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LIGHTS - Leadership

AI leadership beyond automation?

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence is increasingly shaping organizational life, yet the current framing of AI research focuses on its potential for automation and augmentation. This paper challenges that view by examining AI as a sociotechnical condition that reorganizes judgment, autonomy, and collective learning. Drawing on Bernard Stiegler, it explores the ambivalent effects of delegating cognitive and relational functions to technical systems. The central question is what role AI Leaders should play when AI reshapes the conditions under which leadership is exercised in organizations. The paper argues that AI leadership is not only about optimizing automation or augmentation, but about protecting the conditions under which human judgment, autonomy, and collective learning can still be exercised. Leaders must decide what can be delegated to AI and what should remain open to human interpretation by way of de-automatization. This reframing highlights the risk that excessive reliance on AI may weaken autonomy, and organizational intelligence. The paper contributes a new perspective on AI governance as a judgmental orientation toward what should, and should not, be handed over to machines.

Keywords: AI Leadership, Bernard Stiegler, de-automatization, exosomatization, stupidification.

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AI leadership beyond automation?

Much of the contemporary debate on AI is organized around the promise that AI can both automate and augment managerial work. On the one hand, AI is presented as capable of taking over tasks previously performed by humans; on the other, it is expected to complement human judgment by enabling new forms of human-machine collaboration (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). The appeal of AI for organizations thus lies in this dual promise: AI may increase efficiency by automating routine or codifiable activities while enhancing decision-making, coordination, and organizational learning through augmentation. However, this framing risks obscuring a deeper transformation. If skills can increasingly be automated through AI, then the central question is not only how such automation can be implemented, but whether it is desirable, under what conditions, and with what consequences for decision-makers. This paper therefore begins from the observation that the dominant discourse on AI promises continuity and enhancement, while potentially obscuring the extent to which AI may alter work and organizations more fundamentally. It is at this point that leadership becomes central: not because AI merely changes what leaders do, but because leaders are increasingly responsible for shaping the organizational reality. Indeed, those who argue that AI is transforming leadership (Van Quaquebeke & Gerpott, 2023) may not be entirely wrong. However, this transformation does not concern leadership alone. We should then ask ourselves, how should we envision leadership to preserve the organization's capacity to foster human judgment, collective intelligence, and meaningful work in the face of increasing automation?

To answer this question, we proceed in four steps: first, we summarize the current debate around AI, showing how it is largely structured by an enhancement paradigm; second, we mobilize a Stieglerian approach to contrast this framing by examining AI as a pharmakon. Third, we develop our contribution by introducing the notion of 'de-automatization', understood as the preservation of organizational spaces in which judgment, learning, and responsibility can still be exercised. Finally, we show why this matters for firms by arguing that leaders have a key role in translating AI's technical possibilities into organizational arrangements that protect human and collective intelligence.

AI and the limits of the enhancement paradigm

According to current literature, AI-supported skills development appears as both natural and desirable even as it renders roles redundant. This is the promise of Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence or HCAI. HCAI focuses on amplifying, augmenting, and enhancing human performance in ways that make systems reliable, safe, and trustworthy. Ultimately, these systems are meant to support human self-efficacy, encourage creativity, and clarify responsibility.

Scholars and policymakers interested in these notions have moved beyond thinking about whether AI will be implemented or not; they are now concerned with how this implementation is taking place. However, these claims support a dominant view of AI in organizations: that AI implementation is beneficial, manageable, and consistent with existing models of work. For business leaders, this makes AI adoption appear as a relatively routine strategic decision.

However, this view of human-machine interaction offers only a partial account, since it rests on questionable assumptions, namely: (1) that human-AI hybridization is desirable and unproblematic; (2) that humans should guide AI development; (3) that AI represents the

next step in a continuous path of human progress; (4) and that increasing human control over AI will reduce harmful bias (Ryan, 2025). Whilst we will not delve deeper into critiquing these assumptions in this paper, scholars have come to question our reliance on HCAI as a design choice. For them, this framework prevents a broader and more critical understanding of AI's impact due to its optimistic and reductive assumptions and its dependence on principles that remain vague and normatively unconvincing (Khan & al., 2023).

AI, exosomatization, and the loss of organizational knowledge

To engage further in this discussion, we would like to draw on the philosopher Bernard Stiegler (1952-2020), an author with a growing reputation in management research. Stiegler is useful here because he does not treat technology as either inherently beneficial or inherently harmful. For him, *technics* — that is, the tools, systems, and devices through which humans organize and extend their activity — is a *pharmakon*[1]: both remedy and poison. In the same way a prescription drug can have both positive and negative effects, a technical system can support knowledge creation and coordination, but it can also weaken or undermine them. The question, then, is not whether AI is simply good or bad, but how it is introduced into organizational life and how it reshapes its human component.

It is worth adding that, according to Stiegler, our relationship with technology is not insignificant, since we generally outsource part of what we do to it – and, in a sense, a fundamental part of who we are. Human beings have always outsourced certain functions – such as memory, calculation and perception – to technical tools (e.g. smartphones, cars, etc.). Yet, this process is never neutral. As more functions are externalized, machines do not merely assist human beings but begin to take over capacities that were once cultivated and exercised directly: calculators and spreadsheets transform practices of mental calculation; search engines and note-taking applications reorganize memory; autocomplete and generative writing tools reshape expression; and automated customer-service scripts or chatbots replace forms of situated tacit and relational judgment. This process is what Stiegler calls *exosomatization*.

However, the benefits of exosomatization must be weighed against an opposing tendency: what he calls the "systemic stupidity of organizations" (Stiegler, 2015). Technology may increase speed, efficiency, and coordination in organizations, but it can do so at the cost of reducing the knowledge and judgement exercised by the people within them, making the organization "functionally stupid" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Deslandes, 2026). In this sense, the issue is not only technical dependence but also a form of dispossession as knowledge is transferred to machines. This process of *stupidification* results from the erosion of knowledge and intelligence that can occur when technical systems take over functions that individuals and groups once had to exercise for themselves. This is a major issue in the digital economy that AI amplifies, which is why the "elites" — to use his own terms — must pay attention to it.

To fully understand the impact this may have, it is important to consider the broader socio-historical context and to reflect on our relationship to evolving technology. According to Stielger, machines took away our *savoir-faire* while computational capitalism took away our *savoir-vivre*. With AI, we are at risk of losing all these forms of knowledge (including theoretical ones). These include the ability to think, pay attention, judge, deliberate, and transmit knowledge. Decision-makers should be acutely aware that losing these forms of

[1] https://arsindustrialis.org/vocabulaire-pharmakon-pharmacologie

knowledge means losing our ability to 'think for ourselves' and maintain our autonomy, thus touching at the core of how we relate to ourselves, others, and to our work.

De-automatization: fighting organizational stupidity by disrupting automatisms

Until now we have striven to depict a more contrasted picture of AI than the one usually presented by the most prevalent observers. On the one hand, AI is presented as a technology capable of enhancing mastery, autonomy, and relatedness all at once. On the other hand, from a Stieglerian perspective, it may also participate in a process of stupidification by weakening the very capacities through which individuals and organizations form knowledge, sustain attention, and relate meaningfully to one another. This indicates a need for a different framing of leadership when considering AI as a pharmakon. The task of leaders is not simply to decide when and how to implement AI. They must also decide when not to implement AI, where its use should be limited, and which forms of human activity should remain irreducible to technical delegation. While this observation may not seem new, it highlights yet another risk to autonomy brought about by this technology – not just about the organization of work, but more specifically the purpose we assign to the work itself (Deslandes, 2026).

Research on algorithmic organizing shows that symbolic conformity to algorithmic systems can unintentionally culminate in a deeper transformation of organizational knowledge. This happens when machine outputs gain legitimacy and displace prior expert repertoires while simultaneously reducing unique human knowledge as actors converge toward similar responses (Fügener & al., 2021). In Stiegler's vocabulary, this is not merely a change in tools but a change in the conditions under which intelligence is formed and exercised, hence a risk of stupidification. Abdel-Karim & al. (2023) demonstrate however that AI systems can, under certain conditions, induce reflection by prompting professionals to revisit assumptions and reconsider established protocols. The central issue is therefore whether AI is arranged to interrupt routine and foster thought, or whether it narrows thought by organizing conformity. A Stieglerian account therefore shifts the question from merely keeping humans "in the loop" to preserving spaces in which they can still hesitate, contest, interpret, and assume responsibility – spaces that can potentially be "outside the loop".

To be clear, de-automatization does not mean rejecting technical systems outright. It means deliberately preserving or reopening spaces in which workers and managers must still interpret, decide, and take responsibility, rather than merely execute machine-generated outputs. With this in mind, the issue for organizations becomes not only one of technical dependence or competitiveness. It is also one of preserving firm-specific routines, relational architectures, managerial judgment, and the accumulated know-how through which people learn to coordinate and adapt (Teece, 1997). AI may strengthen these processes when it is properly governed, but it may also weaken them if it becomes the default substitute for inquiry and apprenticeship[2]. Firms should therefore design AI governance around the protection and renewal of these organizational processes. This may involve protected mentoring and apprenticeship routines, collective interpretation of AI outputs, or decision protocols requiring actors to articulate their own reasoning rather than simply reproduce machine-generated answers. Such mechanisms are not obstacles to technological adoption. They are conditions for ensuring that AI complements rather than

[2] Edmondson, A. C., & Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2025). The Perils of Using AI to Replace Entry-Level Jobs. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2025/09/the-perils-of-using-ai-to-replace-entry-level-jobs

cannibalizes a firm's capability base. Without them, AI risks causing deskilling, dependency, and passive adaptation. With them, it can become a resource for expanding agency while preserving the processes through which organizational intelligence is sustained.

One risk for leaders is failing to see what is no longer being learned inside the organization (Hinds & von Krogh, 2024). The responsibility of leaders, then, cannot be limited to optimizing short-term performance. It must also include safeguarding the organization's future capacity to generate, transmit, and renew knowledge. In this regard Stiegler's warning is, in fact, very clear: if decision-makers relinquish their capacity for discernment, organizations may be more susceptible to systemic stupidity. Leaders must therefore protect and nurture those capabilities that AI cannot replace without transforming the meaning of work itself. This does not mean positioning leaders as opponents of AI. It means recognizing that leadership involves making visible, through decisions and organizational design, what the firm chooses to preserve (Table 1).

In this context, leaders must assume a translational role. It is leadership which is responsible for translating technical affordances into organizational arrangements that benefit both the firm and its members. In the age of AI, this constitutes the conditions of possibility for any leadership that claims to be genuinely humane (or human). Furthermore, a workplace that enables employees to use their minds, cultivate practical reason, participate in meaningful activity, and sustain relations of mutual recognition is not merely more humane, it is also more resilient, innovative, and capable of renewal. Leaders may therefore not focus on technical proficiency alone but cultivate a disposition of attention, interpretation, and imagination.

Table 1
Leadership and De-automatization

Logic	Assumptions	Dynamics	For Organizations	Leadership Role
Automation / augmentation	AI is understood as a tool for taking over tasks, improving performance, and enhancing decision-making. Human–AI collaboration is assumed to be broadly beneficial, manageable, and continuous with existing work models.	Skills, judgment, and knowledge are increasingly delegated to technical systems. Work is reorganized around efficiency, prediction, optimization, and the validation of machine-generated outputs.	The organization may become faster and more efficient while weakening the practices through which people learn, judge, deliberate, and assume responsibility. Over time, this can produce de-skilling, dependency, conformity, and organizational stupidification.	Leaders focus on implementing AI effectively: identifying use cases, improving productivity, managing adoption, and keeping humans "in the loop."
De-automatization	AI is understood as a *pharmakon*: both a remedy and a poison. Its value depends on whether it strengthens or weakens the conditions through which human and collective intelligence are formed.	Organizations deliberately preserve spaces in which people still interpret, hesitate, contest, learn, and take responsibility. AI supports work without replacing the practices through which capabilities are cultivated.	De-automatization helps organizations preserve and renew the practices through which people learn, judge, deliberate, and assume responsibility. Rather than producing dependency or conformity, it sustains collective intelligence, meaningful engagement, and the capability base on which resilience, innovation, and renewal depend.	Leaders decide not only how AI should be implemented, but where it should be limited. They design organizational arrangements that protect judgment, apprenticeship, deliberation, responsibility, and meaningful engagement.

Conclusion: what is enlightened AI leadership?

As AI increasingly permeates the workplace, the likelihood is high that we will be deprived of our most fundamental knowledge. Every delegation to AI should raise questions: what form of learning, judgment, or responsibility is being displaced, and what must be created in return? If AI summarizes meetings, who still learns to listen? If AI drafts strategic options, who still learns to frame a problem? If AI recommends decisions, who remains accountable for interpreting their consequences?

As skills shift toward machines, protecting organizational capabilities becomes all the more decisive. It is important not to forget that these capabilities are rooted in the capacities of the individuals who compose the organization. For leaders this means prudence, subtlety, the courage to act, the ability to unlearn, or even the power to say no. But since we know at least that these qualities can never be fully automated, cultivating them becomes increasingly important and urgent (Deslandes, 2026). Enlightened leadership then uses these capabilities to create organizational arrangements in which AI supports work without replacing the practices through which people learn, judge, deliberate, and assume responsibility.

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