Onboarding Your AI Coworker With Sean Gallagher (S5:EP6) (Transcript)

Chris Congdon: Ready or not, AI is here. And that means employees and leaders must learn how to work alongside a new coworker and get ready for the AI workplace.

Welcome to the Work Better podcast, a podcast where we talk about work and ways to make it better. I'm host Chris Congdon and today we're talking all about our new co-worker, generative AI. I'm joined by one of our producers, Katie Pace. Katie, have you used AI in your work?

Katie Pace: Honestly, I am a little intimidated by AI. I know it can do cool things, like synthesize lots of information or even create a whole podcast, but it's not a part of my everyday work yet.What about you?

CC: I totally get that. I use it to help with writer's block or if I have a tough topic to research but I don't use it all the time. Today's guest, Sean Gallagher, says we should actually be using AI more because it makes us more productive and engaged..

KP: Sean is the founder of Humanova, a consultancy that helps companies solve workforce and workplace risks associated with AI and hybrid work. He's a leading Australian expert on the future of work, focusing on the transformative effects of technology..

CC: Sean really knows AI. He led Australia's first study on Generative AI's impact on knowledge work with Deloitte and created the first Generative AI course aimed at enhancing business productivity.

KP: Okay, before we go any further- can we start with what is AI?

CC: That was actually my first question too and where I started the conversation. Let's start there:

CC: Welcome to the Work Better podcast, Sean.

Sean Gallagher: Well, thanks very much, Chris. It's great to be joining you from Sydney, Australia today.

CC: We want to talk about the topic that everybody is talking about right now, which is AI. And as you know, it's a term that's used pretty broadly, and our level of knowledge for our listeners and just in general is kind of all over the place. So just to level-set, could you tell us a little bit about how you define AI or what are some of the distinctions that our listeners should be thinking about as we go through this conversation?

SG: Well, I think this is a really important framing for our conversation, but also for your listeners in the sense that the kind of AI that most people have seen in the headlines recently is a completely new kind of AI, generative AI. I mean, AI has been around for many years, decades in fact. And that kind of AI is often called narrow AI or predictive AI, and it takes very large data sets and can help predict or forecast a trend that is evident within that. So it's really great for, say, forecasting weather or maybe your future sales opportunities. But generative AI is really about creating new content, something that doesn't exist yet, so it generates ideas, or it can help you draft an email or report or write code or create some images for you. So it really is quite a different kind of mindset to understanding AI in that it really is about creating something new that didn't exist before.

KP: That's really the part that's crazy to me, AI creating something new. As a writer, creator, producer it's a bit scary to me. Could AI write this podcast? Could AI produce an article or design a floorplan? Where does AI get so good it doesn't need us?

CC: That makes sense and I have some of those fears too. Generative AI isn't a perfect tool, yet, but it can be used as a thought starter or jumping off point when you give it good prompts. It can take some of the hard work and make it faster.

KP: Sort of like an intern or entry level associate? Writing the first draft of a press release, that then needs some more work.

CC: That's actually exactly what he says! It's more like a new colleague that's coming to help versus an enemy that's coming to take your job. If you give it a report, it can write a summary that's 60 percent of the way there, but you'll still have to edit it and make sure it's on brand. And Sean says when we do start to outsource that work to AI, employees have better overall wellbeing and even work-life balance.

KP: Well that's fascinating.I see how it could reduce the mental load at work, and if you're comfortable with the technology your outlook is probably pretty positive, but if not, there's a lot of anxiety there. This was a really interesting part of your conversation, let's listen to what Sean had to say about AI as a co-worker and how it impacts our wellbeing.

SG: Don't think of it as a technology. Think of it as a virtual coworker or a virtual colleague. And that way it is about this virtual intern who is incredibly capable, is highly intelligent, has an endless capacity to do work, but is naive and makes mistakes. So how would you onboard an intern or a grad or a junior into your workforce? It takes a little bit of work upfront in terms of helping them understand how you work, but also being able to articulate what it is that you want them to do. And so, thinking it's just onboarding a new colleague, but ultimately it will be about how we're able to articulate and express what we want the AI to do for us.

CC: So let's talk about something that you found about how AI impacts employees' mental health. Can you tell us about that study?

SG: Yeah, one of the things that we've done here in Australia is I've led a national study on the workforce, trying to understand and measure the experience, the attitudes, and the use of generative AI by workers right across the economy in the work that they do. And what we found is what we call high-frequency users. Other people call them power users, if you like. So those workers who use AI within their work on at least a daily basis demonstrate a much different perspective on the future and the opportunities that they have in front of them. Not only do they see it leading to better work-life balance in the sense that it minimizes their workload or helps alleviate inefficient workflows, but on the mental health side of things, there's a strong correlation with these power users or high-frequency users. They have a much higher level of job satisfaction. They see a significant improvement in job opportunities, like three times more optimism about better job opportunities, but also in terms of their own work-life balance. It really is across the board, but it cuts off really beyond daily users. So even workers that use it from time to time, maybe weekly, have a far lower optimistic view of the future or the impact on them. And that actually kind of aligns with a lot of research that has been done from a productivity perspective. The top performance comes from workers who are using it continually within their work, not just sort of reaching for it from time to time. That also then aligns with a much more positive outlook for mental health, work-life balance, and better and more meaningful work.

CC: Yeah, that's really interesting, Sean, because it makes sense to me of course that if somebody is like a power user or early adopter, whatever you want to call them, that they're super excited about it and they don't have angst about the technology, they're embracing it. So that makes a lot of sense to me. But I think it also makes sense that if somebody's feeling like, I'm not sure how to use this and I'm not sure what to do, that you would maybe feel a little bit more worried about that and maybe feel kind of AI anxiety. Does that sound right to you?

SG: Yeah, there's a lot of fear around AI and there's probably maybe four different dimensions of fear that I would probably talk about. One of course is fear of losing your job.

The second is fear of maybe using it in your work and you're concerned that you're going to get caught by your boss or your colleagues.

CC: Yeah, they're going to find out it wasn't original work that …

SG: Or that's the other apprehension, right? In the sense that, oh, what if my colleagues find out that I'm using it for the work that I've been employed to do? Are they going to think that I'm less competent for actually using it?

But there's also I think a fear generally of the sophistication of the technology. I remember the very first time that I prompted into chat GBT, my heart rate was elevated. I was a bit anxious and because I had a bit of performance anxiety, performance anxiety in terms of is it going to think that I'm dumb, but gradually getting to build up an intuition, right? As you know, there's no instruction manual that comes along with AI, and the best way for us to build up a proficiency is through building intuition. So, through frequent and regular use within our work.

KP: I can relate to that performance anxiety with AI!

CC: Me too. But as Sean says, this is new and we're all just learning.

KP: So if this new technology changes our work, and can be used to help our jobs and not take it away, and ultimately give us better wellbeing, it seems like the company I work for should have some responsibility to teach me or help me learn how to use it, right? It benefits everyone if the company leads this effort.

CC: Exactly. I asked him about that and he really emphasized that learning AI shouldn't be left to the worker. Right now, AI at work is really employee-led and leaders are taking a wait-and-see-approach. But leaders are critical to its success. Here he is again:

SG: Now it's time for leaders of organizations to really step up and to make sure that they've got the right settings in place. First, there are three key things that our research shows strongly indicate creating a workforce of those power users, the first clear and supportive direction from leadership that AI is integral to our future and we're embracing it. The second is having a policy in place, and that's not just about the guardrails about ethics and security of data and so forth. Of course it does involve that, but it's also the values and vision. Why are we doing this? And we're taking on ai, not because we want to get rid of a whole bunch of workers and reduce our headcount. We want to improve all of you in the work you do. And of course, the third is actually formal training, providing company sponsored type arrangement where the basics, the hands on the tools and understanding how it works, but then also providing a little bit more sophisticated education and experience in terms of now how do you begin to integrate it into the work you do?

And certainly in the companies that I'm working with, that's very much the approach and just the light bulbs that go on when workers start to see, ah, you can do that with it, and it's all of a sudden much less of all the apprehension and fear very quickly begins to dissipate.

KP: I appreciate that. The more I learn from our training about AI, the more I'm seeing how it can help me in my job. When we hear from our leaders in IT on how they're applying AI to help the company, you really can begin to see the possibilities.

CC: Exactly. It has huge potential for the design industry. In fact, Steelcase and our dealer community have developed a data analytics practice that analyzes information gleaned from customer orders. These applications are aggregated to find new patterns in the ways organizations are updating their spaces and then the data allow us to identify and share workplace trends as they emerge.

Of course, as AI evolves and is incorporated into our work it will influence how we interact with our environments.

KP: Of course. I'm really curious, what did he have to say about how AI would change the physical environment?

CC: He talked about how AI is really going to augment our experiences both at the office and at home. And while so much is uncertain, we know when work changes, the places we work need to change too.

KP: This is a good place to pick up the conversation, let's listen in again,

CC: Another thing, Sean, that I'm really interested in is your thinking about how this is going to have an impact on the office and maybe that it might make the office even more essential to our work, which I think for some people that might be counterintuitive, they might think, well, I'm just on a computer screen all the time now with using chat GPT or whatever I'm using. Tell me more about why this will make a renaissance, if you will, for the office.

SG: I think that's a great word, and I do think that the office is going to come back into a greater relative importance in terms of the work we do, but the future office is going to look quite a bit different to what it does today. And I think I've done a lot of research and working with companies in terms of hybrid working and hybrid working actually is to me it's a really helpful framework to understand how AI is going to impact organizations and and where they work. That's interesting. And if you've set up hybrid in, if you set it up very well, then the work that your team members do remotely is that business as usual, that routine task-based work, things that they've done many, many times before can either be as individuals or even teamwork. But when we come to the office under hybrid, that should be much more about dynamic and meaningful interactions with our colleagues.

Let's take advantage of having a bunch of humans together in the same room and do work that we can only do when we have that. The work that we do remotely is actually far more exposed to being automated by AI, compared to the work that we do when we come together, which is actually far less exposed. And so, I sort of see, as AI becomes more and more sophisticated, we will see a greater emphasis on the work that humans do in organizations occurring in the office, and less so than when we're remote.

CC: So I want to pause there a minute because I want to throw out a different experience. It may be just me, but when I work from home, I'm actually doing it when I need to do deep work, when I need to do deep thinking. I'm my own worst enemy when I'm in the office because I'm extroverted and I socialize. And so I think the work that I'm doing when I'm at home, which is not a daily thing for me, that's something that I reserve a day a week to be able to do deep work on. And so that's the kind of stuff that when I'm using AI, that's the kind of thing that I'm doing in that moment. Maybe I need help clearing writer's block or just I'm doing some research and I want to get some help to be able to do that research. So I can see that that kind of work could also be happening in different ways going forward. The way we do deep work might change. What do you think?

SG: Yeah, I think that's a really great observation. You're absolutely spot on that wherever it is, and most often it is when we're working remotely, we need the cognitive space to do deep work. And there's still going to be a role for working remotely, particularly for what you've just mentioned. And AI actually isn't automating you out of that. It's actually augmenting you to help you better form a mental model, to understand a concept or to organize your thinking in a more logical and coherent way, whatever it might be. And that deep work is really important to be done in a space where you're not being distracted by teams, meetings, or all the other digital distractions that go on. So I certainly see that it's not going to be, we only work in the office and not remote, but the type of work that we do in those locations is going to evolve.

CC: Sure, sure. And I'm not saying you can't do deep work in the office. I'm saying maybe that's my challenge just because of how I'm wired. But this does bring us to a point I want to explore with you a little bit because I think as people have thought about the integration of generative AI into our work lives, we've thought about the work itself. I'm not sure everybody has thought as far ahead as maybe you have to think about how might that influence the physical environments in which we're working. And so, I want to unpack that a little bit, and I know you've done some thinking about it. I'm just curious, what are some of your initial reactions to how might the physical places where we work need to change to support using generative AI?

SG: There are probably at least four different roles that I sort of see. So, I see one of the roles is as a meeting place. It's where you have work conferences, it's where you meet clients or colleagues, where you nourish and maintain or develop relationships between your colleagues or those weak ties that we often talk about across the organization.

The second is that team collaboration, but where it's very much more dynamic, where you are working in an ill-defined problem space and having to converge on everyone's mental model to reach a consensus to figure out how to act and respond to the opportunity before you. That can be ideated kind of work, or it could be responding to a client's brief, all of that.

And the third would be what I call sort of business scenario planning. And that's more from an organizational perspective where you are having to have strategic discussions or you're responding to a crisis or maybe you are wanting to develop some new concepts for products or services that you offer. So again, often that amorphous space in which coming together and being able to have rich communication from in-person.

The fourth is, it's a little bit provocative, but there's a couple of things in the news and maybe some of your listeners have seen them. And I'm just trying to understand what this means for the office. The first is you might have heard of the Hong Kong deep fake banking scam where a finance officer thought she was on a video call with her CFO and the CFO asked her, or in fact directed her to wire I think 20 million pounds or about 25 million US dollars to a particular destination, which she did, but it was a complete deep fake. It was not the CFO. And both in terms of the video and the audio were faked.

And there's also the concern as AI is going to become more sophisticated, we may not always be able to trust the AI. There may be some malicious AI that we don't know is listening in and so forth. And I think that maybe this fourth role of the offices could be like secure portals or even Faraday cages where it's the only place you can have very serious and strategic discussions when you're talking with the people that you need to be talking to. But also, the conversations that you have are secure in that space.

KP: Well, I was just starting to feel a little better about AI and now I'm totally spooked again!

CC: Yes, I'm very grateful I don't have the authority or ability to wire money for the company anywhere in the world.

KP: Me too. But to that point, change is happening so quickly, where do we start? And what do leaders need to do?

CC: According to Sean, we just jump in. We start using it with our work and experiment with where it might be helpful.

KP: I'm going to start asking it to write podcast summaries and see what we get.

CC: Let's try it. It's all about a learning mindset.

KP: That's what Sean said, let's listen in again:

SG: I know there might be a temptation among some leaders to say, "Hey, let's let this mature a little bit, settle down, let things shake out, and then we'll start getting into it." But I think you'd advise them that that's a mistake. So can you talk a little bit more about that? How would you get started? Research is showing that cohorts in randomized control trials, cohorts that have been enabled to work with generative AI like ChatGPT versus the cohort that is not able to use it within those tasks, those using ChatGPT can perform a task much more quickly. They can do a much greater volume of work, and the quality of the output is also significantly greater. So there's already data to suggest that the current versions of AI really are going to deliver benefits to you. Of course, leaders are worried about the ethics and the security of data and so forth, and I'm not in any way seeking to diminish that they are a concern, but there's a whole truckload of work that workers can be doing now, integrating AI into their tasks, formatting a report or structuring this or helping me respond to an email or whatever it might be.

And these little time savings accumulate over work. But this technology is, it is going to be different next week and next month to what it is today. And the only way to continue to get the best out of it is to evolve with it and to integrate it into work now.

CC: Sure. So to that point, organizations are really going to need to, if they don't already have it, create a culture that's a learning culture so people can continue to build their skills. And I wonder if you have any guidance for organizations as they're trying to create this learning culture.

SG: Where the technology is currently, all the dividends are being realized at the individual level, workers integrating it into their workflow. But for organizations to really become enabled by AI, it has to be scaled at the team level. I think the team unit is absolutely critical for making sure that you become an AI-driven organization. And there's a number of things that in terms of changing the team culture around that psychological safety is probably number one.

CC: Interesting.

SG: Ensuring that workers want to share their learnings or that they all want to experiment together, that they're learning from their mistakes, that they're able to share use cases, and to be able to understand and improve together as a unit in terms of the work or the functions that they perform in that organization. But at the moment, workers are still very reticent to talk about how they're using it. They might say, "Yeah, I'm using it," but they don't talk about their specific experience and we need to create that culture of psychological safety where we can be much more transparent and sharing. It's just like bringing on a new intern, right?

CC: Sure.

SG: Making sure that they're integrated into the work that you do.

CC:: Yeah, I love that analogy of whether it's an intern or it's a new colleague, it's a new partner in getting your work done. Thank you, Sean, for joining us on Work Better. We just really appreciated you joining us today.

SG: Thanks so much, Chris. I've really enjoyed our conversation.

KP: Alright, I guess our next podcast will be produced by my new co-worker, a bot.

CC: Well, maybe not the whole thing. That was a helpful conversation though, can you tell us who we have on the podcast next week?

KP: Next week we're talking to Dr. Ben Wigert, the Director of Research and Strategy, for Gallup's Workplace Management Practice. He talks about the change fatigue we're all experiencing and why more people are looking for new jobs than ever.

CC: I was really inspired to hear him talk about employee wellbeing, and he has great advice for both employees and managers.

If you enjoyed today's conversation, would you share the episode with a friend or colleague, like us and visit us as steelcase.com/reserach to sign up for weekly updates on workplace, research, insights and design ideas delivered right to your inbox.

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