Be More Human in the AI Age with Kevin Roose (Transcript)

Chris Congdon: Welcome to Work Better a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. Here's a question: Can a robot take your job? It's not such an off-the-wall question anymore. Even writers like me are watching as AI takes a bigger and bigger bite out of the work we all do.

Our guest today – Kevin Roose – says you can do things to bring more of your humanity to work – and keep those robots at bay. Kevin is a New York Times technology writer based in Silicon Valley. He also wrote the book Futureproof: 9 Rules for Humans in the Age of Automation. We've followed Kevin's work for years. He's so close to all the advantages technology brings – and yet – he always seems to come back to what makes humans unique.

After we hear from Kevin, you'll want to stick around for our chat with Michel Held. Michael is Steelcase vice president of global design. He wrote an article about if Creative AI will make designers redundant – and we knew he was the perfect person to help us connect what Kevin says to our workplaces.

Let's get started. Thanks for joining us Kevin.

Kevin Roose: Thank you so much for having me.

CC: Kevin, you are a technology columnist and yet your work tends to kind of wind back to humanity. So I want to talk about that with you today but I want to start by just setting for the audience some terminology that we might use throughout the conversation because not everybody has your kind of background in technology. So we're all on the same page, how would you define AI and automation?

KR: It's a tricky question. We started hard. So, because AI and the way that people use terms like AI and automation really varies, some people and a lot of computer scientists think that AI refers to only computer programs that can learn on their own right, that aren't just carrying out pre-programmed instructions and things like deep learning and neural networks would fit into that category. But you know people use AI for all kinds of things. Siri for example. Some people consider things like dishwashers to be a robot that lives in your house. So there's really a wide range from very prosaic to very sophisticated so in the book I just use the sort of catchall category like AI and automation to describe any sort of process that is done by machines that used to be done exclusively by humans.

CC: Okay, that's super helpful. Yeah I agree there are some devices that have just become standard in our house that are a lot smarter than sometimes I even want them to be.

KR: There's a technologist who likes to say that it's AI until it works in which case it's just a washing machine or just a dishwasher or just a Roomba or something like that.

CC: Exactly. So going back before the pandemic there was a lot that was getting written about AI and automation and there was just a lot of speculation about the impact that was going to have on the world, on society and on business. And there was a lot of speculation that jobs would be lost as a result of automation. But yet here we're sitting in 2022 and we've got all kinds of jobs that are open and I'm just curious, what happened there?

KR: Well a couple possibilities. One is historically a lot of big leaps forward in automation come during recessions, so companies are tightening their belts. They're looking for ways to cut costs. And they might bring in a robot to replace some of the people on their assembly line or they might automate some back-office process that they've been meaning to get to. But when the economy's good and your company's flush with cash, maybe you don't feel as much pressure to wring every bit of savings out as you can. So it's possible that if we do enter a recession in the next few years, there will be more companies saying maybe now is the time to deploy that automation that we've been thinking about for years.

And another one, and this is one that I learned in the course of researching this book, is this theory of so-so automation and this was a term coined by two economists who have this great paper about basically the kind of automation that is only mediocre. It's not sort of a huge leap forward in automation that allows companies to be significantly more productive or cut entire departments worth of people. It's not world changing automation. It's mediocre improvements in processes or outcomes. A good example of this is the customer support automated voice thing that you get when you call an airline or an insurance company or something and a lot of the time like the robot's just not very good. It can't get you what you need and so you end up pressing 0 to talk to a human.

So that company still needs humans to pick up where the machines end. So it's not saving them a ton of money. It's not saving them a ton of headcount. It's basically this automation that is sort of just barely better or almost as good as a human. These economists Acemoglu and Restrepo write that this has been the dominant kind of automation that we've seen in the corporate world over the past several decades. Not this kind of enormous step change in productivity that would allow companies to do as much work or more with many fewer people. It's this kind of mediocre, so-so automation that they've been doing and so that could help explain why we don't have any people out of work.

CC: Yeah, because we were having a lot of water cooler conversation about whether our jobs could be replaced by a robot and I remember looking online to see what are the odds that my job could be replaced by a robot? And it seemed like there were some that were more likely to than others. But the thing that I found really interesting in your book Futureproof and in your Ted Talk is that you've talked a lot about rather than our response being to compete with the technology and be more like the robots, that we should actually be more like humans. Can you tell us a little bit more about that because I think that might seem counterintuitive to some people.

KR: Yeah, well it was counterintuitive to me and when I started researching this book I went out and I talked to a lot of leading AI scientists, researchers, people who work in the automation field and I was concerned principally with how we as humans, what should we do, if this big wave of automation is here if it's going to put a lot of people out of work if it's going to challenge us to keep up. What should we be doing? And I thought all of these computer scientists and engineers were going to tell me you need to go to coding boot camp. You need to become a programmer. You need to basically get as close to the machines as possible and instead they said the opposite. They said, you need to figure out what you can do that can't be automated because that's where the opportunities are going to be and that's going to be where the safe zone is around all of this technology. So then the question obviously is, what can't be automated and in the book I talk about 3 categories of work that I think are very unlikely to be automated anytime soon.

CC: Right.

KR: I call them surprising, social and scarce.

CC: And can you tell us a little bit about what it means to be surprising, social and scarce at work?

KR: Sure. So surprising work is just work that is irregular. It involves lots of chaos or basically jobs that are very different from day-to-day. So like a kindergarten teacher, it would be very hard to automate right? Because that job is just chaos. But chess for example is very easy for AI to perform at superhuman levels because it's the same every game. You're playing on a fixed board with the same rules every time. So the more surprising we can make our jobs, the more varied we can make them, then the safer we are. Social, the second category of protected work is work that doesn't involve making things, it involves making people feel things. So a therapist in the healthcare industry and your job is to work with patients, and if you're a teacher, if you are even someone like a barista, it's a social job if you are connecting with your customers and making them feel like they're getting more than just a cup of coffee from that exchange. And so the more social we can make our jobs, the more protected they are. And then the last category, scarce, is just these jobs that require rare skills or combinations of skills or that involve sort of extreme high-risk circumstances that we wouldn't trust to a machine. So the example I use in the book is the 911 operator. So today if you call 911 to report an emergency, a human picks up, not an automated voice machine and the reason that it does is because we've decided collectively as a society that job is too important to entrust to a robot. You really need someone who's going to pick up. Who's going to intuitively understand what's going on and who's going to be able to make the right decision about how to respond.

CC: I think in an emergency I really don't want to get the automated response in order to deal with what's going on at the moment. So one of the things that I actually found surprising about your work just to build off of that is in talking about remote work. So I kind of expected as a technology guy that you would be a huge advocate for remote work, that you would just think that that was the best thing ever. But then I saw a piece that you did that said working from home is overrated and I'm just curious to hear your take on this in this era of automation at whatever pace it's happening. How does remote work either help or hurt us as people?

KR: Well there's a lot of research on this luckily and by people much smarter than me and what the research generally shows is that people who work from home tend to be more productive than people who work in an office and there are all kinds of reasons for that. I mean if you aren't spending an hour or two a day commuting, if people aren't dropping by your desk, if you're not, you know, sitting in meetings all day, you can accomplish more. You can get more tasks done. So that's a plus for remote work but the research has also found that people who work remotely tend to be less creative. They tend to have fewer new ideas. They tend to spend less time collaborating with people, generating the kind of creative collisions that we get in an office and that they tend to be less happy and less connected to their work than people who work at least some of the time from an office. And I think we're starting to see this play out where people who feel like their jobs are precarious, they actually want to be in the office. The people who are most eager to get back into the office are young people. And there are people who aren't established in their careers who are still kind of making the connections and building the networks and learning the skills and who are finding that that's much easier to do in a physical office.

So I think that part of the issue with remote work is that if you work remotely, now your potential pool of replacements, people who could do your job, not only includes people who live in your city or could commute to that office, it includes people who can do your job all over the world and it also includes robots because ultimately and if AI can do your job more effectively and you're not bringing anything more than your labor to a company, it's much easier to replace you.

CC: I think we're in a very fluid period right now where it doesn't necessarily have to be an either- or proposition. You know, I don't have to be remote 100% of the time or I don't have to be in the office 100% of the time and our research is showing that most companies are shaking out somewhere in this middle zone of a hybrid work environment where people might be in the office 2 to three days a week or something like that. I think it's likely to be kind of fluid as you were saying if, for example, we came into a recession period that might be a time where people might be more likely to say, hey you know I feel like we need to gather all the troops together. We need to be hands on. We have big problems to solve and we better all do that together. In your book, you talk about this idea about being an end point or you kind of coach people to not be an end point. And I was wondering if you could talk about that a little bit because I wasn't sure if I really understood. What is the concept of a person being an end point?

KR: Yeah, so end point is a term from software development.

CC: Ah, that's why I didn't understand it. (laughs)

KR: Basically in software development. I mean I'm not a developer either. But I have talked to enough that I sort of learned their lingo and and an end point is basically a piece of software that connects to applications. So if you have dating apps like Tinder that want to be able to pull in photos from your Instagram account, then they will write a program and connect it to the Instagram end point. And that program will sort of be the connective tissue that allows one program to talk to another. A software developer said something that really stuck in my mind once, which is that a lot of people are essentially end points now. I mean think about Uber drivers or Amazon warehouse workers, people whose jobs basically involve taking instructions from one machine and putting them into another machine. You know taking the directions from a mobile mapping app and steering your car to where the machine tells you to go. Working in a warehouse – you're packing the boxes in the way that the machine tells you to and sending them to the places that the machine tells you effectively. You're not a machine. You're not a robot, but you are effectively working as one. You are part of this robotic system and the only reason that you haven't been replaced yet is because the machine can't yet do some little piece of that job. But those jobs are those end point jobs and there are millions of them. Those are the easiest targets for automation because humans are this little sort of fleshy middle point in this fully automated system and once the system can eliminate that human role it's going to be much faster and more profitable for it to do so.

CC: Interesting. Okay, so another concept that you zeroed in on is about collaboration and the idea of working with other people is also key to helping us thrive in the automation age. Can you talk about that a little bit?

KR: I mean this goes to that second category of protected work which is social and meeting people's social needs rather than just their material needs. It is a huge industry. I mean we have therapists, we have life coaches. We have executive coaches. And we have you know people whose jobs are deeply social and those jobs are hard to automate, not because you couldn't teach a chat bot to dispense executive coaching advice, but because what we're paying for when we hire a life coach or a diet coach or a therapist is that personal connection. So people in any workplace can make their jobs safer and less prone to automation by making them more social, by establishing those connections by making sure that when you are doing your work, you're actually not just typing into a box and doing it in a solitary way, but you're building relationships and making people smile and helping them when they're in need. Those kinds of jobs are going to be much safer than the jobs where you're just a solitary genius pecking away at code in a basement somewhere.

CC: Got it. So Kevin, I want to pivot a little bit because you started writing about a topic that is very hot on everybody's minds right now. I think you were kind of ahead of the curve when you wrote an article about the Yolo Economy. You were identifying that people were starting to look for something else coming out of their work, something that was missing and could you talk a little bit about what you were seeing and what is it that you think was kind of missing for a lot of people at work? And what are some things that leaders might want to think about differently in order to make sure that we're meeting those needs that people have?

KR: Yeah, so the Yolo Economy was my attempt to coin a term and get it into the vernacular. Yolo is short for You Only Live Once, of course. Unfortunately, I think that the term that ended up sticking was someone else's term – the Great Resignation. But it's all sort of the same thing which is that there was this wave of workers in white collar industries but also in other industries who midway through the pandemic, 2021 and early 2022, decided that they weren't getting what they wanted out of their jobs and that they were missing balance. They were missing time with their families. They were missing novelty or adventure and so they were just quitting and they could afford to do it because they had some savings, their stock portfolios were up and they were getting stimulus checks. So all of a sudden you just had these people who were saying like I don't really need to be doing this anymore and changing the course of their lives entirely because they just decided that life was too short to be stuck at a job where they were unhappy.

So I interviewed people from lots of different fields who had made sort of Yolo decisions around their jobs and also to employers who were trying to decide what to do about this. You know, should we try to keep these people, how can we prevent people from getting so burned out that they quit? I think there's still a lot that we don't know about that. I think companies are really desperate to retain their best people and so I think part of the kind of flexible work push is an attempt to do that, saying well don't quit. Maybe you'd be happier if you worked from home or only came in one day a week or something like that. I think there's been a lot of companies that have attempted to make work as flexible for people as possible in hopes that they won't quit and need to be replaced.

And so I'm interested in doing a follow up on that actually. It's been a while since I wrote that article because I think there's been a shift in some of these workplaces. Maybe the companies are big tech companies and they don't have as much money as they used to. Their stock prices are down 30 or 40% and so I think they're actually seeing workers be a little bit more attached to their jobs and eager to keep them rather than saying: Well I'll get another one tomorrow that pays more because I think they feel like the economy is turning a little bit.

CC: Yeah, I think one of the shifts that we've been talking about a lot is really what is the experience people have when they go into the workplace? And we've talked about how maybe the original inspiration for the office was more factory based or efficiency based and do we need to start thinking about the workplace to be more like the thriving communities where people really feel a sense of belonging and connection. So what I wanted to ask you before I let you go is, you told a great story about a bookstore in your neighborhood. I think it's called Marcus Books and it really thrived during a time where it seemed like the companies that were going to thrive and that were going to come out on top were all, maybe more technology focused or more automation focused, but yet Marcus Books was a different story. Can you just talk about that a little bit?

KR: Yeah, Marcus Books is a black owned bookstore in my neighborhood in Oakland, California. It's actually the oldest black owned bookstore in America and I go there a lot. And I was sort of fascinated by its resilience and survival. If you were going to start a business in the last 20 years, there aren't many worse ones than an independent bookstore. A lot of them have gone out of business. It's very hard to compete with Amazon and other retailers and so I was just sort of flummoxed by how this store seemed to be doing so well. So I did some research and I talked to the owner. It turns out that basically I thought they were going to say oh well, we've been working on our e-commerce strategy and we've lowered our prices to compete. And instead it was sort of this experience where I was just dead wrong because the owner basically said we're not really all that internet focused. They didn't even really have a website where you could order books as of a year or two ago.

And yet, they were super super popular and profitable and thriving and so I asked her how do you do that? And she just said basically in so many words, we cultivated a good vibe, people really like coming here.

CC: That's awesome.

KR: You know, black patrons like coming here because they know that they're not going to be followed around and harassed by some security guard and families like coming here because they know it's a place where kids can discover books and we have knowledgeable people who work in the store and can point people to where they go. It's just got a good vibe and I really think that's a good instructive lesson for businesses that are threatened by not only automation but by competition from huge highly automated companies like Amazon. And you're not going to outcompete Amazon on logistics, shipping time, price inventory, you're just not going to be able to do it as an independent bookstore. But what you can do that Amazon can't do is cultivate a vibe and so that's my advice to any business that feels like they've run out of options for competing with speed and efficiency and price.

CC: I would just build on that and say for a lot of organizations who are saying gee, I really wish my people would come into the office more often, you know, maybe they need to focus on just cultivating a good vibe.

KR: This is gonna be the name of my consultancy that I start someday, vibe cultivation.

CC: I love that. Or maybe it's the title of your next article or your next book Kevin. Anyway, it has been such a pleasure to talk with you today. I really appreciate it and I think I'm just going to go out and work on cultivating my vibe and leaning into my humanity instead of trying to compete with computers. So thank you for being here.

KR: Awesome! Awesome and thank you so much for having me. This was a lot of fun.

CC: Welcome now to Michael Held, Steelcase vice president of global design. I wanted to talk to Michael because a couple of years ago he wrote an article titled "Will Creative AI Make Designers Redundant?" That title just sticks with me because I always worry if my job could be replaced. AI is doing so many things now. I'm curious about what you think about the role of AI in our creative jobs?

Michael Held: At the end of the day, I think it's humans that create culture for humans. It's us choosing what are the things that we want to automate? What are the systems we want it to be involved in? For the moment, I think we use it as creative tools. We play around with technology. Writing is a big thing. There are a lot of websites that are automated, aggregated, and provide summaries of reviews of other websites. In some cases, people don't mind. They are okay with automated responses. And in some cases, you do mind. You want to have that human connection, a level of trust you might not get any other way. What we see today with text to image, text to video, speech to image experiments are super interesting. AI is trying to guess what we imagine and trying to give us images we won't dream up ourselves. It's refining those queries. And there are already new jobs created. Somebody who is really good at asking or triggering those AI systems to provide better results. Those jobs didn't exist a few years ago, but they do exist now. People are getting paid for it.

It's impossible to even think about what these systems will even do in two years, five years, ten years. In fact, I think most things we do as humans today could be done one way or another by systems. But do we want that? Do we need that? And who makes those decisions? I think this is where we want to have humans involved.

CC: I'm fascinated with Kevin pointing out that we can be very productive working from home. All the data points out that people can get a lot done. But he also pointed out, and this surprises me coming from a tech writer, that they tend to have a lot less creativity, fewer ideas, and they tend to spend less time collaborating with people. I was wondering what you thought of that and if we can create physical environments that can help us build those kinds of connections that we missed if we have been working remote or maybe still are?

MH: Yeah, it's interesting. These topics. He started with certain buckets of work that would be difficult to automate and one of those was "surprising." I think this applies really well to spaces. The watercooler or serendipity – those are the things that are really hard, or impossible to transfer to a remote work scenario because you don't schedule 30 minutes for serendipity at home. You don't have a computer system that randomly connects you to a coworker and then you suddenly talk about something that you hadn't thought about before. This is where physical space is a much better catalyst for these kinds of interactions. You have to go from point A to point B and during that short amount of time something can happen that simply does not happen when you sit in front of a computer and you join the next call. You just join the next call sitting in the same place you were, probably thinking the same things you were.

A physical space really helps us to be not comfortable all the time. But also to be uncomfortable once in a while, and be surprised or be triggered by something or interrupted by something. And while in the moment that can feel less than ideal, the outcome is often better than the monotony of sitting in front of a screen and not moving, joining and hanging up.

CC: It's interesting when you talk about feeling uncomfortable. I probably felt comfortable working in sweatpants when I was at home. But the idea that the workplace can make us uncomfortable – do you mean push us out of our comfort zones?

MH: I think any environment where people learn needs to strike the right balance between making us comfortable with a slight level of discomfort. When I observe myself, I learn the most when there are moments when I get uncomfortable. You don't want to be in that state forever. You don't want to be constantly under stress. But, we humans need both states. I think that's what Kevin may have been getting at a little. There are certain things we maybe should do at home because they are just working through some tasks, you know. And there are other things we should definitely be together in the office. How do we get people to come and enjoy the places? What's the right experience to help everyone find that right balance?

CC: Do you have any thoughts on that?

MH: Kevin was talking about this bookstore, Marcus Books in Oakland where he lives, that's this great place for the community. I think it just means so much more for that community then just being a transactional space. And, in the same way, I think the office needs to be a space that's for more than just doing the tasks assigned to you. You're part of a community. It's a social element. You have coworkers. It's also – you don't necessarily have to agree with everybody, and that's okay. A lot of people are in their social bubbles and when you talk to people that are the same and think alike, you only reinforce what you're already thinking. And I think a workplace is a place where people also get new ideas or different ideas and once in a while also hear something that they personally think otherwise about. That's okay if we do that with the right kind of values and treating each other right. And that's what this bookstore is doing for that community. It's a place to learn. A place to connect. It's a space to meet people that are different, perhaps. So the workplace should be doing that. The way it's designed should provide you with a lot of different variety of spaces that provides that side of the story and not just a monotonous place to get tasks done. This is definitely a non-corporate space.

CC: I loved the way he described it as a place that just had a great vibe. I just loved the idea that we should be creating places at work that have a great vibe. Anyway, I'm really glad that you could take the time to join me, Michael. Thank you for being here with me.

MH: Thanks, Chris.

Thank you for being here with us this episode of Work Better. If you enjoyed this conversation – please subscribe to this podcast on your favorite podcast platform and visit us at steelcase.com/subscribe to sign up for weekly updates on research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox.

Next week – We're talking about Hipsters, Hackers and Hustlers. Simone Ahuja will be here to talk about how cultures of innovation need all three roles – the hipster, the hacker and the hustler to succeed. Simone is CEO of Blood Orange and consults with some of the biggest organizations out there on innovation strategies. She's also author of Disrupt-it-yourself. She'll share research she conducted in India that inspired her to think about how innovation can actually help with engagement. Please join us.

Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.