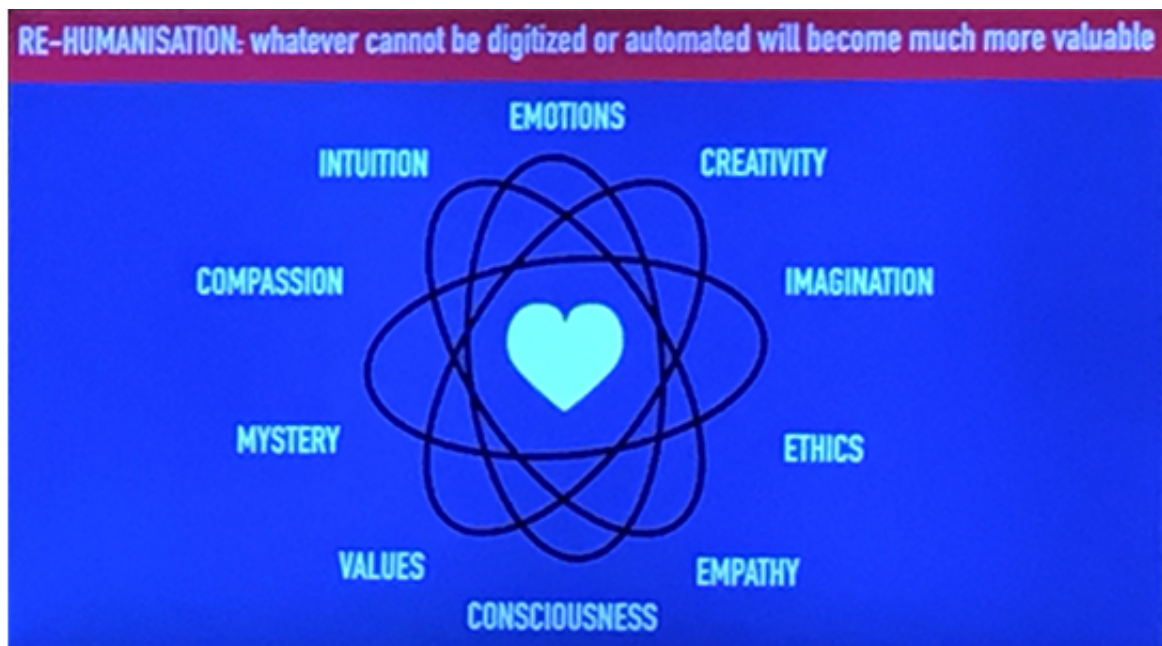


Digital megashifts could give supply chain managers "superhuman" productivity, futurist says

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Despite potential of tech to streamline business tasks, human traits like compassion can never be replicated, Leonhard tells MHI show.

By [Ben Ames](#)

A flock of digital trends on the horizon are on track to give supply chain managers "superhuman" powers of productivity within just five years, but despite that potential, there will always be certain human traits—like trust and compassion—that should never be automated, a Swiss futurist told the crowd at the MHI conference in Orlando on Monday.

"We're looking at a future that is quite amazing but also potentially quite horrifying. Right now, we're at about 90 percent amazing," [Futurist Gerd Leonhard](#) said at the trade show. In a session about identifying the

"megashifts" affecting the industry, he cited trends including: personalization, virtualization, disintermediation, cognification, digitization, robotization, datafication, augmentation, and automation.

Taken together, those movements have the potential to create exponential growth by combining with each other and creating entirely new, holistic capabilities, Leonhard said at MHI's 2018 Executive Summit and Annual Conference. For example, while algorithms can now provide intelligent assistance, machines will soon reach new plateaus such as augmenting human performance, and then existing as completely autonomous systems, [said Leonhard, who is futurist & CEO at The Futures Agency.](#)

As the technology of 2018 hatches into soaring new abilities, it will drive new levels of business performance that are already beginning to affect society, he said.

"Science fiction has become science fact," said Leonhard, in reference to movies like [Minority Report](#), [Ex Machina](#), and [Blade Runner](#) that foresaw futures full of artificial intelligence (AI) and self-driving cars. "In the next five years, you will do all your supply chain tasks with these technologies; it will be like being superhuman."

As an [example of the potential of AI to improve logistics business processes](#), Leonhard cited IBM Corp.'s "[Watson](#)" AI platform, which the company says can provide improved visibility, transparency, and insight for supply chain data and processes.

However, even as that technology reaches new heights, planners are contemplating whether some human tendencies should remain beyond the reach of computers. Human activities like trust, customer satisfaction, compassion, and understanding will forever be beyond the reach of machines, Leonhard said.

Data is great, but "dataism" is not, Leonhard said, making reference to some peoples' tendency to disbelieve the stark facts in front of them by citing allegedly contradictory data. For example, it would be absurd to

stand outside a crowded restaurant but decline to go inside because [the AI-powered travel website TripAdvisor](#) says it's not popular, he said.

Those conflicts can arise because of the break between the real and digital worlds. "Most AI today is as dumb as a toaster outside its domain," Leonhard said. "If you torture data long enough, it will confess to anything."

When it comes to replicating some tasks, computers will never be up to the job, he said. "Machine smartness is not the same as human intelligence," said Leonhard. "Even if machines can understand compassion—by recognizing it through facial recognition software, for example—they cannot *be* compassionate."

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Ben Ames has spent 20 years as a journalist since starting out as a daily newspaper reporter in Pennsylvania in 1995. From 1999 forward, he has focused on business and technology reporting for a number of trade journals, beginning when he joined *Design News* and *Modern Materials Handling* magazines. Ames is author of the trail guide "Hiking Massachusetts" and is a graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism.

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