

The Human Reserve

What should we choose to keep human?

THIS WEEK'S THOUGHT

A reserve is not empty space. It is capacity held for uncertainty.

THIS WEEK'S BIG IDEA: THE HUMAN RESERVE

A fascinating idea appeared in the AI debate this week. Bill Gates proposed a category of work he calls Human Reserved. He compares it with a nature reserve: somewhere we could develop, automate or exploit, yet deliberately choose to preserve because something valuable would disappear if we did.

[READ BILL GATES' ESSAY](#)

What should we deliberately preserve as human, even when technology becomes capable of doing it for us?

Three reserves worth protecting

Capability reserve. The things people continue to practise because the capability itself matters: reasoning, writing, remembering, explaining, navigating uncertainty, noticing patterns and making judgements.

Relational reserve. Activities whose value comes partly from the relationship itself: teaching, mentoring, caring, coaching, listening, leadership, friendship and difficult conversations.

Capacity reserve. Time, attention and energy held back from immediate output, creating room to respond, recover and adapt.

Ecological systems rarely devote every resource to immediate output. Seeds remain dormant. Soil stores carbon and nutrients. Animals accumulate energy before migration. Landscapes contain margins, hedgerows and wetlands whose functions become most visible when conditions change.

Human systems often operate much closer to their limits. Calendars become completely occupied. Attention is continuously available. Teams are staffed for normal demand with little spare capacity. AI can then allow activity to accelerate further.

CARRY THIS THOUGHT

The reserve is capacity available for a future we cannot completely predict.

AN IDEA TO DEVELOP: DESIGNING THE HUMAN RESERVE

This framework brings together AI, learning, work design, wellbeing, professional capability and human flourishing. It can be used to examine the tasks within a role and make a conscious design choice.

CHOICE	QUESTION	EXAMPLES
Delegate	What can technology take away because little human development or meaning depends upon doing it?	<i>Routine administration, transcription, formatting, information retrieval</i>
Collaborate	Where can technology increase capability while the human remains intellectually engaged?	<i>Research, analysis, drafting, planning, scenario testing</i>
Practise	Which activities must people still perform because competence depends upon rehearsal?	<i>Writing, calculation, diagnosis, interpretation, critical reasoning</i>
Reserve	Which activities should remain meaningfully human because relationship, dignity or responsibility form part of the value?	<i>Care, mentoring, sensitive conversations, accountability, ethical judgement</i>

The distinction between collaborate and practise is crucial. A task may suit AI-assisted work while still requiring periods of human-only practice. Aviation offers a useful analogy: automation performs much routine flying, while pilots retain sufficient training and simulation to intervene beyond expected patterns.

Human first does not necessarily mean human only. It can mean preserving authorship before augmentation begins.

Experimental evidence published in Scientific Reports found that passive reliance on AI was associated with lower self-efficacy, psychological ownership and perceived meaning. People who began with their own thinking and then used AI to refine it retained outcomes closer to those working independently.

READ THE AI AND MEANINGFUL WORK STUDY

CURATED FOR THE WEEK: THE SHELF

ESSAY

Bill Gates: The turbulent AI era is here

Read for the Human Reserved idea and the distinction between technological capability and social choice.

READ, LISTEN OR WATCH

RESEARCH

Designing for cognitive resilience

Hans Westerbeek argues for deliberate friction, attention protection, retrieval, reconstruction and developmental staging of AI.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

RESEARCH

Relying on AI at work

A useful study of self-efficacy, ownership, meaning and the difference between passive reliance and active collaboration.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

REVIEW

Human-Centred AI Adoption in Knowledge Work

A socio-technical view of trust, autonomy, technostress, organisational culture and job design.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

LEADERSHIP

Human Sustainability Leadership

Research connecting flourishing with leadership structures, learning, meaning, relationships and workload.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

ATTENTION

Intentional versus passive technology use

A study of 842 adults exploring digital balance, attentional control and psychological wellbeing.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

CREATIVITY

Mind wandering, creativity and attention

A nuanced study of the different roles played by deliberate mind wandering and attentional control.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

BOOK

The Serviceberry, Robin Wall Kimmerer

A small book with a large systems idea about reciprocity, interdependence and abundance.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

BOOK

Four Thousand Weeks, Oliver Burkeman

A thoughtful challenge to the idea that good life management means fitting ever more into finite time.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

PODCAST

Hidden Brain: Unleashing Your Creativity

On unconscious thought, incubation and why ideas emerge when deliberate thinking recedes.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

VIDEO

Katina Bajaj: How play boosts creativity and resilience

A TED talk about adult play, exploration and activity whose value is not predetermined.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

NATURE CONNECTION: RESERVES IN THE LANDSCAPE

Late August provides an unusually good landscape in which to think about reserves. Hedgerows contain several timescales simultaneously. Elderberries are ripening. Blackthorn is developing sloes. Hazelnuts begin appearing. Crab apples move into their late-summer and autumn season. Swifts continue their migration.

EXPLORE NATURE'S CALENDAR

Some of this year's energy has become fruit. Some has become seed. Some animals are converting available food into the energy required for a journey that has barely begun. Nature carries future capacity inside the present landscape.

Cleeve's long journey

The British Trust for Ornithology is following a satellite-tagged cuckoo called Cleeve, tagged in Norfolk. On 4 August he cleared the Sahara into Mali. By 17 August the signal placed him in northern Nigeria, continuing a migratory pattern researchers have followed for several years.

Energy accumulated in one landscape supports movement through another. Timing is shaped by food, weather and season. Stopover sites that look insignificant on a map become critical infrastructure. The quality of the journey depends partly on the quality of the places where recovery is possible.

FOLLOW CLEEVE'S MIGRATION

Rosebay willowherb and succession

Rosebay willowherb is a pioneer species. It rapidly colonises disturbed ground, including forest clearings, railway edges and damaged land. Plantlife records its famous expansion across bombed areas of London after the Blitz.

Ecological resilience means more than returning a system to its previous state. Sometimes disturbance creates the conditions for a different form of life to emerge. For people too, resilience may involve succession: new identities, skills, relationships and ways of living becoming possible because old conditions have changed.

DISCOVER ROSEBAY WILLOWHERB

A migration cannot be optimised purely around speed. It requires places to pause and replenish.

THE EMERGING RADAR: IDEAS WORTH WATCHING

Cognitive resilience could become a workplace capability

If AI performs drafting, synthesis, reasoning and analysis, organisations must decide how employees continue developing the capabilities needed to evaluate those outputs. The defining question may be: where will tomorrow's experts get their repetitions?

EXPLORE THE SOURCE

Human-AI collaboration may need an authorship principle

Evidence suggests that people who draft first and use AI for refinement retain a stronger psychological relationship with their work. A simple design principle follows: create before you delegate.

[EXPLORE THE SOURCE](#)

Recovery is a systems-design problem

Always-available communication, role spillover and AI-enabled acceleration can keep people psychologically inside work. Healthy organisations need spaces in which work is genuinely absent.

[EXPLORE THE SOURCE](#)

Quality of technology use matters

Intentional, value-aligned technology use was associated with stronger attentional control and wellbeing after overall screen time was considered. Agency is part of digital wellbeing.

[EXPLORE THE SOURCE](#)

Flourishing is a legitimate work-design outcome

Flourishing includes meaning, growth, relationships, agency, learning and the ability to contribute. A sustainable organisation should leave people with greater capability for life.

[EXPLORE THE SOURCE](#)

Attention may need a conservation strategy

Organisations protect financial capital, intellectual property, physical assets and data. Attention also deserves to be treated as a finite organisational resource.

THINK AND CREATE: A PROMPT FOR YOUR OWN WRITING

The future of work will be shaped by what we automate, and by what we deliberately choose to preserve.

Imagine that technology can perform almost every cognitive task you currently undertake: writing, research, planning, analysis, scheduling, problem-solving and decision support.

- Which activities would you continue doing yourself because doing them changes you?
- Which would you retain because another person deserves human presence?
- Which skills would you continue practising because you want the capability to remain yours?
- Which tasks would you happily release?
- Which parts of life would become richer if technology gave the time back?

Then move beyond work. What would you place inside your own Human Reserve: walking, growing food, cooking, writing, conversation, learning something slowly, getting lost, making things by hand, remembering or looking after another living thing?

Capability tells us what technology can do. Values help us decide what it should do.

PAUSE AND NOTICE: REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Where in my life have I used almost all of the available capacity?

Consider time, physical energy, attention, money, emotional capacity, curiosity and relationships. Then ask: what would change if I deliberately kept some of it in reserve?

A deeper version of the question is: what part of myself am I becoming so efficient at outsourcing that I risk losing the pleasure or capability of doing it?

YOUR PRACTICAL EXPERIMENT: THE HUMAN RESERVE AUDIT

For one week, notice your relationship with technology before trying to change it. Choose one meaningful task each day and identify which category it belongs within:

DELEGATE | COLLABORATE | PRACTISE | RESERVE

Collaborate. Spend the first ten or fifteen minutes forming your own view before bringing AI into the process.

Practise. Complete one short version without technological assistance. The aim is capability maintenance.

Reserve. Keep the experience entirely human. It might be a conversation, a walk, writing a page, making something, gardening or cooking.

At the end of the week, look across the five days and ask:

- Where did I feel most capable?
- Where did I feel most like the author of what I produced?
- Where did technology genuinely expand me?
- Where did it quietly replace an experience I still value?

Then redesign one recurring activity accordingly.

METAPHOR BANK: LINES WORTH KEEPING

- A system with no spare capacity has nowhere for surprise to go.
- AI can extend our capabilities while practice keeps those capabilities ours.
- Efficiency can create time. Wisdom decides what the time is for.
- Attention is a habitat. What we repeatedly invite into it changes what can live there.
- A skill rarely disappears in a dramatic moment. It fades when the environment stops requiring it.
- Recovery is one of the processes through which capacity is rebuilt.
- Sometimes resilience is recovery. Sometimes it is succession.

A FINAL THOUGHT

The next stage of intelligent living may involve becoming much more deliberate about what we allow technology to do for us, what we continue doing with it, and what we choose to keep beautifully, deliberately human.

WORK SMART IS THE MEANS. LIVING WELL IS THE POINT.

Vanessa Aradia

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