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Intelligence Beyond the *Playbook*

A society that confuses obedience with intelligence should not be surprised when its ideal worker turns out to be a machine.



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The value of judgement

We have measured people by their ability to adapt to a system: learn its rules, repeat its methods, produce its approved answers. The child who gives the expected answer becomes the employee who follows the established process. Progress is rewarded with qualifications, titles and authority. Over time, success within the system comes to look like proof of intelligence itself.

Standard answers are easy to mark. Standard procedures are easy to supervise. Predictable people are easy to organise. The error begins when we mistake what is convenient to measure for the full extent of what a human being can contribute.

AI is exposing that error

If a person's contribution consists chiefly of applying a known method to a familiar class of problems, the method can increasingly be reproduced without that person. Agentic AI extends this capability across connected tasks and entire digital workflows. A prestigious title cannot make a reproducible contribution irreplaceable.

Modern AI draws its capabilities from patterns learned through training, shaped by the data it encounters and the objectives it is taught to pursue. Those patterns can support genuine discovery; they are not a prison. But the technology exposes an uncomfortable weakness in our inherited conception of intelligence: proficiency in reproducing accepted answers is no longer a secure claim to human distinction.

The more completely a person's contribution can be captured by the playbook, the less persuasive the claim that the contribution is irreplaceable. The decisive question is no longer simply who has mastered the established method. It is who can recognise the assumption the method conceals, the possibility it excludes, or the point at which it should be abandoned.

Human beings also learn from the past. The distinction lies in the authority we allow the past to exercise. Experience can furnish the mind with tools, or imprison it within precedents. What has worked before deserves consideration. It does not deserve unquestioning obedience.

> *The future advantage is not freedom from learning. It is freedom from unquestioned conformity to what has been learned.*

Consider what a playbook actually is

A playbook preserves answers that worked under certain conditions. Its usefulness depends on whether those conditions still hold. When they change, perfect obedience can become the perfect repetition of a mistake. Intelligence includes the ability to notice that the method has outlived the problem it was designed to solve.

Someone must recognise the faulty premise, see the possibility the procedure excludes and decide what the work should serve. An organisation can become extraordinarily efficient at pursuing an objective that no longer deserves to be pursued. *Speed cannot correct a direction nobody has thought to question.*

As AI supplies more answers and more ideas, judgement about what deserves attention becomes more consequential. The value lies in choosing what matters, testing it against lived circumstances and taking responsibility for the result.

> *We have spent too long rewarding people for internalising the system. As machines become increasingly capable of performing within it, we must recognise the value of minds that can question its premises.*

This is where neurodivergent minds command serious attention

ADHD, autism, dyslexia and other forms of neurodivergence can bring strengths that conventional systems struggle to recognise. For people whose strengths include unusual associations, deep absorption, sensitivity to patterns or a refusal to accept an unexplained assumption, the apparent difficulty of fitting the system can become the capacity to see beyond it.

For some neurodivergent thinkers, the distinctive contribution is not greater speed along the accepted route, but a different relationship with the route itself. Their thinking may connect ideas that convention keeps apart, resist the example offered as a model, or question a premise others have already accepted as part of the problem.

Cognitive science gives parts of this process a more precise vocabulary: divergent thinking, which opens alternative possibilities, and conceptual expansion, which extends an idea beyond its familiar boundaries. These capacities are neither universal among neurodivergent people nor exclusive to them. Their significance lies in what they make possible.

Thought can move as a constellation rather than a procession. A detail from one discipline illuminates a problem in another. An apparent distraction becomes a connection. A question changes the destination before anyone has finished calculating the route. What an institution dismisses as departure from the method may be the discovery that the method was unnecessarily narrow.

The value is not eccentricity for its own sake. It is the capacity to turn an unfamiliar perspective into a useful possibility - and to recognise that an established answer is not the same thing as an exhausted question.

> *That is the artistic dimension of intelligence: perceiving possibilities before they become procedures. The artist can see a different use, a different purpose, a different world within the materials before them. What begins as an unfamiliar way of seeing can become the next useful way of working.*

Give such a mind AI, and its difference acquires a powerful means of expression. The technology can help organise, develop and test an idea, reducing the distance between imagination and a finished result.

Consider the skilled tradesperson

We have often treated practical work as though it required less intelligence because its results can be touched. Yet physical work imposes a discipline that abstract work can sometimes evade: reality must accept the answer.

A perfect explanation does not stop a leaking pipe. An agent can identify components, calculate quantities, order parts and organise a repair. Someone must still get beneath the sink, confront the corroded fitting, discover what the drawing omitted and make the connection hold.

That person must interpret what is actually there. The access may be wrong, the material damaged, the previous installation improvised. Experience becomes judgement, and judgement becomes a movement of the hand. The work requires continual adjustment between what was expected and what is found.

Where reality tests the answer

Knowledge is tested by consequence. The water either stays inside the pipe or it does not. No credential, confident sentence or elegant theory can negotiate with that fact.

Robotics will advance, and trades will change with it. But working reliably among the irregularities of existing homes and buildings demands a mastery of physical conditions that software alone does not supply. Automating a digital procedure and delivering a dependable repair in an unpredictable space are different achievements.

The neurodivergent thinker can question what should exist; the skilled tradesperson can discover what making it exist will require. Both expose the limits of confusing a plan with understanding. Those capacities can belong to the same person.

> *My conviction is that the AI economy will increasingly favour neurodivergent thinkers who can challenge inherited assumptions and turn unfamiliar connections into useful ideas, alongside tradespeople who deliver reliable results in unpredictable conditions.* Their opportunity lies in contributions that cannot be adequately described as repeating an accepted answer: reconsidering what the problem is, imagining a different possibility, and making the result work in reality.

Institutions must overturn the obsolete assumptions that govern what they recognise as excellence. A neurodivergent mind may reveal its value through a connection, a question or an approach that conventional assessments fail to anticipate.

Teach a method, then alter the conditions and ask when it stops working. Recruitment should ask candidates to improve a brief, defend what they would keep and change, and explain how they would test the result. Treat vocational training as a serious intellectual ambition.

Institutions that claim to value independent thought must be prepared to recognise excellence in an answer they did not prescribe.

The future will reward those who can imagine beyond the playbook and those who can make that imagination stand up in the world.

We must prepare people for that future instead of continuing to reward them for resembling the machines that will compete with them.



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