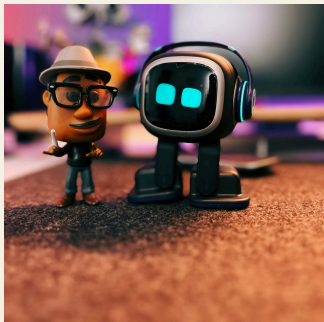
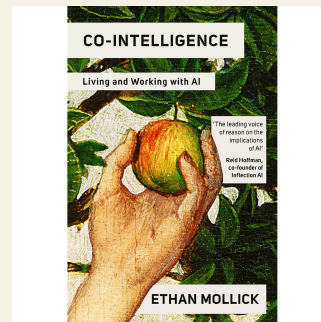


**Spotlight**

Shining a light on significant trends in management, sales and learning

**Skill Up**

Shines light on a specific skill, you can quickly learn and put to use

**Must Read**

Short Excerpts, Extracts and annotations drawn from insightful books, new and old

**Future of Sales**

Future focused ideas and practices

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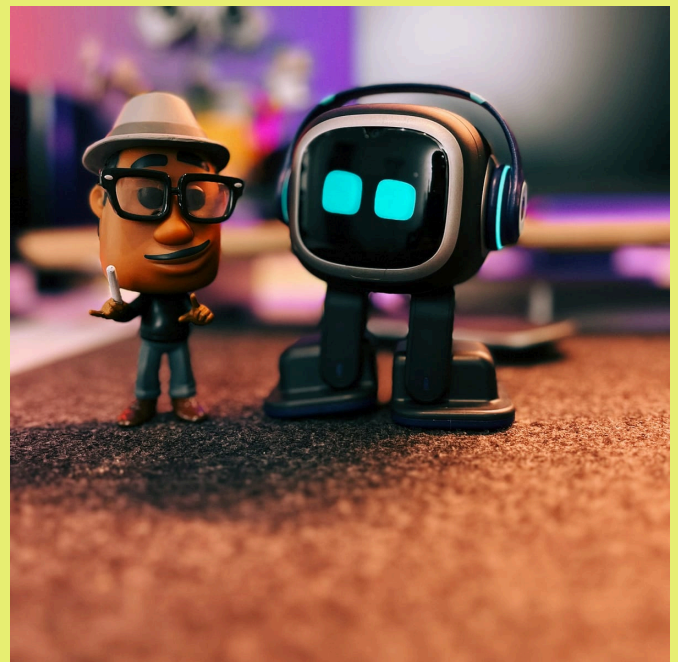
Four Critical Human Skills AI Can't Bring In ... And Sales Needs All Four

What are human skills?

Harvard Business School Online defines human skills as “capabilities that rely on distinctly human traits that AI and other digital technologies can't currently replicate or perform well”

According to that definition, those capabilities include the ability to:

- “Build, navigate, and sustain human relationships
- Perceive and interpret emotions and understand how they influence behavior
- Apply ethical reasoning informed by values, context, and lived experience
- Make judgment calls in ambiguous situations without clear right or wrong answers
- Think strategically with layered context and long-term implications in mind”



Human Skills that AI Cannot Replace and How Sales Needs them All

A HBS Online blog by Tim Stobierski identifies the following 4 Important Human Skills AI Can't Replace. These are uniquely human and they constitute a line that AI cannot cross.

Interestingly all 4 of them are essential skills required for excellence in sales as well:

Emotional Intelligence and Human Connection – In tasks like creating text, images, videos and human like voice content and in analysing gigantic amounts of information on the web to produce coherent and well summarised responses to queries, at incredible speed, generative AI is vastly superior to human beings.

What it cannot summon is emotional intelligence and the ability to feel and express empathy, create trust, and forge genuine human connections. Sales roles require display of considerable emotional and social intelligence in dealing with Customers

Active Listening and Meaning-Making – AI language models may appear to listen carefully and respond thoughtfully but they develop responses essentially by recognising patterns and predicting what will come next. They do not interpret meaning

In situations that call for nuance, appreciation of context and nonverbal cues like tone and body language, the AI bot's limitation becomes evident. In sales and customer service, picking up messages from what has been left unsaid could be as important as understanding what was spoken

Judgment in Ambiguous Situations – Problems with clear parameters, with right or wrong answers are best suited for AI. But it can be a struggle for AI to handle problems that need 'satisficing' solutions to be obtained using incomplete or unstructured data, where human judgment must step in to fill in the gaps.

Selling activity many times involves dealing with several stakeholders, forming judgements on their motivations and biases and working with available data

Human Creativity and Challenging Assumptions – AI in its current stage of evolution, cannot produce path breaking inventions or innovations. AI can of course generate output that looks creative. It can do this at astonishing speed and scale. Even these outputs are the product of pattern recognition and recombination and not the result of innovation thinking.

In contrast, human creativity, brings into play imagination, intuition, and the ability to challenge assumptions. A salesperson needs to be creative and imaginative in dealing with other human beings and constantly changing internal and external conditions

Clearly sales professionals who are strong in the human dimensions of selling build themselves a moat that AI cannot cross easily

[The Harvard Business School Online blog by Tim Stobierski on 4 Important Human Skills AI Can't Replace can be accessed here](#)

“As data and science become more accessible and more the production of software and AI, human creativity is becoming a more valuable commodity.”

– Hendrith Vanlon Smith Jr

Sharpen your 'Mentalizing' Skill by Making Technology your Teammate

Research shows that technology doesn't always make sales jobs easier

Isn't technology expected to make all jobs, including sales, a lot easier?

Surprisingly research seems to find that this may not be true always. At least not for the salespeople.

Findings of a Gartner survey of B2B sellers cited in a Harvard Business Review article ("Sellers Are Overwhelmed by New Technology" by George Tobias, Craig Riley, Colleen Giblin and Betsy Gregory-Hosler – HBR August 22, 2023) showed that almost half of those surveyed felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of technology needed to get their work done

Far from helping the salespeople, the survey results indicated that sellers feeling overwhelmed by technology were less likely to meet their sales targets compared to their peers who did not feel pressured by technology.



What can be a solution for this?

The authors suggest a simple but powerful prescription:

Coopt technology, especially AI tools, as your teammate and sharpen your human skills

A fascinating insight that they draw is how AI is dramatically different from all technologies that we have seen so far. With AI, it is possible to make the tech itself share the salesperson's responsibilities of navigating the buying environment independently. This can considerably reduce the non-core work of the salespeople, allowing them to focus on selling and Customers.

When AI is adopted like "full fledged member of the sales team," it can free up salespeople's energies.

4 High Value Use Cases of how AI can Free up Salespeople's Energies

Here are 4 high value use cases listed by the authors:

Simplify and enrich Salesperson's role – Activities like updating CRM and data capturing that salespeople usually regard as "Administrative" and "low value" hassles can be fully automated

Craft unique value narratives for clients – Generative AI tools can support in turning customer data into customized value messaging, faster and better

Prospect better – AI agents can scrape data from social media, external company databases, rating agency reports, and other sources to pick, qualify and shortlist prospects worth pursuing

Design high value solutions and speed up deal closures – AI can be used to analyse real-time Customer information, product specs, and RFPs to generate solutions and quotes that salespeople can review and use. It can provide data-backed pricing justifications and value-based reasoning to close deals faster

What is the one skill needed to make the most of tech as a teammate?

The authors' research uncovered another powerful insight. Their data showed that B2B buyers are much more likely to purchase a high-quality deal if interactions with the buyer clarify the value of the solution. Buyers' confidence must be boosted by validating their purchase decision

This can be made possible through exercise of a human skill that only salespeople possess. The authors define it as "the ability to infer unspoken beliefs, feelings, and intentions to predict and influence buyer behavior." Drawing on psychology, they give this skill a name – "Mentalizing"

The buyer's mind is like an iceberg. The visible tip is what the buyer reveals out loud. The untapped potential lies beneath and that is accessible only through mentalizing. When technology is leveraged as a teammate, salespeople have room to mentalize, anticipate buyers' stated and unstated needs and close high value deals

How to Develop Mentalizing at 4 Levels

Mentalizing is a skill that can be developed and honed through practice and use of AI's vast capabilities. Mentalizing happens at 4 levels, before, during and after buyer interactions:

Active Listening – What Buyers Say

Action – Stay fully present in the moment as the buyer speaks. This will help probe for missing information and ask targeted follow-up questions

Perspective Taking – What Buyers Think

Action – Train yourself to immerse yourself in the buyer's point of view, assess what is already known to the buyer, and offer additional insight to affirm the value of a solution

Empathizing – How Buyers Feel

Action – Develop sensitivity to the emotional component of buying, alleviate fears of purchase risk and make the decision feel good all through the purchase journey

Cognitive Decoding – How Buyers Will Act

Action – Synthesize all the information at hand, predict how buyers will behave, and adapt strategy to maximize deal closure odds. This is the most sophisticated dimension of mentalizing

What it Takes – 3 Requisites

The authors suggest 3 requisites to build mentalizing skill by coopting AI technologies as a teammate – (i) Develop skills in prompt engineering (ii) Hallucination spotting and (iii) Creative use of AI as a sounding board

What it all Means

Putting it all together, the authors advise: "Sales leaders must combine the transformative power of AI with the uniquely human capabilities of their salespeople to drive high-margin deals." That's where the human edge is!

"The work does not exist for the sake of the tool; the tool exists for the sake of production. This rule is constantly violated by today's computer users ... when the new computer arrives, a frantic search begins to find things for it to do."

– Peter Drucker, 1974

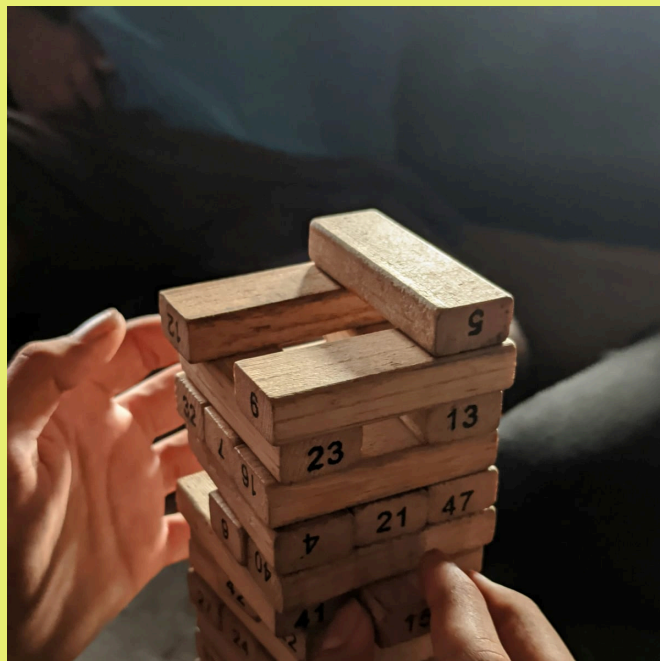
Enjoy Using AI at Work? Watch Out for the Risk of Losing your Human Edge

The advent and excitement of the AI era

“Did you check this on an AI?” “What is the AI view?”

These are questions we now encounter frequently even in casual conversations. AI is so much a part of our life today that it feels like it has always been with us. But it is hardly 5 years since the first of the Large Language Models (such as ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini and Copilot) brought within the reach of millions, a search and query tool that could answer problem type queries, take follow-up questions and draft fluent, human sounding responses in conversational language. The models were greeted with excitement and awe

Dr. Cornelia C Walther, Senior Visiting Scientist at Wharton Initiative for Neuroscience sums it up this way in a Knowledge@Wharton article “Is Overreliance on AI causing Agency Decay?” (Sept 15, 2026): “The early mood was experimental. People tested it, teased it, challenged it, praised it, feared it, and shared screenshots the novelty has (now) become infrastructure. AI now sits inside search engines, office software, customer-service platforms, coding environments, writing tools, and corporate workflows”



What is Agency Decay

AI is such a versatile technology that it is easy to be tempted to be pulled into using it indiscriminately. Dr Walther flags 4 pervasive risks to watch out for as we grow comfortable using AI in our day-to-day work. She categorizes these risks under a larger problem that she calls “agency decay.”

Dr Walther defines agency decay as a “gradual erosion of a person’s ability and willingness to observe carefully, think independently, choose deliberately, and act responsibly.” This happens when we get so comfortable with the convenience of using conversational AI as a thinking partner that it becomes a default setting. Then without knowing it, our own ability to think independently gets reduced and agency decay sets in

4 Stages of Agency Decay to Watch Out for

Agency decay or erosion in independent cognition, doesn’t happen overnight. It has the following 4 stages, says Dr Walther

Experimenting – This is the “playful and practical” stage. The LLMs help new employees sound clearer. A non-native speaker uses them to write more fluently. Or a busy sales professional might rely on LLMs to quickly create client meeting notes.

At this stage, the human remains in charge. But there is a subtle risk, Dr Walther points out. Productivity improvements may encourage us to assume that faster output means better work. The assumption becomes risky in situations that demand “judgement, context, ethics or accountability.” Continued reliance on AI tools could also make it difficult to work without them even for simple tasks

Integrating – In this phase, use of LLMs and generative AI becomes part of the workflow. “This,” observes Dr Walther, “is where the relationship changes.” Once we start viewing Language Models not just as tools but as collaborators, there is an ever-present temptation to incorporate their output directly into our drafts, reports and recommendations.

Take the case of salespersons prospecting a potential buyer from new industries or businesses they are not familiar with. They may use an AI tool to learn more about the new industry or business. The research output they receive from the tool often sounds so convincing and authoritative that they may feel like using it as it is in building a proposal. As familiarity grows, trust in AI rises. This is where cognitive offloading transitions into belief offloading. AI output starts getting accepted as correct even when evidence doesn’t seem to support it. The question slowly shifts from “Is this task suitable for AI?” to “What did the AI say?”

Reliance – In the next stage AI becomes the default starting point for everything. Work gets done by AI tools with the output being reviewed by people. But this marks a shift from “human thought to machine generation.” Usage, however extensive, is not the problem. Risk is in relying on outputs without examining and validating them independently.

Dr Walther advises – “The lesson is simple and uncomfortable: The more people trust the tool, the more deliberately they must protect the habit of questioning it.” In a sales context, accepting whatever AI offers without questioning, could result in costly and time-consuming rework and could create a poor impression with clients

Depending – When individuals or teams struggle to perform, decide, or verify without AI, it signals entry into the stage of dependence. The negative effects at this stage are not limited only to the individual. They affect teams and organisations also.

Dr Walther raises a disturbing question – “What happens to skill formation when the first draft is increasingly outsourced?”

4 As Framework to Retain Human Edge

Awareness – Begin by noticing what you are doing. Before using AI, ask: What exactly am I handing over – Drafting, reasoning, judgment, empathy, verification, accountability?

Appreciation – Appreciate work situations where AI genuinely expands human capacity. Entrust tasks like summarizing, translating, comparing, simulating, or picking up blind spots in which AI can augment and speed up human effort. Retain higher order tasks like problem framing, values setting, context appreciation, ethics and quality standards with humans

Acceptance – Accept that AI has its limits even when it sounds confident and sure. Also recognise that making people more productive with AI could also make them less skilled. People should have sufficient opportunities to practice the underlying skills without automation. For instance, salespeople could decide to continue writing some percentage of mails by themselves without relying on AI support to ensure retention of mail writing skills

Accountability – Regardless of who generates the output, AI or individuals, accountability rests with humans in the system. So, cultivating a “human first draft” habit for important thinking is a good practice. This also includes mandatory source checks, disclosures of AI usage and assigning human owners for AI-supported decisions

Winners of the future will be those organisations that treat human agency, autonomy, judgment and trust, as business assets to be preserved and grown in tandem with the usage of AI

[The Knowledge@Wharton article Is Overreliance on AI Causing Agency Decay? by Dr Cornelia C Walther can be read here](#)

“By far the greatest danger of Artificial Intelligence is that people conclude too early that they understand it.”

— Eliezer Yudkowsky

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The Human Edge will make B2B Salespeople Irreplaceable in the AI Era

What does the AI-dominated future hold for B2B sales professionals?

What's the story in the crystal ball?

Will AI script a story similar to the one playing out in retail consumer selling? Will autonomous AI agents take over totally to deliver “frictionless” B2B commerce?

A longitudinal study by Christoph Senn of INSEAD, and Mehak Gandhi of Valuecreator predicts the exact opposite.

Study finds that Salespeople are Irreplaceable

Drawing on surveys of 10,000 business relationships and 1,000 transformation projects over an extended time-period, the study argues that the ultimate differentiator in B2B sales is the ability to use AI to augment planning, execution and resources in the B2B arena infusing the irreplaceable human judgement into all above three components of strategy.



Trends and Shifts that Explain why Salespeople are Irreplaceable

In an INSEAD Knowledge article featuring the study (“Your Best Sales Tool Isn't Your Tech Stack” – INSEAD Knowledge Aug 2026) Senn and Gandhi remind us that “deep, lasting human-to-human relationships have become the only source of sustainable competitive advantage.” They point to the following trends and shifts that support this outlook:

AI is better suited for Product led growth than Customer centric growth – AI algorithms are good for product led growth marked by speed and volume. This transactional model has limitations in B2B, which is Customer centric and requires sales professionals who understand and work with the Customer ecosystem

AI cannot build mutual trust, only salespeople can – AI can crunch large volumes of data to forecast demand. But it cannot understand nuances involved in two distinct corporate cultures coming together in a B2B sale. It takes salespeople in real time dialogue with purchasers to make these things happen

AI can map hierarchies but cannot build rapport – Rapport is built during spontaneous, unscripted moments like coffee breaks or social events, where unspoken needs and unforeseen opportunities can often be voiced.

AI cannot replicate the authenticity of human communication – AI can automate reports and ensure timely delivery, but it cannot infuse honesty, emotion and trustworthiness into words

We cannot count on AI to bring a “what if we were one company” mindset – Salespeople alone can “orchestrate” collaborative relationships between stakeholders in seller and buyer companies

An example cited in the article tells the story of a logistics firm that wanted to deepen its relationship with a home-improvement retailer in the United States. While AI tools identified growth potential, the actual decision to co-invest in new logistic centres materialised only after cross-functional workshops revealed shared expansion goals

Salespeople alone can create nimble relationships that quickly respond to challenges and opportunities – AI and automation can help spot potential bottlenecks and develop better autonomous processes. But adapting to the Customer’s ad hoc or non-standard requests would be a challenge

A case in point is that of a European chemical company that used AI to track engagement with a large Customer across depts. But when a product issue arose, it was the trust built between the supplier’s regional business director and the Customer’s COO over years that saved the day for both

AI is no replacement for the human X factor – AI can never be the “trusted advisor” that salespeople can be. The human X factor is demonstrated in being a sounding board for the Customer, taking risks based on intuition, not just data. It is also seen in breaking silos and fostering collaboration by playing the “orchestrator” role while overseeing AI as the ‘human in the loop’

Prepare for the Future with a 3 Step Action Plan

Senn and Gandhi suggest a 3-step action plan:

Embrace AI for speed, humans for vision – Let AI do data-driven heavy lifting, but reserve strategic orchestration for your sales talent

Try a time bound litmus AI test on select key accounts – Deploy AI for joint execution in those experimental accounts. If the AI suggestions and human intuition don’t match, pivot right away

Upskill for empathy – The most valuable employees are those who can navigate grey areas where algorithms fail. So emphasise skilling for orchestrating relationships more than merely learning tools

Senn and Gandhi wrap up their [INSEAD article Your Best Sales Tool Isn't Your Tech Stack](#), with caution and hope: “With AI becoming a permanent fixture, the danger is not the technology itself, but the erosion of the human bridge that connects two organisations. Solid B2B relationships are built on mutual value creation across planning, execution and resources. This type of orchestration requires levels of collaboration and trust that only humans can deliver”

“Deep, lasting human-to-human relationships have become the only source of sustainable competitive advantage.”

– Christoph Senn & Mehak Gandhi, INSEAD Knowledge

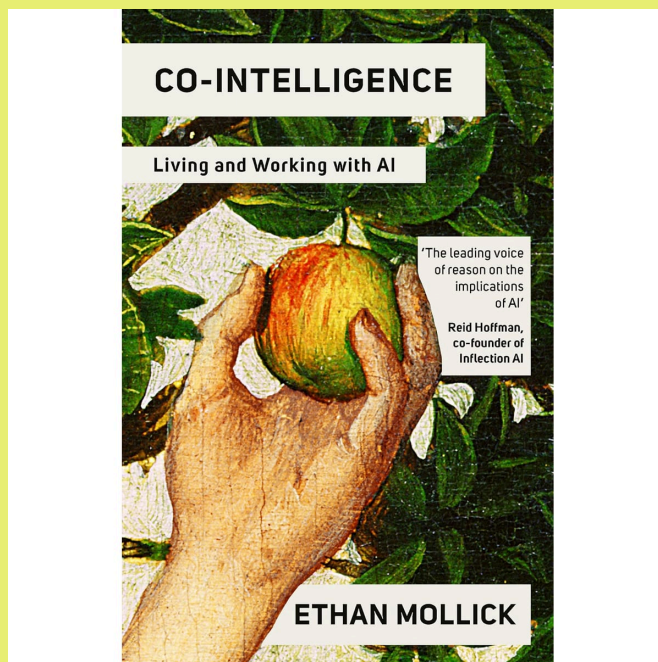
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Co-Intelligence by Ethan Mollick

[Co-Intelligence \(2024\)](#) by Prof Ethan Mollick of Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, explores how we can partner with generative, language-based AI in any area of life or work that you want to excel in. The book touches upon both the possibilities and limitations that AI comes with and encourages you in simple, engaging language to live, work and thrive with AI

Below are select quotes and excerpts from the book's chapter on "Four Rules for Co-Intelligence." The core idea of the book is to treat AI as something that will augment our own natural intelligence. From this perspective, AI can be seen as Additional Intelligence

These four rules are especially valuable as road signs for all of us in business and professions to navigate the mystifying yet magical world of AI in our efforts to make the most of it



Four Rules for Co-Intelligence

"The fact is that we live in a world with AIs, and that means we need to understand how to work with them. So we need to establish some ground rules. Because the AI available to you when you read this book is likely different from the one I have when writing it, I want to consider general principles. We will focus on things inherent and timeless, as much as that is possible, in all current generative AI systems based on Large Language Models.

Here are my four principles of working with AI:

Principle 1: Always invite AI to the table.

You should try inviting AI to help you in everything you do, barring legal or ethical barriers. As you experiment, you may find that AI help can be satisfying, or frustrating, or useless, or unnerving. But you aren't just doing this for help alone; familiarizing yourself with AI's capabilities allows you to better understand how it can assist you—or threaten you and your job. Given that AI is a General-Purpose Technology, there is no single manual or instruction book that you can refer to in order to understand its value and its limits.

Principle 2: Be the human in the loop

For now, AI works best with human help, and you want to be that helpful human. As AI gets more capable and requires less human help—you still want to be that human. So, the second principle is to learn to be the human in the loop...

You provide crucial oversight, offering your unique perspective, critical thinking skills, and ethical considerations. This collaboration leads to better results and keeps you engaged with the AI process, preventing overreliance and complacency. Being in the loop helps you maintain and sharpen your skills, as you actively learn from the AI and adapt to new ways of thinking and problem-solving. It also helps you form a working co-intelligence with the AI.

Principle 3: Treat AI like a person (but tell it what kind of person it is).

..... To make the most of this relationship, you must establish a clear and specific AI persona, defining who the AI is and what problems it should tackle. Remember that LLMs work by predicting the next word, or part of a word, that would come after your prompt. Then they continue to add language from there,

again predicting which word will come next.

So the default output of many of these models can sound very generic, since they tend to follow similar patterns common in the written documents the AI was trained on. By breaking the pattern, you can get much more useful and interesting outputs. The easiest way to do that is to provide context and constraints. It can help to tell the system “who” it is, because that gives it a perspective. Telling it to act as a teacher of MBA students will result in a different output than if you ask it to act as a circus clown.

Principle 4: Assume this is the worst AI you will ever use.

As AI becomes increasingly capable of performing tasks once thought to be exclusively human, we’ll need to grapple with the awe and excitement of living with increasingly powerful alien co-intelligences—and the anxiety and loss they’ll also cause. Many things that once seemed exclusively human will be able to be done by AI. So, by embracing this principle, you can view AI’s limitations as transient, and remaining open to new developments will help you adapt to change, embrace new technologies, and remain competitive in a fast-paced business landscape driven by exponential advances in AI”

About the Author

Ethan Mollick is the Ralph J. Roberts Distinguished Faculty Scholar, Rowan Fellow, and Associate Professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, where he studies the effects of artificial intelligence on work, entrepreneurship, and education. His academic research has been published in leading journals, and his work on AI is widely applied, leading him to be named one of TIME Magazine’s Most Influential People in Artificial Intelligence.

“Our intelligence is what makes us human, and AI is an extension of that quality.”

— Yann LeCun, Professor, New York University

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Inventions that Impacted Sales in 10 Bullets

1440 – Johannes Gutenberg invents the Printing Press

1837 – Samuel Morse develops Morse Code paving the way for introduction of electrical telegraph

1843 – Facsimile or Fax patented by Scottish inventor Alexander Bain

1876 – Alexander Graham Bell revolutionises voice communication with the invention of telephone

1971 – Ray Tomlinson creates system for sending messages through computers via ARPANET

1973 – Martin Cooper of Motorola does a demo of the first handheld cell phone

1981 – Osborne, precursor to current day laptops comes to the market

1989 – World wide web arrives

1996 – Google introduces a search engine

2018 – OpenAI announces release of GPT 1 which was followed by other launches in 2022



We could also have a completely different list depending on what one regards as impactful in the history of sales and selling

“Information technology will not be considered a tool or even a way to leverage human knowledge. It will become an expected utility, much like electricity, noticeable only in the rare event it is withdrawn”

— Charles B Wang



"The new computer is great, but we can't get rid of the old one. It knows too much."

Paul Kales

Courtesy: Harvard Business Review - Cartoon by Paul Kales



"Good. Now we'll take things up a notch and have you check your work e-mails..."

Courtesy: Harvard Business Review - Cartoon by Paula Pratt

"Lo! Men have become tools of their tools"

— Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862)