“Creativity” Beats “Machines” in a Digital Age

Erik P.M. Vermeulen - Professor | Executive | Entrepreneur.

Why “Creators” and “Creatives” are the Winners of the Future

We live in a “standardized” world. I see it every day in my work. Business processes are standardized and replicated across organizations. Teaching is standardized. Rules are standardized. Websites are standardized. CVs are standardized.

Even the way that we are expected to write an academic article, a business plan or a recommendation letter is becoming increasingly standardized.

There are many benefits attached to “standardization”.

It makes compliance easier. It makes comparison easier. It makes it easier to control processes. And—at least, according to *Wikipedia*—it has the potential to maximize “compatibility, interoperability, safety, repeatability and quality”.

Standardization leads to routine work that can easily be automated. Robots, sensors, data, algorithms and software are increasingly used in perfecting a standardized process or task.

After all, machines make less mistakes than humans. They are available 24/7. They don’t complain. They don’t ever need a vacation.
But the “standardization of reality” is not without pitfalls.

In a standardized world, creativity and “out-of-the-box” thinking is often not appreciated, valued or understood. Also, making the “creators” and “creatives” comply with standardized processes can have a counter-productive effect. It can add to levels of stress and, ultimately, it can “kill” creativity.
Let me break down exactly how we’ve screwed over creative people.

Creatives are fucked. And it may be too late.

And this could really start to hurt in a digital age. As I have written before, spurring creativity is particularly important now. As “machines” replace “humans” in performing routine and standardized tasks, the “value added” of humans will be in our capacity to be creative.

But, there is also good news. As technologies replace humans in management and business processes, the world becomes “flatter”. There is already a clear trend towards “decentralized” platforms and “peer-to-peer” transactions.

Think *YouTube* and *Medium*. This flatter world offers far more opportunities to be creative than the traditional hierarchical world.

We could even say that automation offers an opportunity for more creativity and “out-of-the-box” thinking.

Learning from the Past … The Four Levels of Creativity

The standardization and automation of business processes is nothing new.
I can still remember the stories of my grandfather. He was a "glassblower" at a light bulb factory.

At first, manufacturing was performed entirely by people, but then—gradually—the whole process became more and more automated.

On the one hand my grandfather was happy about automation. It ended many unhealthy and dangerous business practices. Automation took care of the boring aspects of work. It made the job easier and safer.

On the other hand, it eventually led to job losses, as humans were no longer necessary. A machine was just better and more efficient at "blowing glass" for the manufacturing of light bulbs than any person could ever be.

But my grandfather also understood how to deal with this new automated reality: *Creativity*.

He distinguished between f**our levels of creativity**. Four responses that the more creative glassblowers had to the automation of their craft.

#1—The General Opportunists

The first group of workers can best be described as "general opportunists". They found ways to further develop their "glassblowing" skills and experiences and started to use them in other, less automated, areas.

#2—The Developers

Second, you had the workers that found opportunities in the design of the automation process. They embraced the new machines and helped construct and improve them. They also identified new business applications for the automation technology.

These new "creators" cooperated and collaborated with the machines in order to enhance automation. We can call them the "developers".

#3—The Specialists

Third, you had those workers that identified problems in the automation process and created a new role that addressed these problems. After all, automation is never perfect and, at some stage in the process, there will be limits (the "weakest link in the chain" idea).

The more creative glassblowers identified these limits and were able to carve out a new role for themselves that focused on these tasks. They became "specialists" in specific non-automated roles.

#4—The Artists

Finally, you had the workers that transformed their manual labour into art. These "artists" targeted the niche market that still wanted hand-blown glass. They bet on the idea that some people would always love retro-style, hand-made products.

4 Levels of Creativity

All four groups used their capacity for creativity to take advantage of the new opportunities that automation created. Of course, many workers were forced out of a job and, over a couple of generations, the "role" of the glassblower—at least, as it was traditionally performed—disappeared. We shouldn't forget that.

But, equally, we shouldn't ignore the fact that creativity was the best (and often only) response to this inevitable process of standardization and automation.

… And Back to Our Digital Age

My grandfather's stories still seem relevant in a digital age.
There is no doubt that the digital age is having a major impact on society. The speed of technological developments is mind-blowing. Different technologies (artificial intelligence, robotics, blockchain) are accelerating each other.
The process of automation and standardization—which has always existed—is developing at an exponential rate. Whereas the automation that my grandfather experienced took place over decades and affected one sphere of activity at a time, automation today is faster and more dispersed.

The result?

There is less time to adapt and the need to be creative becomes more and more urgent. The most important effect of this acceleration is that, in a digital age, standardization should not be a priority. The focus should be on creative deviation from standardized processes.

The capacity to innovate—to be deviant in unexpected and imaginative ways—will put a premium on creativity.

What's Next?

Automation will require more people to "think out of the box" in order to find innovative new opportunities. As an "educator"/teacher, I try to encourage this type of creative deviation by requiring the students to:

- **Identify** and explain a problem that automation has created.
- **Collaborate** and engage in team work.
- **Inspire** and learn from each other (find a creative response to this problem).

- **Develop**, listen and learn from "individualized" advice and feedback (instead of standardized models).
- **Explain** all aspects of the creative solution and master the art of storytelling.
- **Test** the solutions.
- **Experiment** with new technologies to discover new challenges and solutions.

The importance of being creative was true for my grandfather's generation and it is actually more important today. It won't be easy—I don't say that—but it is possible. We need to encourage creativity. We must remember that everybody has "creativity" within them.

This is particularly true for a digital age which becomes more and more automated, competitive and stressful.

Luckily, I see more and more examples of creative people finding happiness, satisfaction and meaning in what they do.