

CoolTimeLife Podcast 66 Innovation - Help is on the way - Blubrry transcript

Why Gen-AI Is an Innovation to Take Note Of

We have all been in situations in our lives where something goes wrong. The need to fix it becomes urgent. Tension forms in our minds and our physical selves as we obsess with the very real compulsion to fix this unwelcome situation. We want to get back to normality. The feeling overwhelms us. We might even feel physical pain as we wrestle with the problem. We definitely will have troubles thinking straight. It is all about “I have to fix this. And I have to fix it now.”

Then comes the moment when help arrives, and in a wonderful turnaround, you recognize it’s going to be OK. Think about how your mind and body respond to this new development. Think about the rush of endorphins, the immediate relaxation, the sudden clarity of thought. There is a resurgence of OKay-ness. You can see things that moments ago were obscured by fear and confusion. It’s a great place to get to.

Now hold on to this image, because it is so vital to the next stage of your career.

Hello and welcome to CoolTimeLife. I’m Steve Prentice. Each of our CoolTimeLife episodes focuses on a topic dealing with people, productivity, technology, and work-life, and each offers ideas and facts you need to know about to thrive in today’s busy world. An index of our podcasts is available at cooltimelife.com.

Here’s a related question for you: When’s the last time you took a vacation? Most working people do not take much in the way of vacations, some not at all. Their reasons may vary – too much work to get done, fear of being replaced if they are suddenly not there for a week, a lack of trust that their colleagues can do the work in your absence.

This is very sad because vacations – even short ones – have three major benefits, not just one. The time spent on vacation is the most obvious one, certainly, but so too is the anticipation of an upcoming vacation. Observing that well-deserved period of R&R getting closer delivers a sense of comfort and clarity similar to the resolution of a panic situation, like the story I told at the opening of this episode. Knowing something good is coming can be as healthy and cathartic as the good thing itself. So, the anticipation of a vacation is in itself a major benefit. The third is a memory of that vacation. A nice vacation is a life memory – something that you will carry with you forever. Moments like that are what life should be made of. As the expression goes, no one on their deathbed is likely to say, “I wish I had spent more time at the office.”

It is that sense of anticipation that is a tonic, especially when work gets tough. If you are in a crunch period right now, with back-to-back projects and meetings, it can be – it will be – mentally and physically exhausting. There seems to be no way out. No fix. Except if there is. When I work with overloaded people, I implore them to plan some time off – even if it is just a day – because it’s not just that day that counts – it is also about knowing that day is coming. This provides comfort and clarity even during times of overload and crisis. The benefits of a vacation start the moment the date is set – even if it is months away, and it lasts your whole life.

Now let me turn these stories over to what this episode is really about, and that is the emotional and physiological value of generative AI in the workplace. Quite a leap, huh? Not really. Generative AI is not a mere advancement. It is a true innovation, with benefits well beyond the immediate.



Think about email for a moment. It has been around for a long time now, but most people will agree, it hasn't made work any easier. In most cases it has simply added to the pile, both physically in terms of the number of emails received and also physiologically in terms of the stress we all feel knowing there may be more unread emails in the inbox at this very moment. Email was not an innovative technology. It was simply an advancement. It was not something new that we hadn't seen before. It is still about composing a letter, placing it in an envelope and sending it to someone, only faster.

The same goes for online searching. Doing a Google search – or any brand of search engine – is the modern-day equivalent of going into a library or a bookstore – real life or online – and wandering through the collections in the hopes of finding something. But in both cases, such an exercise can be overwhelming and counterproductive. Where do you start? How many books should you pull from the shelves? How many websites should you follow from your search results and where should you look? Research in this form delivers at best a static collection of information, and this can lead to frustration and distraction. Search engines, for all their speed and depth, have basically remained as enormous libraries, where information is at hand, but where a great deal of energy is required to find it and extract any value from it. Googling is just an advancement of the age-old act of research.

Advancements, like email and Google search, simply improve existing tools or techniques. They enhance what we already do. We've seen this before. For example, think about the transition from film cameras to digital cameras. Same technique, only faster and easier. Paper maps were replaced by GPS to help us find our way when driving. That was an advancement. Only when crowdsourced real-time data was added through apps like Waze – a feature that makes intelligent, real time suggestions for better routes and delivers a sense of community through communication and gamification – only then was there true innovation in the act of using maps. A word processor? It does the same thing as a typewriter only with a dictionary attached. Each of these technologies, and many more like it, made a familiar process faster, easier, and more efficient. But they didn't fundamentally change what that process was.

Innovation, on the other hand, opens the door to something entirely different. It doesn't just improve how we work; it changes what we're able to do. Electricity was an innovation. The internet was an innovation. And Generative AI certainly belongs in that category. It changes how we do things, not just mechanically, but also psychologically and emotionally – for the better.

Imagine you are an accountant, responsible for helping small business owners do their year-ends and file their taxes. Let's imagine also that your client, a small business owner, has literally kept all the receipts from the business in a shoebox – they didn't have the time or desire to use bookkeeping software. You, as the accountant, face many tedious hours of data entry to get these files in some sort of order before even starting to help your entrepreneur client with the filing. The dread that accountants feel when confronting these types of tedious tasks, especially during peak season – tax season – is palpable. And it directly affects an accountant's capacity to think strategically or even schedule time to talk to their clients. That's what fear does. It blocks the desire to continue.

But now that accountant can simply lay those receipts out on the floor, take a photo of them, and have a generative AI app like ChatGPT categorize them into a spreadsheet, and have it make suggestions about what the client should do next. It will also offer to present the information in a pie chart, draft up the summary report for the client, schedule some reminder messages for the client, and set up an agenda for a client meeting, complete with an invite worded in such a way as to capture the client's interest and make them want to attend. All in seconds. It can also suggest some new ideas and topics for the accountant to broach with the client.

Those are some truly innovative actions. The generative AI tool is transforming the activity of consolidating raw data into some truly creative professional activities that the accountant may not have thought of or that fear and procrastination pushed out of sight.

But now let's pull these threads all together. I started this episode by talking about the clarity and relief a person feels when they detect that a crisis is about to be rescued and resolved. I then talked about the therapeutic benefits of anticipating a vacation; not just taking a vacation but knowing that it's coming.

That, to me, is one of the primary, but less discussed benefits of the generative AI revolution.

It's a mindset change. The dread that the accountant once felt about all that tedious work has now been removed, to be replaced by energy, enthusiasm, and from that, a genuine interest in and desire to relate to the client on a much higher level, and a greater capacity for creative thinking, to talk about strategies, the future, new ideas for the client to try.

When tedious, stressful or fear-inducing work is resolved, the mind and body feel more able to roam. This opens up channels of creative thought that were previously held closed by the obligations of tedious work. These are the types of benefits that generative AI technology offers. This technology is not simply an apples-for-apples exchange of a previous process, in the way email replaced postal mail or digital cameras replace film. In addition to performing the tasks, generative AI also injects a sense of creative freedom and motivation, thanks to the person now knowing that the boring, tough or tedious stuff will be taken care of. This relief, this awareness, is as energizing as the knowledge of a problem about to be resolved, or of the anticipation of an upcoming, well-deserved and overdue vacation.

More Than Just a Better Search

So, yeah. When people first encounter Gen-AI, they often think of it as a kind of supercharged Google. But it's so much more than that. A big part of it is knowing that the ideas are out there. Knowing that help is on the way. Ironically, the more people become aware of that, the better and more creative they become. AI technology makes people smarter, not by replacing us, but by assisting and accompanying us, and basically by boosting us, emotionally and intellectually.

Generative AI may be a computer technology, but LLMs are trained on human material in the form of billions of pages of human created text. It has been trained on the collective output of humanity. This fosters independent problem-solving rather than making people reliant on it and allows a human relationship pattern in terms of conversation, context and empathy. Yes, it's all a result of data processing and not true sentience, but the effect is still powerful and positive.

The creative power of conversation

In a previous episode, I discussed how important physical space is for the act of learning. Basically, I talked about how you can learn more by looking around a room than you can by staring at a screen, because the physical space of your environment adds to your capacity to process ideas.

This is something else to consider when evaluating generative AI. You can talk to it, and it will talk to you in a very human way. You can't do this with a Google search. You can ask generative AI questions, or tell it what you are thinking, and it can respond with highly nuanced answers. But more than that, like with any good conversation with a real human, half or more of the value comes from you hearing yourself talk and processing your own thoughts along with those of your conversation partner. Discussion, talking, and conversation are vital tools for processing information.

Often, as you even think about what you might ask ChatGPT, for example, the act of thinking helps you clarify your ideas. It's a self-reflection thing. Highly cathartic and practical. Even if you know -or think you know what you plan to work on, bouncing a statement off of generative AI may result in a couple of

additional avenues that you didn't think of. "Oh yeah! That's great! I can add that to my report, proposal, or whatever. That's what conversation in the real world does, and yes, having a conversation with CoPilot can yield the same results. Friendly dialog feels good.

There's a difference between efficiency and creativity. Work is more than just completing tasks; it also gives us a sense of purpose, usefulness and motivation in our lives overall. Some people worry that generative AI robs people of the opportunity to actually think and create, therefore eliminating some of that sense of usefulness, value, purpose, meaning and motivation. But I feel the opposite. I think that conversations with generative AI, which, again, are based on a database of human experience actually enhance these sensations.

Knowing that ideas and additional ideas are out there

Sometimes a challenge to success in work and motivation comes from having no light visible at the end of the tunnel. No finish line on the horizon. This is a key aspect of maintaining morale in long-term projects, for example – the importance of celebrating small wins along the way. A project manager or team leader has the plan in place, and can see the finish line, but it's not the same for all the team members who are working at least partially in the dark. Allowing people to know that there are answers out there, and that progress is being made is vital to a project's success.

So it is, too, with other tasks. Very often things take longer than they should because people don't know how to get started. They may suffer writer's block or get overwhelmed by the size of a project before them. It is at this juncture that generative AI can come to the rescue by providing a plan, with steps, a downloadable schedule, and a first outline of a document. It's not that it is writing the project entirely for you necessarily, more importantly, it's a presence by your side, setting up those first steps, breaking through the wall of procrastination, and tapping in to the enthusiasm and commitment that lies behind it.

So Why Are We Still Nervous about Generative AI?

Because it's new. With any new technology or change, especially one this powerful and seemingly all-encompassing, there comes a sense of uncertainty. As I have already mentioned, with uncertainty comes the instinct of fear and the desire to stay with what we are already used to. The most common responses to generative AI, for example are:

- AI will steal your job
- AI is coming for the creatives
- We're not ready for what's next

That fear is normal. It's not irrational. It's human. This type of fear often comes from what we don't understand, or for which we have only partial knowledge. The best antidote to fear is full knowledge.

I was teaching a course in project management just recently, and as an exercise in estimation, I challenged the class to calculate how much time, money, resources, and people would be required to completely empty the classroom of all desks, chairs, furniture, and fixtures. Naturally, they work through calculations based on their understanding of the task. Very few think about outsourcing the estimation to a professional mover, and almost no one thinks of hidden risks and delays such as booking an electrician to remove the overhead projector.

Then I show them this: I took a photo of the room and uploaded it to ChatGPT with a request for an optimized assessment for the clear-out. Within seconds, it delivered an inventory of the room, along with four different approaches to moving based on a team of three people, four people or six people. It also made suggestions on delegation, such as assigning one person the action of taking things apart. It provided

a timeline and a risk register of the ten most likely risks to the project, ranging from physical injury and damage to walls and doorframes through to allergies caused by the raising of dust.

Such advice can be just the thing to pull a team together with a level of commitment and desire that wasn't there before. It took no-one's job away, in fact it helps get the task done in the most efficient way possible, allowing those team members to get back to other tasks more quickly.

At this point most students in my project management classes are amazed by this, their perception of generative AI still being one of a fast way to write a memo and little more.

Knowing what generative AI can and can't do and knowing how to talk to it and how to use it, gives a person the sense of control that they thought they had lost. Simply knowing the advice is out there gives people a sense of optimism and willingness.

A Calming Perspective

Generative AI isn't here to replace people. It is here to assist with tasks, especially repetitive or routine ones — so that people can do more of what only humans can do: connect, imagine, empathize, and lead. It is an innovation because it does something new. Something additional and different that no other technology has done before. Microsoft Word is simply the digital equivalent of a quill pen and a bottle of ink. It does the same thing, only faster. Generative AI, however, does something new. It creates ideas, plans and solutions, not to replace your own capacity to do so, but to allow you to climb up on top of that hill and see further.

If you have a comment about this podcast or a suggestion of a topic you would like me to discuss, join the conversation on LinkedIn. My ID there is [stevenprentice](#). Or feel free to drop me a line through the contact form at [cooltimelife.com](#), where you'll find a full listing of our episodes. If you feel you are getting value from this series, please leave a review, and tell just one person about us, or mention us on social media. And if you want, you can support us on Patreon. Contributions from our listeners allow me and my team to spend more time researching and preparing our podcast series. If that feels fair to you, please visit [patreon.com/steveprentice](#).

Until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening.