

# SUMMARY

## HUMANS ARE UNDERRATED

GEOFF COLVIN



# **Summary Of “Humans Are Underrated” By Geoff Colvin**

Written By Nicolas Stewart

Many of our jobs are being automated and replaced by computers, find out what skills you can develop that can't be replaced and how technology and social media might help or hurt them!

Introduction	5
Technology is changing us more than we think – for the worse.	6
Social skills are becoming a more important asset for humans than knowledge.	7
Humans will always require the skill of empathy.	9
Team building is becoming more important in every area from golf to business.	10
A good story is more convincing than logic.	12
Computers can be creative too, but true breakthroughs come from human interaction.	13
Harness the power of computers to boost your knowledge and social skills.	14
Final Summary	15



# QuickRead

F R E E B O O K S U M M A R I E S

**Go to [QuickRead.com/App](https://QuickRead.com/App) now to download our app and get access to thousands of free book summaries as both text and audiobooks.**

**Get the key insights of non-fiction books in minutes instead of hours. Listen to our free audiobooks while you workout or on your commute to work.**



# Introduction

The earliest transistor radios had 5 transistors per integrated circuit, whereas modern computer CPUs have over 5 billion transistors. This is an example of Moore's Law.

Moore's Law is the observation that the number of transistors in an integrated circuit doubles every 2 years. In layman's terms this means that the computing power of IT systems increase by 100 percent every 2 years. While this won't hold true forever, as eventually it will become physically impossible to make transistor any smaller, generally it's not useful to compare yourself and your brain to a computer, as you probably won't become twice as smart every 2 years.

Computers aren't just better than humans at math or chess, they even beat us out at skills you might think were exclusive to humanity. For instance psychologist Paul Ekman developed something called the Facial Action Coding System, a program that uses a webcam filming a human face, and analyzes the 40 facial muscles used in human facial expressions, allowing it to detect and recognize over 3000 different "micro-expressions" connected to different emotions. With this system a computer can correctly identify what emotion a human face is expressing 85% of the time, compared to other humans who can only do so 55% of the time.

# Technology is changing us more than we think – for the worse.

You might occasionally hear your older relatives complain about how everybody always is always focused on their phones these days, and that no one talks face to face anymore.

While this may seem like they're simply out of touch the reality is that they're not entirely wrong; research is showing that technology is in fact decreasing our social skills. The amount of time we spend glued to our phones, laptops, tablets, etc is proportional to a worsening ability to understand others emotions or read body language.

A study done at a 5 day “screen free” camp showed that in that short period 6th graders showed substantial increases in their ability to understand the emotions of others.

Social media as well seems to, ironically, damage us socially. Research has shown that teenagers in the US that spend significant time on social media show higher rates of unhappiness and have worse relationships with their friends and families.

Humans evolved to be social creatures, but social media ends up providing us with what is essentially a simulation of social interaction, rather than direct human contact. This leads us to be more lonely, less empathetic, and less trusting, at a time when skills like empathy are more important than ever.

## Social skills are becoming a more important asset for humans than knowledge.

Technology is redefining what makes us good at our jobs. In the past a good doctor was one who had the symptoms of hundreds of maladies memorized, a good lawyer had an encyclopedic knowledge of court cases stored in their brains. But today more medical studies come out everyday than an individual could conceivably read, and computers can look up a million legal cases in a fraction of a second.

So how do we define what a good doctor or lawyer is today? Technology has forced us to shift our skill sets from those focused mostly on acquiring knowledge to social skills. The ability to connect and understand a patient or a client emotionally, to help them make decisions in their best interest, are skills computers still can't replace.

Indeed technology is making those skills even more necessary, since it has allowed us to interact with people from different countries and cultures on an unprecedented scale. Making social skills and cultural understanding of immense, and often life saving, importance.

A good diplomat for instance is aware that the seemingly innocuous act of crossing one's legs, making the heel of their shoe visible, is in fact a sign of disrespect in Iraqi culture. A hostage negotiator as well needs knowledge of the hostage takers, but also needs the abstract social skills necessary to defuse tensions and de-escalate conflicts.

During the Iraq war there were many examples of cultural misunderstandings leading to violence. A truck of soldiers driving too close to a sacred mosque lead to a battle. Conversely soldiers dealing with an enraged crowd by pointing their weapons down and kneeling, thus effectively reading the situation and knowing how to communicate via body language, allowed them to exit the situation without any fighting.

Social skills, and properly figuring out how to avoid or navigate interpersonal and intercultural miscommunications, can be the difference between peace and war.



# Humans will always require the skill of empathy.

Empathy is the foundation of virtually all human interactions. Empathy is defined as the ability to understand what another person is feeling, and this skill is at play regardless of the circumstances of an interaction, including within the business world. Despite the common depiction of business interactions being cold and impersonal, there are ample examples of how a *lack* of empathy can and has hurt businesses.

Take the call-center, a universally hated institution. Why is it that we all find calling customer support so frustrating? A large reason for it is that call-center workers usually have to strictly follow a script, they can't truly communicate or connect with you as a person. Which is to say they can't demonstrate genuine empathy for you, and you can tell. Whether or not consciously realize it or not, you notice that you're not being heard and not being empathized with and it makes helpful communication difficult if not impossible.

And this issue doesn't apply just to the customer, call-centers have notoriously high turnover rate because workers get burnt out and frustrated with being unable to behave like humans. This was demonstrated perfectly when Jim Bush was placed in charge of call-centers for American Express. The very first thing he did was eliminate the use of scripts and instead gave workers information about each customer and the freedom to use their own personal judgement. The result was higher profits, higher approval ratings, and a full 50% turnover rate reduction.

Empathy is one skill that will likely never be replaced by computers as it is something we as humans understand instinctively. We are naturally inclined to demonstrate and receive empathy to and from others. And even if we one day develop computers able to mimic the act of empathy, which is to say able to understand what others are feeling and react to it appropriately, odds are people simply won't trust or accept it the way we will empathy from other humans.

# Team building is becoming more important in every area from golf to business.

Whether doing group assignments at school, playing sports, or tackling projects in the workplace, we've all had the experience of being a part of a team that just didn't click. So what are the characteristics of a great team? Why is it that you can have a team wherein every member is competent and talented, yet simply cannot work together effectively?

The effectiveness of a team can be influenced by things like shared goals, team size, and so on. but the single biggest factors are the social abilities and sensitivities of its members. For instance in 2008 the US golf team won the Ryder Cup, one of its biggest victories in years. And this was due to the coach, Paul Azinger, recognizing that in previous years their losses had been caused primarily by the team's inability to work together. Thus that year he sought to build a team based on which golfers' clicked best as teammates rather than simply based on who were the best golfers.

During the 88-89 NBA season the Detroit Pistons became the first team to effectively deal with the Chicago Bulls' Michael Jordan. Up until that point the Bulls were unstoppable because they based their entire strategy around emphasizing the immense skills of one player. As a response the Pistons chose to focus away from the skills of individual players and towards the use of teamwork. By teaming up on Jordan and crowding him anytime he had the ball they virtually negated the Bulls' advantage. A team of ok players who knew how to work together effectively is more valuable than a team of individuals each only focusing on their own skills.

This is proving to be true across the board. Businesses aren't run by one executive, but rather a team of C Suite officers. Scientific research is performed by teams. Executing roles in the government, such as the Attorney General, are still assisted by an army of Assistant Attorneys General. Even strictly hierarchical organizations like the military depend heavily on teams and people with different specialities working together and cooperating.

It's often joked that nothing good is ever created by committee, but in the modern world consensus and cooperation are often the two biggest factors in success.

## A good story is more convincing than logic.

What do you do when you have a logical argument backed up by data and evidence, but still find yourself unable to convince others of your position?

This was the issue Stephen Denning, the director of the Africa region at the World Bank, was dealing with when he tried to convince his colleagues that making the abundant amount of data the World Bank had on various diseases available to health workers in African countries. Unable to sway them using graphs and studies he instead told them a story. He asked them what good all the information they possessed would do if a Zambian health worker trying to treat patients with malaria logged onto their website but couldn't access the information?

It worked, his colleagues put themselves in that health worker's shoes and realized they weren't actually making any difference if the information they compiled wasn't accessible. This change went on to help millions of people.

Storytelling is a uniquely human activity, one shared by literally no other species, and computers simply cannot write stories that connect and move people. People can tell when a story doesn't seem authentic because it lacks a genuine understanding of human emotions. Software developers in recent years have worked on and improved the quality of machine written stories but still people can always tell the difference. We might not be able to immediately say "this was written by a computer", but we can tell that there's something suspicious about them. That ability to connect emotionally simply cannot be replicated.

## Computers can be creative too, but true breakthroughs come from human interaction.

The IBM supercomputer “Watson” is capable of a lot of surprising things. It doesn’t just compete on Jeopardy, it can even cook! By analyzing thousands of recipes and ingredients, and downloading chemical profiles of different flavors, IBM decided to see if it could create new recipes from them. It turns out Watson is actually a pretty great cook!

One of its first recipes sounded strange, the Austrian Chocolate Burrito was made from beef, chocolate, mashed soybeans, cheese, and apricot purée. While this might initially sound like a culinary disaster but proved to be extremely popular when sold at SXSW festival.

More importantly this demonstrates that creativity in and of itself is not limited to humanity. But human interactions are still the greatest source of creative breakthroughs. This is something implicitly understood by many successful companies. Google for instance makes sure their cafeteria has exceptional food because they want employees to go there and intermingle, in the hopes that this will lead to chance interactions with other employees who might not otherwise even meet, and in doing so might develop a solution or idea that otherwise could never had existed.

This sort of engineered “chance interaction” model was a hallmark of Steve Jobs’ management style as well. Companies like Apple and Pixar all use floor plans and organizing methods designed to encourage face to face interactions and, hopefully, cultivate innovation.

# Harness the power of computers to boost your knowledge and social skills.

The point that we keep coming back to is that humans excel at social skills in a way computers just do not. And while technology can sometimes hinder those skills, it can also be used to improve them.

Students for example are often much more successful when they learn on their own via a computer than in the traditional classroom setting. Stanford University discovered this when they first launched their Massive Open Online Course on artificial intelligence, which allowed anyone in the world to sign up and learn online. After this first course in 2011 Stanford found that the top 400 performers from the 160,000 online students all outperformed the traditional students in the on-campus classroom.

The US Navy has also started using individual computer driven lessons to teach skills like repairing technical systems, subjects that require no social interaction are unsurprisingly more effectively taught in non-social settings.

Technology aiding education goes beyond academics as well. The “Love Machine” program is used by companies to help employees improve their own skills in social interactions by giving employees options like sending one another thank you messages, but with no private message function. Meaning any messages you send are able to be seen by all other employees, in the hopes of encouraging employees to share knowledge and to interact more rather than keeping it to themselves and not help each other.

The use of a publicly visible praise results in more employees being incentivized to help each other. Technology can be harnessed to encourage our beneficial human instincts like altruism and cooperation, rather than to isolate us or incentivize our more anti-social inclinations.

# Final Summary

We can't avoid technology advancing to the point that it automates many of our jobs, nor should we. Instead we need to focus on the skills that cannot be replaced, on using technology to help us enhance those skills, and on how to avoid having technology hinder those qualities.

It's increasingly easy to become isolated from direct human experiences and social media often makes it so we don't even realize how isolated we've become. We've allowed ourselves to believe that empathy, informal interactions, kindness, and understanding are antithetical to the businessworld and that logic trumps all. The reality is this hasn't made us more like rational, calculating computers, it's just made us less functional humans.

By ignoring the things that humans excel at; cooperation, compassion, storytelling, we are hindering our own ability to succeed in a world where other technical skills are performed quicker and better by machines.

The goal here should be to use social media less and try to interact with others face to face. Hone your communication skills and be more mindful of your own ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of those around you. Make use of online courses to improve your own skills and expand your knowledge.

Social skills are invaluable for becoming an effective leader or team member and directly contribute to how well you do in job interviews, in projects, and in career advancement.



# QuickRead

F R E E B O O K S U M M A R I E S

**Go to [QuickRead.com/App](https://QuickRead.com/App) now to download our app and get access to thousands of free book summaries as both text and audiobooks.**

**Get the key insights of non-fiction books in minutes instead of hours. Listen to our free audiobooks while you workout or on your commute to work.**

