



AI AND THE END OF AWFUL

PETER HINSSEN
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WHY ONLY THE BRILLIANT CAN THRIVE IN A SEA OF MEDIOCRITY

DEAR READER,

In the 1,5 years since ChatGPT surfaced, Generative AI has been deeply transforming how we work, learn and how we connect with customers. This is just the beginning, and as with many paradigm shifts, there is an incredible amount of potential for productivity, growth and augmentation. On the other hand, we are facing quite a few challenges, too, as the old flows into the new.

In our e-book, we want to examine how AI tools like ChatGPT, Claude and Microsoft Co-Pilot are reshaping professional output and customer interactions.

As AI eliminates the 'awful' aspects of work and customer experience, we also face an unprecedented rise of mediocrity. How will individuals cope with that? How will organizations? How will you?

[That's what we want to help answer here.](#)

Enjoy the e-book!

Cheers,

Peter & Steven



PART 1

THE END OF AWFUL

BY PETER HINSSEN

INNOVATION STRATEGY AND TECH EXPERT

AUTHOR AND KEYNOTE SPEAKER



THE GOOD THE BAD THE UGLY

From a young age, educational systems worldwide familiarize us with the notion of grades and evaluation. Our academic life involves constant assessments, whether we are writing essays, creating art, composing papers, or crafting poems. Each piece of work is scrutinized, evaluated, and eventually ranked.

And we can't offer everyone an A+, all the time.

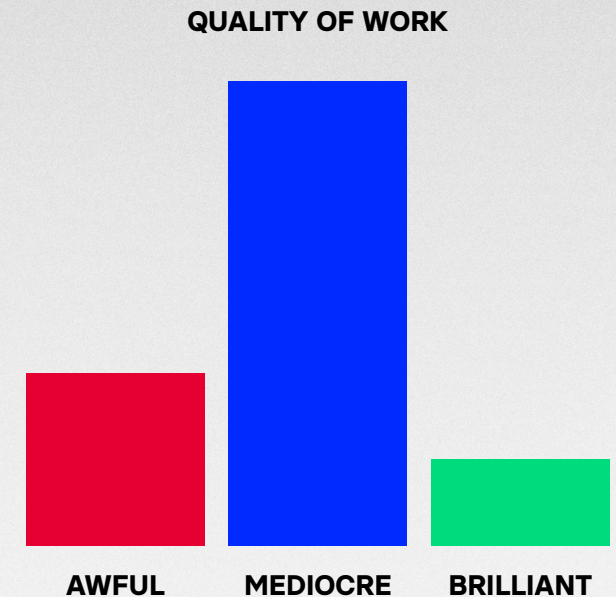
The fundamental idea of education revolves around differentiation. Some students struggle and fail, while others excel, gaining entry to prestigious academic institutions. And the majority will just get labelled 'mediocre' and become bunched up in the big middle bulge of a distribution curve.

This pattern extends well beyond academia. Blue Collar workers, too, are familiar with the constant monitoring and measurement fetish that has been the hallmark of business since the industrial revolution. Frederick Taylor wrote the "Principles of Scientific Management", which became the bible of worker assessment and performance-linked wages.

But White-Collar workers produce output as well. We write reports, send emails, create PowerPoint presentations, produce magnificent Excel sheets and communicate over Slack and messaging platforms. What we produce there, also gets to fit in this distribution curve that slides from bad to great.

Yes, we might like to think that all our work is 'pretty, pretty good', but reality often falls short. While we occasionally deliver exceptional emails or presentations, and sometimes contribute a pretty sharp and snarky comment on an online forum, our output is usually average at best. At times, it's even downright poor. So, we see a distribution in the quality of work.

If you were to sort all your intellectual efforts into three categories: Brilliant, Mediocre, and Awful, how that would look like? My guess is something of which 19th century German "Prince of Mathematicians" and inventor of the bell curve, Carl Friedrich Gauss might have been quite proud (were it not for the slight imbalance at both ends):



GUARDIAN ANGELS AT WORK

But since ChatGPT took the world by storm in 2023, everything has changed. And this is probably just the very beginning of that wave.

AI is starting to become our everyday companion. Microsoft picked a brilliant name for its embedded AI offering: Co-Pilot. (Mind you, Microsoft has not always had the reputation of brilliance when it comes to naming a product. Remember the strange 'Windows XP' and the bizarre 'Zune music player'? Or the hilariously pedestrian 'Microsoft Bob'? Anyway, we're digressing.)

But Co-Pilot sums it up beautifully: you now have AI minion available that guides you every step of the way. It's a sounding board to help you generate ideas.

It's a co-writer helping you formulate your thoughts. It's a guardian angel that tells you that maybe you should re-phrase that email before you send it out, or that you should change the tone of voice in the message you want to post.

Thanks to Microsoft you can now have a true partner, a faithful intelligent companion. While you may remain in the driving seat, your friendly and cautious co-pilot adviser keeps you safe and relevant.

VIDEO KILLED THE RADIO STAR

AI has already transformed the academic landscape, challenging traditional methods like writing papers.

I read an op-ed piece recently where two professors of philosophy publicly declared that 'Generative AI had murdered the concept of a Master's Thesis'.

And that every attempt to perform CPR was useless. We clearly cannot put ChatGPT back into Pandora's Box. And indeed, every student is now using the power of Generative AI to produce content, write papers, generate reports and develop dissertations.



But this effect is also branching out into the business world faster than any other existing technology. With AI's capabilities expanding rapidly, it is reshaping the nature of professional output. Every email, presentation, report, and document will most likely be affected by the fact that the people who produce it have an incredible co-pilot at their side, one that seems to be getting better and smarter every day.

But what will that do to the quality distribution of work? How much awful, mediocre and brilliant will we get now?

THE END OF AWFUL

This evolution in technology is likely to standardize the quality of work, leading to a proliferation of mediocrity.

I'm already seeing it in my inbox. I receive an increasing number of emails which are clearly generated by AI. Each of them clearly tries to trigger something, grab my attention or sell me something. All are desperate to find some connection with me as a consumer, and a potential buyer. And they are getting on my nerves.

Granted, some are cleverly generated. They use information they have found online about me, my work and my interests. And they leverage it to craft something that craves to stand out in my inbox. Something that will catch my eye, and not be deleted immediately.

But the reality is that most of this stuff is horribly mediocre. And it has the complete opposite effect on me as a consumer, having developed an almost allergic reaction to it. I find this content as irritating as it is uninspired, much like the often-criticized approach of American sales tactics to European consumers.

I don't react well to mediocre.

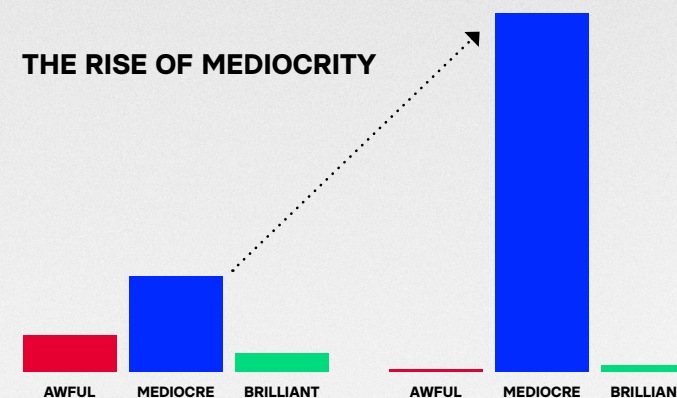
Chances are, though, that the increased use of GenAI will trigger an almost exponential rise in mediocre narratives and content. On the other hand, 'Awful' probably will cease to exist.

And that might be a good thing. Let's face it, that moment seems to be creeping closer already: when you hit 'send' on a particularly poorly written email, your faithful AI co-pilot will gently suggest reconsidering it, asking "Do you REALLY want to send this out like that?". Before we send out a truly dreadful email, our AI companion will correct it for us. Before we upload that report, print out the document, or finalize the PowerPoint, all the terrible, horrible,

awful mistakes will have been automatically adjusted, mended, and cleaned up by the AI. Like magic.

I like to call this phase "The end of Awful". As John Cleese might put it "This parrot Awful is no more! It has ceased to be! It's expired and gone to meet its maker! ... It's rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible." You get the gist, I'm sure. 'Awful' is a term we will only remember from the 'B.C' era: Before ChatGPT.

So, the quality distribution of work, content and other output in organizations will fundamentally be altered by AI. Mediocre will explode. Awful will disappear.



AND WHAT ABOUT 'BRILLIANT'?

I also believe that Brilliant will keep existing. Humans will keep making unique observations, write hypercreative content and develop one-of-a-kind and incredibly original work.

But it might also become more difficult to trace this brilliance in a sea of mediocrity. True genius might become even more scarce in the world of AI generated content and very hard to find.

So that would be my advice to you: in a tsunami of mediocrity, identify where you can be brilliant. Don't settle for a job where you're just average, or worse, where a co-pilot helps you become mediocre instead of awful.

**Find out where you shine, and then keep polishing that.
Because you'll need it where we're going.**



PART 2

THE BEGINNING OF BRILLIANT CUSTOMER SERVICE

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CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE EXPERT

AUTHOR AND KEYNOTE SPEAKER



Just like Peter, I've been pretty obsessed lately about the impact of all things Generative AI on cx. And I've been thinking a lot about what this rise in mediocrity could mean for customer relations. On the one hand, there is a potential win: the end of awful customer service. But on the other, there is also a potential danger: a boost in average quality customer service.

DROWNING IN A SEA OF AVERAGE

Let me start with the NPS score to explain my theory. Let's say, if an NPS runs between 0 and 10, a score below 6 signifies that an essential part of your services is below par. In other words, it means that your company dropped the ball in a certain interaction with a customer. And in a lot of cases, a score between 0 and 6 is linked with impolite, unclear, slow or partial communication.

Just think of the construction industry, where projects often run into time and, worse, budget problems. The result is an unpopular sector with many, many frustrated clients. That's very unfortunate because many of the challenges of that industry could easily be solved with better communication.

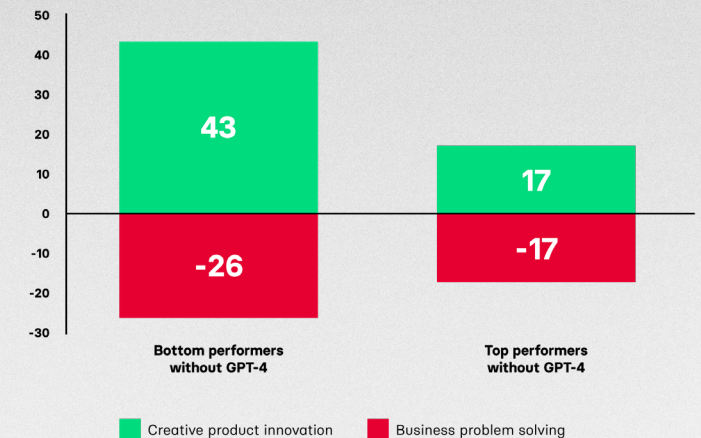
Or just think about how patients - who often find themselves in a fragile and emotional situation - get frustrated by the brief and distant communication of their doctors, who are just too busy to concern themselves with empathy and attention. Many frustrations and frictions in CX are related to communication in one way or another.

The great news is that AI agents and chatbots are becoming more capable by the day in this area. The result may very well be that really bad CX and NPS scores that fall between 0 and 6 could become a thing of the past. But not being awful does not necessarily make your customer relations good, let alone great. When was the last time you really wanted to invest money into something because it was "not bad"?

A study from the de Boston Consulting Group found that generative AI does work as a skill leveler: "the consultants who scored the worst when we assessed them at the start of the experiment had the biggest jump in their performance - 43% - when they got to use AI. The top consultants still got a boost, but less of one."

Gen AI's performance effect is strongest when baseline proficiency is lowest

Average change in performance with GPT-4 (%)



So it turns out that AI is really, really good at making awful better. But not at making mediocre great, or at making top performances even better.

STANDING OUT IN AN EVEN BIGGER CROWD

Don't get me wrong, getting rid of the worse parts of your customer experience is commendable and definitely worth investing in. But just make sure that your obsession with eliminating the bad - the 0-6 NPS scores - does not come to the detriment of excellence. If so, you'll just become a mediocre brand in a sea of other mediocre brands (who will also use GenAI to drive out the bad). The only thing that's more difficult than standing out in a crowd is standing out in an even bigger crowd.

The reason why customers give an NPS score of 9 or 10 to an experience is never (just) efficiency or the absence of friction. It is because customers felt really heard, seen or helped by an extraordinary human. It is

because someone went out of their way to personally help them. To this day, humans remain the true vector of excellence in customer service.

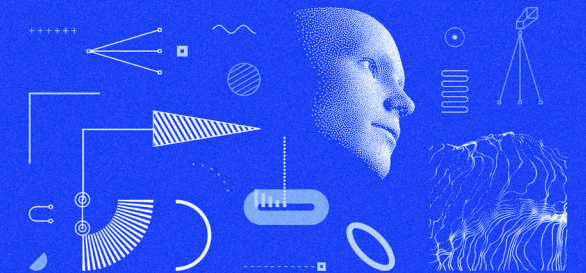
A perfect example is that of a story that actually first started out on a sour note: at a luxury hotel (it remained anonymous, but I got it from this McKinsey article), a customer ordered chocolate chip pancakes at breakfast but received plain pancakes instead. When the server realized his mistake, he apologized profusely and took care of the problem. But then, adding a sprinkle of human flair and kindness, he also brought a plate of macaroons designed in the colors of the customer's favorite sports team, which the customer had mentioned earlier in the meal. I'm pretty sure the hotel would have gotten a great NPS score after that, even if a slight mistake was involved at first.

The Big Question is: Will we ever give an NPS score of 10 to a machine? Maybe in the long run, but certainly not today. And probably not in the coming years.

I truly believe that if companies allow themselves to become too obsessed with only focusing on removing the 0 to 6, they will have to cope with the negative side effect of losing out on (near) perfect 9 or 10 scores. And of becoming invisible in a sea of mediocrity.

So yes, I too, like Peter, believe that there is a big chance that mediocrity will rise, and in my domain that will mean a lot more average quality customer service.

WILL WE EVER GIVE AN NPS SCORE OF 10 TO A MACHINE?



A STRATEGY OF HUMAN EXCELLENCE

Again, I think it's a great idea to invest in automatization to remove all the awful parts of your customer service. That's for instance what Klarna seems to have done with quite some success with its AI assistant powered by OpenAI. After just 1 month of usage, they released some pretty impressive numbers:

- **The AI assistant had 2.3 million conversations, two-thirds of Klarna's customer service chats**
- **It was doing the equivalent work of 700 full-time agents**
- **It was on par with human agents in regard to customer satisfaction score**
- **It was more accurate in errand resolution, leading to a 25% drop in repeat inquiries**

- **Customers resolved their errands in less than 2 mins - compared to 11 mins previously**
- **Klarna saw massive improvement in communication with local immigrant and expat communities across all our markets thanks to the AI language support in more than 35 languages.**

Klarna estimated that its AI assistant would drive a \$40 million USD in profit improvement in 2024, on top of saving consumers time, worry and money. Great stuff.

But I also believe that this is the best possible moment for Klarna, and every company that is heavily investing in automatization, to reposition their customer service strategy. They need to take a few steps back and think about human value and the best places to add it. Which skills will they (no longer) need? Which parts should be replaced by machines? Which skills should be augmented with AI? Which new hires they should do? These are the type of important questions that need to be answered now.

In the case of Klarna it would mean solving questions like "if our AI assistant does the work of 700 agents, do we fire these agents or reskill and reposition them in roles where their human talents will really make a difference". That would be a great question to ask. In fact, it's one that was already answered by IKEA a few years ago.

Even before the GenAI hype, IKEA had introduced an AI bot called 'Billie' to help answer everyday customer queries. Launched in 2021, it helped answer 47 percent of IKEA's customer queries. But rather than firing its 8,500 call center workers who were replaced by Billie, it decided to retrain them as interior design advisors and put them in positions where their human strengths would add value to customers.

Driving your NPS above 6 is the easy part, if you have access to the right software and bots. The hard part is getting to 9 and 10 and understanding where you need to put the humans to achieve excellence.

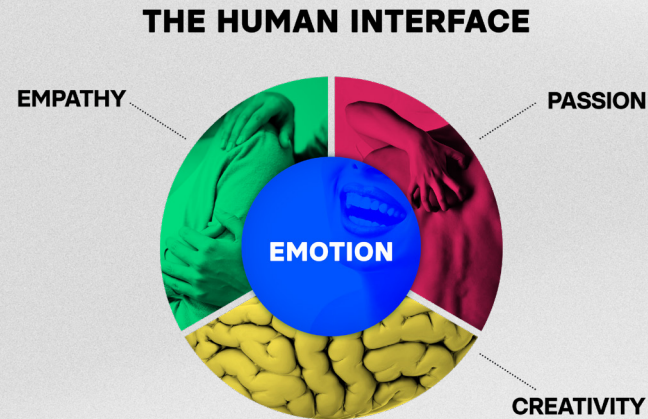
WHEN DIGITAL BECOMES HUMAN

Ten years ago, I wrote my third business book 'When Digital Becomes Human'. Back then I already discussed the combination of digital and human strengths. The concept is more than ever relevant in this age where companies are struggling with finding the right balance between their digital and human resources.

But there is one small part of that book that I would like to discuss with you.

In 'Chapter 10', where I wrote about human values, I claimed that, in the next 2 decades, computers would not be able to beat human skills on 3 levels:

1. Passion
2. Empathy
3. Creativity



Today, I'm in serious doubt about two of these three skills. Though I still believe that human passion has not yet been disrupted by machines (for now), we have seen quite some instances where machines beat us at empathy and creativity. Let me give you some examples.

Artificial empathy first: we have seen many examples of that, especially since the launch of OpenAI's GPT models. A 2023 study, for instance, compared physician responses with responses from ChatGPT. The AI responses were rated significantly higher on both quality and empathy. On average, ChatGPT's responses scored a 4 on quality and a 4.67 on empathy. In comparison, the physician responses scored a 3.33 on quality and 2.33 on empathy. In total, ChatGPT had 3.6 times more high-quality responses and 9.8 times more empathetic responses than physicians.

There was also a study which found that AI-generated messages can make recipients feel more "heard" compared to responses from untrained humans. The research demonstrated AI's superior ability to detect and respond to human emotions, potentially even providing better emotional support. But the really interesting part here is that the study also found that knowing that a message is from AI can make recipients again feel less heard. So humans are still pretty biased against AI-generated empathy, which is also

something that brands will need to take into consideration when it comes to automation.

There were also other really interesting (and dark) studies. One, about machine learning that was so good at reading emotions that it could predict with 80% to 90% accuracy whether someone will attempt suicide, as far as 2 years in advance. Another one that showed that interacting with an empathetic chatbot could help people with experiences of social exclusion feel better again.

Computers are getting excellent at creativity, too.

A recent study revealed that artificial intelligence, particularly ChatGPT4, performed better at a common creativity test known as the Alternate Uses Task (AUT). AI chatbots did surpass the average human's ability to generate ideas in the assessment. Interestingly, while they displayed consistently high performance, the AI did not outperform the most creative human participants.

And then we have of course numerous examples of the creative industry being disrupted by graphic generative AI like Dall-E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, video generators like Sora, song generators like Suno and Udio etc. The relationship between the tech providers of creative AI and artists and their labels is a strained one, with the latter being concerned about copyright and IP and of course becoming irrelevant or grossly underpaid (because the bots are pushing the prices down). But anyone who has ever used one of these systems, cannot help but be impressed by their creativity.

That's why Boris Eldagsen won the World Photography Organization's Sony World Photography Awards for a piece titled The Electrician (even though he did decline the award).

And why game designer Jason Allen won first place in the emerging artist division's "digital arts/digitally-manipulated photography" category at the Colorado State Fair Fine Arts Competition with his



Midjourney image "Théâtre D'opéra Spatial" (French for "Space Opera Theater"). People were truly outraged about his victory, as you may remember.



PROBLEM SOLVERS

So, no, I no longer believe that empathy and creativity are the sole domain of humans, but I do believe that passion for great service and for great connections with humans will remain part of the “human premium”, as Peter likes to call it.

So, in order to stand out in the deepening and expanding sea of mediocrity, I believe that brands will need to do 2 things:

- 1. Revisit their customer experience strategy to find a strong balance between digital versus human service and communication.**
- 2. Investigate which human skills will help them stand out and deliver excellence in customer experience and then hire for these skills and/or train to have them developed in their current workforce.**

Though we will of course need more research in the matter, these are some of the skills that I would prioritize for that:

- **Passion**
- **Emotional Intelligence**
- **Active Listening**
- **Critical Thinking**
- **Positive Energy Transfer**
- **Relationship Building**
- **Strategic Thinking**
- **Problem Solving**

To zoom in on one of them: an area where humans will (for now) keep playing an important role is indeed problem solving. We’ve all been there, when a package does not arrive and the track and trace keeps saying that it’s on its way, but it’s been days and we know that something went wrong. These are not the types of conversations where a chatbot can help, because they are great at rules, not at exceptions. Humans are great at understanding exceptions, finding

out what caused them and solving them. Even when the problem is not their fault or that of the company.

I remember a fantastic example where a customer returned a set of tires to a Nordstrom store, even though the company doesn’t sell tires. The employee accepted the return without hesitation and refunded the customer’s money, even though it was clearly not an item they carried. What they were doing was “solving the problem, no matter what”. They were in the business of managing the emotion, not the problem (which clearly wasn’t theirs). And they succeeded, because they kept the customer happy. That’s a radical example and you can’t allow that with everyone, of course, but it’s also a situation that almost never happens. A bot would not have been able to understand that.

These are the types of places where you have to put human employees, if you want to reach an NPS of 9 or 10. That is the point where not only “awful” ends, but where “mediocre” stops too. And, just as importantly, where “brilliant” begins.

ABOUT STEVEN

Steven Van Belleghem is widely regarded as one of the world's leading thinkers, keynote speakers and authors in the field of customer experience and culture. Steven has inspired world-leading companies such as Disney, Mastercard, Mercedes, Booking.com, Heineken and Salesforce with his visionary approach to customer experience. He is also an investor and partner at several leading companies, a multiple board member and a lecturer at the Vlerick Business School.

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ABOUT PETER

Peter is a top rated keynote speaker and author on innovation strategy, leadership and the impact of all things digital on society and business, who has inspired many Fortune 500 companies like Google, Roche, Microsoft, Gartner, Sanofi, etc. He lectures at various business schools, among which the

London Business School (UK) and MIT (US).

He's also a multiple board member (at Belfius, Mediahuis and Ergon Capital), a former Entrepreneur in Residence with McKinsey & Company and he founded 3 tech companies of his own which were acquired by Alcatel-Lucent, Belgacom and Descartes respectively.

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