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THINKING · AI · EARLY SIGNAL

Should You Treat Your AI Assistant With the Same Respect as a Human?

I put my AI assistant on the org chart in 2016. Whether to say "please" to a machine taught me more about myself than about the bot.

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Please! Thank-you! Simple phrases that invoke action as well as gratitude. Whether in person or in writing, they show a level of respect — the phrases we were taught as children, and that hopefully, when we grow up and enter the business world, continue as genuine expressions of our requests as well as our gratitude.

Simple phrases for sure. But what about when dealing with a machine?

As of late, I am spending more time with leaders in the AI space. One story I keep sharing with them — and they prompted me to write about it — is how, at first, I felt intellectually conflicted with treating my AI assistant like I do my human assistant.

Let me explain.

I started using Amy Ingram (X.ai) in the summer of 2016. I have found Amy to be an incredible product, having saved countless hours of human time to focus on higher-value activities as opposed to scheduling meetings. In fact, I loved the service so much that my entire team is using Amy, and I even made a point to meet with Dennis Mortensen and his team when I was in New York City last fall. Amy is not perfect — she still has work to do — but for 8 out of 10 use cases she is incredible.

When I started using Amy, I found myself communicating with her the way I communicate with people. Phrases such as:

"Amy, could you please schedule ..."

"Amy, that time no longer works, can you please adjust to ..."

"Thanks Amy for the update ..."

At the beginning I was very aware that Amy was a machine. I could have easily said:

"Schedule ..."

"Adjust to ..."

"BLANK" — never saying thanks.

I tried to be less personal with Amy. That lasted about 2 hours. I simply could not do it. This is not my genuine self. When I say please and thank you, I mean it. It means you are going to help me, or have helped me. The 2 hours when I tried to treat Amy differently from all my other email interactions, I felt like it was not me communicating. I wasn't being my authentic self.

That really bothered me.

I struggled with why it bothered me. She was a machine after all. Not a person. But she interacts like a person. She has a human name.

Then I realized it had nothing to do with Amy and everything to do with me. My politeness in dealing with Amy had less to do with treating her like a human and more to do with my core belief (thanks to my parents) of treating all interactions with respect.

My parents could never have imagined that would extend to an AI bot — to be honest. There was no struggle. I just needed to be true to myself.

Amy is now a valuable part of my team. So much so that I include her on my org chart. This has created a funny story with my HR team, but that is for another post. Despite the fact that she is simply a machine run by incredibly smart people with offices in New York, she interacts like any other person on my team, with a clear job to do.

Please! Thank-you! I think it says more about the person writing those words than the person receiving.

Do I treat Amy like a human? Yes I do.

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