

Dr. Wendy Cukier–AI and Workforce Evolution

Host: Darian Kovacs

Overview:

Dr. Wendy Cukier joins us to discuss her take on the future of work in Canada. A leading expert on disruptive technologies and innovation, Dr. Cukier is Academic Director of the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University. As AI technologies become more common in the workplace, Dr. Cukier argues that workers need both frameworks to support these technologies, and guardrails to ensure they're used responsibly.

Highlights from our conversation include:

1. Even as Generative AI takes hold, Dr. Cukier sees an ongoing need for non-technical skills, such as the ability to argue, use language, and think critically. Such skills, she says, will be key to effective prompt engineering.
2. Despite rhetoric and backlash against it, diversity remains a competitive advantage for businesses and must continue to be leveraged.
3. Those businesses that are able to leverage inclusion, innovation, productivity, and sustainability will be well positioned for long-term success.

DARIAN:

All right. We're here at Magnet Network Live. I am here with Dr. Wendy. So we're here talking about the future of work. When you hear that term, what do you think of when you think of the future of work, the future of the workforce in Canada?

WENDY:

I think about how often we are wrong in making projections about the future. So I'm very...I'm very reluctant to be definitive about what we should expect or should not.

I've become a big proponent of sort of scenario planning and and thinking about possible outcomes like if this happened would be be ready and I think COVID perhaps was one of the best lessons in how the best laid plans can go awry. One of the things I've been really interested in is because I've worked in IT since before you were born, and I started my early career with the Institute for the Future in Menlo Park, California, where we were doing all sorts of projections and planning and talking about digital transformation before there was the internet. I've been looking at sort of... If we look back at AI, for example, and what people were saying about AI, I still remember the Fran Osborne study from which was, to be fair to them, was misquoted, but said basically that AI would replace % of jobs. But I've been thinking about how often we're wrong when we make projections. And, you know, one example was John Roth, who was the CEO of Nortel, kept saying, we need to double the pipeline, double the pipeline for engineers. And then the dot-com crash came, and we had doubled the pipeline, and we ended up with a lot of unemployed engineers. Or, you know, even more recently, I think it was the Osgren and Frey study came out and they basically said that if you analyze jobs, I think it was to percent could be replaced by AI within the next decade. Now, that was picked up by the media and became not could be, but will be replaced by AI. And of course, years came and went, and we still saw that even though Canada has won, has a Nobel Prize winner for, you know, often considered the father of AI, we are actually laggards when it comes to the adoption of the technology until chat GPT hit. And what we're seeing now is not, I think, anything that anybody anticipated, which is that employees are ahead of employers in the adoption of technology. So despite all of the talk about how employers need to invest in training, which they do, what we're seeing is a lot of employees just taking it in their own hands. And we just did a survey of people and found that a higher percentage of employees say they're using AI than employers. And what that tells you is a lot of employers don't know their people are using AI. And what that means is we're introducing all sorts of threats because as you know, AI can have unintended consequences and a lot of the free applications mean that you're giving up your IP and so on. So one of the things that I'm always humbled by is how often we're wrong in trying to predict the future. At the same time, recognizing how important it is to be flexible and resilient and to anticipate changes. So I think regardless of what jobs will disappear, what jobs will be created, what jobs will be transformed, it's fairly evident that AI is here to stay and that we need to really

be investing in ensuring that not only do employers have the frameworks and the strategies in place to use it to drive productivity improvements and so on, but they've also got the guardrails in place to ensure that it's used responsibly. And that when we're thinking about foundational skills, skills for success, digital skills, it's almost like we now have to embed AI in everything because it's pretty clear that we're going to require AI literacy, we're going to require people who can match AI to organizational needs and drive change, and we're going to need the people with the deep technical skills to solve the near unsolvable problems. So AI is kind of front of mind right now in terms of something we've got to grapple with very, very quickly as a country if we're not going to be left behind. And at the same time, we create responsible and ethical uses.

DARIAN:

So I need to ask, there's lots of data coming out of the Diversity Institute. You've worked on multiple projects like ADPT and others people can go to the website, we'll put a link in the show note, yeah, but if you were to give one highlight about diversity and what you've been seeing in the research you're putting out that has to do with the future of work and skills development what's one highlight that you want people to know?

WENDY:

Despite the backlash despite the rhetoric, there is no doubt that diversity remains a competitive advantage for individual companies and for Canada, and that we have to continue to leverage it. When we think of the future of work, in my view, it's really important to ensure that we are harnessing diversity effectively as opposed to driving disparity. And those are two very clear directions or paths we might take. I believe that having strategies for the future of work that centre inclusion along with innovation, along with productivity, along with sustainability... Absolutely key.

DARIAN:

It's amazing. Anything else you want listeners to know?

WENDY:

AI is the English major's revenge. I mean, one of the wonderful things, in my view, about some of the new generative AI tools is it's going to open up opportunities for women, for Indigenous peoples, for people who are Black, who are typically underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and math, because the ability to argue, to use language, and to think critically are really key to prompt engineering, and very different than the skills required for coding. So I see huge opportunities to open up pathways if we handle this right.

DARIAN:

Wow. Well, you heard it first, Magnet Network Live. You can hear the conversations happening in the background. People are probably talking about similar things, things that happened today. But Wendy, thank you for being here.

WENDY:

Thank you. And as you know, I'm a professor, so long-windedness is an occupational hazard.

DARIAN:

This is lovely. We'll see you next time on Magnet Network Live.