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Book Review: Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI

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Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-Intelligence: Living and working with AI*. Portfolio. 256 pp. 059371671X

Descriptive Summary

Ethan Mollick is an associate professor of management at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, and is a popular author and speaker. His Substack, *One Useful Thing*, has about 175,000 subscribers, and he uses that platform to muse on artificial intelligence in education and business. His latest book, *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI*, summarizes many of the philosophies and considerations Mollick espouses for generative AI in workplace environments.

As a business professor, Mollick naturally addresses generative AI from a business professor's viewpoint. He is most concerned with how the workforce and education will incorporate and benefit from generative AI, and how society as a whole will be changed by it. He also focuses on the societal prospects of AI, namely what to expect in the future. This is important for organizations wishing to understand the potential impacts of AI, whether through the elimination of old jobs, the creation of new ones, and a sea change in the way information is created, transmitted and consumed.

Mollick first addresses how to think about AI. His ultimate goal is to help readers understand that generative AI is not a replacement for creators, but rather a co-creator. It is an intriguing paradigm and one that serves as a decent model for the sometimes confusing array of information overload surrounding the field.

Early in the book he presents four principles for working with generative AI. First, he suggests using it in almost everything within daily deskwork. It is a wonderful tool for many

tasks. AI has what Mollick calls a "jagged frontier" of improvement. Some things it does extremely well, better than people. In other things, it lags behind. But, it is always improving. Each new generation performs better in different ways. We never know which model has improved in what ways until we explore them, but the jagged frontier always marches forward. He suggests readers push AI products to their limits, and keep track of improvements for their own knowledge and use.

Mollick also encourages the concept of "being the human in the loop." By this, he means that AI is best suited for assisting people rather than doing things completely on its own. AI still displays sometimes unexpected weaknesses, but it is improving to the point where it can easily pass the Turing test. But Mollick discourages thinking of it as a true human. Thus, when using AI, we should be the ones accountable for what is produced under our own names. We were assisted in creating our products, but not by someone who is real.

On the other hand, he encourages us to treat AI like a person, although we get to tell it what kind of person it is. Here he explores the pitfalls and benefits of anthropomorphism. The typical AI interface is designed to respond to users as if the program indeed is another person. Some people develop emotions through these interactions, for better or worse. It seems to work the other way, too. Some large language models have been documented to produce better results when prompted with emotional appeals, such as "This is important to my career." Treating generative AI like a person, while keeping firmly in mind it is not a real one, thus becomes an important strategy to effectively using it.

Mollick tells readers to presume the AI they are currently interacting with will be the worst one they will ever use. He points out improvements in the field are so rapid, with new models debuting on a regular basis, that what you are using now will be far inferior to what you will find in the future. He expands this idea on a regular basis in his online writings, showing examples of output over several generations following the same prompt. The improvements are truly rapid and notable.

The remainder of the book focuses on how to think about AI, and includes chapters on considering it as a person, a creative, a coworker, a tutor and a coach. He concludes with a look at the future. AI, Mollick says, is a "weird alien mind" that is not sentient, "but can fake it remarkably well."

For now, at least, humans are far from obsolete. Mollick sums up his book stating that rather than replacing us, AI is a co-intelligence, one that is "living" and working side by side with us. Thus, the title of his book.

Critical Review

Fully grasping the capabilities and ramifications of generative AI within education and the workforce is something that remains lagging in the overall populace as well as with educators. Mollick's book offers a cogent framework for understanding and thinking about AI, its possible impacts, and where to go from here. For readers seeking the latest research in this fast-moving field, the book cites several relevant studies through 2023.

Overall Impression

For academics and professionals struggling to get a grasp on AI, Mollick's book is probably the best available one out there at the moment. I would recommend it to anyone trying to understand generative artificial intelligence, how it works, why it does things in the way it does, and what to prepare for in the future.

Author's Bio

John Rice is the instructional technologist for Blinn College District. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Learning Technologies from University of North Texas, a Masters in Educational Administration from Texas A&M, and has 30 years experience as an educator, technology coordinator and consultant for various educational entities throughout Texas.