely good one is their ability to excel in each of these areas. They are able to develop better ideas, facilitate higher quality teamwork, and communicate with greater clarity and purpose. Their thought work is of a higher quality, and they are able to look at things in a different way—finding innovative, efficient, effective solutions when others struggle.

AI and thought work

If AI is going to replace thought worker roles like project managers, then it needs to be able to execute thought work better than the people doing it today. Not occasionally, but *every* time. It can't do that today, and I don't believe that it's going to be able to do it any time soon.

In fact, I think I'll be replaced as a writer before PMs are at risk from AI. That's because there are far more variables involved in leading projects. Writing has a consistent structure, each writer has their own style, and articles are relatively contained in terms of scope and depth. Projects aren't any of those things.

Project Handoff
by Veronica Thraen, PMP August 11, 2023

How can you ensure project success when you take over a project midway through—or leave midstream for another project? Here are three tips to ensure a successful project handoff—and, ultimately, project success.

Outsourcing Clinical Trials in Pharmaceutical Companies
by Vikas Kumar August 4, 2023

Outsourcing of clinical trials is frequently done by pharmaceutical companies because they don't have the expertise to run those trials, they need to expedite the timelines, or they are working at capacity. In this article, we explore key outsourcing activities for Phase I clinical trials from a PMBOK® Guide lens to identify key success factors.

different expectations, different priorities and different skills. Yet a PM needs to bring them together as a cohesive team that believes in each other and the PM. They must be willing to put the needs of the team above their individual needs, and be willing to work hard to achieve a common goal.

AI can't do that, let alone then manage the project that all of those people need to work on. Will it be able to do that at some point? Probably, but that point is a long way off. The challenges that PMs face are unique; every project—heck, every *day*—brings some new scenario that needs addressing, a problem to solve, or an opportunity to take advantage of. It's going to be a long time before the technology is capable of solving those problems as well as a human—and even longer before AI is going to be able to recognize opportunities.

That last part is key. It's one thing to say to an AI tool, "Here's a problem, come up with some solutions." It's quite another to expect AI to operate without those prompts—without anyone telling it that there is a problem, opportunity, risk, etc. that needs addressing. And if it's going to take a long time before the technology is capable of doing that, you can be sure that it's going to be a lot longer before organizations allow the technology to do that.

Project management may be an expensive discipline, but a project that fails because of AI is way more expensive.

Conclusions
In its own conclusion, ChatGPT claimed that AI-powered tools would deliver "increased efficiency and accuracy." I'll buy the efficiency, but accuracy? Well, only in certain circumstances. It also said "as we embrace this paradigm shift, project managers must adapt their skills and leverage AI technologies to thrive in this rapidly evolving landscape." I'll buy that—not with a view for AI to potentially replace PMs in thought work roles, but in that generic stuff that ChatGPT threw out at the start of its article

(administration, data analysis, etc.).

Someone suggested to me that I was taking a risk with this article because I was leaving it up to you as readers (and to the editor) to determine how far away ChatGPT was from my ability to produce meaningful articles. Well, if it's a risk, then it's probably time to put me out to pasture anyway, because I just don't see the technology being in the same league as thought workers.

If that sounds arrogant on my part, it's not meant to—it's intended to be a ringing endorsement of just how capable project managers are, and just how hard it will be to replace them with technology.

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Reshma Rizvi
Saskatoon, SASKATCHEWAN, Canada
Network:117

Thanks for the interesting article and perspective; in the future thoughtful PMs (with soft skills, ie: empathy, EI, adaptability, etc.) will go together with AI (with technology) to be efficient and effective in the VUCA world--We have to choose and balance out wisely.

Posted: Aug 11, 2023 5:03 PM

Andy Kaufman
Host, People and Projects Podcast
LAKE ZURICH, IL, USA
Network:2606
CONNECT

No one is going to replace Andy Jordan any time soon. :)

I had an AI join me as a podcast guest (PMeLa for Project Management and Leadership). "She" did OK--perhaps remarkably well considering what would have been available only a year ago. But there are a lot of nuances that made it clear she wasn't human. It will only get better which is why it's good for us to have these conversations.

My take: for the foreseeable future, AI will be like having an assistant or intern for most of us. I don't think I'd want to be a voiceover artist these days. Or, in some industries, working in a call center. But for PMs, we're getting access to a powerful assistant. Let's take advantage of it! :)

Posted: Aug 10, 2023 12:00 PM

Eduin Fernando Valdes Alvarado
Project Manager, F y F Fabricamos Futuro
Villavicencio, Meta, Colombia
Network:2607
CONNECT

Very interesting., thanks for sharing

Posted: Aug 10, 2023 9:51 AM

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