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AI, ROI, and Mental Health

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More than a decade ago, a former Google design ethicist named Tristan Harris began warning that technology companies were engaged in a silent competition for human attention. At the time, his concerns were often dismissed as overly dramatic. Social media was still largely viewed as a force for connection and empowerment. Yet many of the problems Harris warned about eventually became impossible to ignore. Algorithmic addiction, endless scrolling, declining attention spans, and the growing influence of recommendation engines are now widely recognized as unintended consequences of a digital world optimized for engagement rather than human well-being.

Today, Harris and [The Center for Humane Technology](#) are sounding the alarm again. This time, the subject is artificial intelligence.

This time I find myself paying very close attention.

Until recently, I would have described myself as very optimistic about AI. In many ways, I still am. Over the last two years, I have written extensively about the opportunities generative AI presents for legal professionals and organizations. I have encouraged leaders to experiment, learn, and prepare for a future that will undoubtedly look different from the past. Much of that enthusiasm remains intact. But after spending the past several months immersed in autonomous agents and AI-driven workflows, I emerged with a growing sense of unease that I wasn't expecting.

What surprised me wasn't the quality of the work being produced. By any measure, it was exceptional. What surprised me was how the experience made me feel.

Like many people, my initial experience with AI felt empowering. Chat assistants helped me expand the scope of what I could accomplish on my own. The technology felt less like a replacement and more like an extension of my capabilities. Working with autonomous agents, however, was different. Instead of helping me perform the work, they increasingly performed the work for me. At first, that felt exhilarating. The productivity gains were undeniable. Yet after the excitement wore off, I began to notice something unexpected. The more thinking I delegated, the less connected I felt to the work itself.

The feeling was difficult to describe because nothing was actually wrong. Projects were moving forward, and the results were consistently better than I could have produced on my own in the same amount of time. From a productivity standpoint, the experience was a

success. Yet there was a strange emptiness to it. Some of the most rewarding parts of professional work are not found in the finished product. They come from wrestling with a difficult problem, discovering an unexpected insight, or gradually building expertise through effort and repetition. When too much of that process is handed over to an agent, something important can get lost.

That experience helped me better understand what Harris means when he talks about building a human-centered future. The phrase can sound abstract, but I have come to think of it in very practical terms. A human-centered future is one where technology serves human flourishing rather than simply maximizing efficiency. It is a future where we evaluate success not only by what machines can do, but also by how people experience the world around them.

This realization has changed the way I think about AI adoption inside organizations. Much of the conversation has centered on how quickly we can implement AI and how much work we can automate. Those are reasonable goals, but they should not be the only goals. Leaders should also ask whether the work environment they are creating is one that people will actually enjoy inhabiting. If AI adoption leaves employees feeling disconnected from their work, isolated from their colleagues, or reduced to supervisors of automated systems, then we may be solving one problem while creating another.

Work has never been solely about productivity. For many people, it is also a source of identity, community, mentorship, and a sense of belonging. Some of the most valuable moments in a career occur during an impromptu conversation with a colleague, a collaborative brainstorming session, or the shared experience of solving a difficult challenge. These moments are difficult to quantify, which is why they are often overlooked when evaluating new technology. Yet they play a significant role in whether people feel engaged, fulfilled, and connected to the organizations they serve.

Fortunately, I don't believe the answer is to slow innovation or reject AI. The answer is to be more intentional about how we introduce it. A human-centered approach begins by recognizing that not everyone wants the same relationship with technology. Some employees will eagerly embrace advanced agents and highly automated workflows. Others will prefer AI tools that assist their work while allowing them to remain deeply involved in the thinking and execution process. Rather than forcing everyone into a single model, organizations should provide options and allow employees to determine the level of AI engagement that best supports their success and well-being.

Just as importantly, we should start automation efforts with the work people genuinely want to give up. Most legal professionals did not enter the field because they love repetitive administrative tasks, manually organizing documents, or searching through endless email

chains. AI can be incredibly valuable when it removes friction and frees people to focus on higher-value activities. The goal should not be to automate the parts of the job that bring satisfaction, growth, or professional pride. The goal should be to automate the work that stands in the way of those experiences.

At UpLevel Ops, we often talk about creating work joy. While productivity matters, it is not the only measure of success. Work joy comes from solving meaningful problems, building expertise, collaborating with colleagues, and contributing in ways that feel valuable. When organizations give employees a voice in how AI is deployed and allow them to identify which tasks they want to remove from their plates, adoption becomes less threatening and more empowering. AI stops feeling like something being done to them and starts feeling like a tool that helps them do more of the work they actually enjoy.

This is why I find myself increasingly interested in the questions Tristan Harris and others are raising. The conversation should not be limited to what AI can do. We should also be asking what kind of society and workplace we want to create alongside it. How do we preserve opportunities for learning, mastery, creativity, and connection? How do we ensure that technology remains a tool for human advancement rather than a force that quietly diminishes the human experience?

I continue to believe AI will create extraordinary opportunities for those willing to embrace it thoughtfully. But moving forward, I suspect my conversations with clients will increasingly focus on a different question. Not simply how we use AI, but how we use it in ways that make people's lives better. As these technologies become more powerful, protecting human connection, purpose, and work joy may become just as important as improving productivity. The future of work is still being written. We should make sure people remain at the center of the story.

Brandi Pack is the Director of Innovation at [UpLevel Ops](#), where bold ideas become practical tools that transform legal departments. She leads the firm's AI programs, delivering AI-powered solutions that are accessible, secure, and built for teams ready to work smarter, not harder. With a background spanning Legal Ops, tech, and project management, Brandi is passionate about turning what's next into what's Next Level. She is also a frequent advisor and speaker on AI adoption in legal, known for translating emerging tech into practical wins for in-house teams.