

ATOMIC 212°

SMARTER, FASTER, ACCOUNTABLE.
UNPACKING THE BITE OF AUTOMATION.

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MODERATED BY

Carolyn Maloney
*People & Culture Director,
Atomic 212°*

PANELLIST

Alison Earl
Speaker, Author & Trainer

PANELLIST

Elias Lattouf
Agency Lead, Google

PANELLIST

Aaron McEwan
*Vice President, Research
& Advisory Gartner*

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ATOMIC 212° PRESENTS AT MFA-EX

Atomic 212° was proud to be selected to present a session at the Media Federation of Australia's MFA EX: Media For All, a new event for the media industry. Held in Sydney in October the event attracted 1,500 people and highlighted ground-breaking media thinking, innovation and people development and best practice.

The title of our session said it all: Smarter, Faster, Accountable... Unpacking The Bite Of Automation. According to McKinsey & Company, between 25% and 46% of jobs in Australia could be automated by 2030. While automaton and artificial intelligence present economic opportunity upwards of \$4 trillion, what does this mean for current skillsets and job functions in our industry?

Our aim was to explore the rise of automation within the workforce and its impact on agency work and agency people – and to answer a simple but extremely complicated question: what does an automation-enabled results-driven business, look, feel and behave like.

As a data-driven business we are tackling these changes on a daily basis as we navigate the opportunities and barriers associated with automation. The MFA EX session explored that challenge and what it means for our industry.

The session featured three industry experts: Google Australia agency lead Elias Lattouf; Gartner vice president, research and advisory, Aaron McEwan; and speaker, trainer and author Alison Earl. The session was moderated by Atomic 212° people and culture director, Carolyn Maloney.

HERE IS AN EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF THE SESSION.



CAROLYN

At Google you engage with automation on an everyday basis, let's start with your definition and experience with this hot topic?



ELIAS

I see automation as very much the idea that we need a computer to perform those repetitive and menial tasks that really take up a lot of our time. I do want to make the distinction between automation and artificial intelligence, machine learning and deep learning because that sort of stuff is very much like automation on steroids.

We're going from basic processes like that robot in The Simpsons to things where we're going to literal networks and finding new parts using data and machines. It's been interesting seeing that shift over time, as we go from that automation perspective right through to execution as well. It's been interesting seeing how a traditional agency, for example, would differ to a digital agency because all of a sudden you've got this focus from archaic systems such as getting a media plan and signing it off, to some agencies where that's not even a thing – you're just pushing a button and things are going live.



CAROLYN

Alison, at the end of day, everything we do as an industry comes down to influencing behaviour. As a behaviour change expert, what's the role of automation in the way the industry is evolving?



ALISON

I think today we need it more than ever. We are inundated with choices and options and we can help simplify the process of choosing for our consumers and, at the end of the day, start to understand a really complex media landscape.

Everyone's familiar with the concept of a designated driver, but what you might not know is that it was actually a Harvard professor who came up with that concept in order to try and solve the problem of drink-driving.

That professor worked with the writers of the TV show Cheers to build it into their scripts. But back then we had a captive audience; 70% of the population would be watching the one TV show at that time. These days there's literally thousands of media touchpoints that our consumers are exposed to; we can't access them in the same way that we used to, so we need the machine learning and AI to start to make sense of that.

Not to mention the consumers themselves. All of us, on average, have to make 35,000 semi-conscious decisions a day, which is just an outrageous amount, so the more we can automate and make it easier to navigate that, the better.



CAROLYN

What does automation mean for current job numbers and skill sets for marketers, agencies and media owners in Australia?



AARON

Mostly, really good news. What we're seeing in terms of the projection of how automation is going to drive the demand for particular skill sets is that we've probably already reached the peak of what we call hard technology skills. The demand for things like coding and AI engineers is probably going to flatline or decline over the next 10 years. The biggest growth is in two areas. One is what we call digital dexterity: the ability for someone to use and manipulate emerging technology to drive value to the customers or business. The second one is social and creative skills, that is, the higher-end human skills around engaging, influencing and so on.

The good news is that everyone in this room probably has high digital dexterity and social and creative skills, so you're going to be at the top of the hit list for every company in the world. You've got exciting careers ahead.

The bad news is that if you're an owner or a manager of an agency, your people are going to be the biggest target for poaching by every company in the world and you won't be able to just throw money at people to keep them.



CAROLYN

You are working with agencies on a daily basis. What are your observations when it comes to automation/processes in terms of workflow, systems, tools and so on?



ELIAS

One of the most exciting parts about my role is I have visibility of agencies not just across Australia but across APAC and the US. I think there are some important distinctions to make between agencies that are really leaning into automation versus agencies that potentially succumb to legacy systems, for example, for account queries and so on.

There is a new breed of agency that really have embraced automation and have it at their core. One of the agencies we work with has made it their ambition to automate themselves out of the door, not in the literal sense, but they keep striving for automation and really making efficiencies so they can focus on high-value tasks like strategic thinking.

The second thing is there's a lot more to automate. McKinsey estimates that, on average, 30% of the jobs that we do on a general level are data collecting and reporting. That stuff can all be automated and make us so much more efficient in what we do. Automation can also reduce churn and burn out.

But there's a lot of inertia. For people who don't technically understand machine learning or the full capabilities of it, there is this sense of 'I don't want to give over the keys over because I don't know what this thing can do and I'm not really sure if I trust it'. That's a very natural thing to feel. Some people are really leaning into it and seeing the benefits, and I think that's somewhere as an industry we really need to go.



CAROLYN

You've been working with companies that are experiencing record levels of change. Can you tell us about the impact of automation and AI on the human experience in the workplace?



ALISON

The idea of automating yourself out of a job is a really cool mission and it's something that's also the reason people are really freaked out by AI and automation. I work a lot with companies that are changing at really rapid rates. I was speaking to the CMO of one of the tech companies recently and they just had 25% of their marketing roles replaced by AI in the previous year and that's only going to continue to increase.

What that means is we're being confronted with a lot of uncertainty – what does this mean for my job, do I still have a role, is it good for me, is it bad for me?

We don't quite know the answers yet because we're still working through it all and understanding the full capabilities of AI and automation. Research shows that uncertainty is more stressful than knowing something bad is definitely going to happen. More people would rather know for certain that they're going to get electric shock than have a 50/50 chance of getting zapped. It's not surprising we have record rates of stress and record rates of burnout in the workplace.



CAROLYN

How can automation be less of the game changer and more of the job enabler?



ELIAS

I'd challenge that question and say AI and machine learning is the game-changer and the job enabler. Thirty per cent of people [in the media industry] feel they are under-resourced to perform their jobs. At the same time, AI is growing and expanding the economy. It's a job enabler because it's giving us the opportunity to get into more strategic work. We don't study to update media plans, we don't study to optimise campaigns, we all study to really get into strategy and fundamentally change the way our clients do their business. That's what we all want to do.

Think about if you could automate post campaign reports, where you just have all your data pre-populated into a template that you and the client agree on and you're just coming in over the top to add things that the machine can't add. The machine doesn't know the political context, the machine doesn't know the market conditions, but it knows for sure the numbers. Using the machine you're reducing the chance for error, you're reducing time spent on data collection and reporting, and you're focusing on higher strategic work.



CAROLYN

As we go on the automation journey, what are the key things individuals and businesses need to think about and start planning for?



AARON

The fundamental problem is that the demand for the types of skills that I described earlier is going to become so intense that companies cannot just use what they've previously used, which is what we call a build and a buy strategy. You either build your capability internally – if we're talking about an increasingly automated or technology-driven workplace then typically we would have tried to steal people from Google that come with wonderful skillsets by giving them more money – or we try and build skills internally.

Unfortunately, more and more companies will not have pay cheques big enough to buy and they won't have the internal capability to build the type of skills needed. So increasingly they are going to have to look at two things. One of those things is what I call the borrow. That means tapping into the contingent workforce, that is, the non-traditional, non-permanently employed market. Those people want more flexibility to be able to build their skill sets in a faster way than most companies can offer. Companies will increasingly have to get very comfortable with not owning their employees but



CAROLYN

How do we need to think differently about learning and growth in order to thrive?



ALISON

We used to learn new skills and then apply them over and over again. But that no longer works as we have to keep re-learning all the time. The way we learn has to be constant. There's a lot more experimentation and we have to get a lot more tolerant about how we learn from failure, for example. We have to develop workplace cultures that are a bit more experimental because even if you figure out how to do something now, it's going to change really quickly.

rather borrowing them. So if you're a big bank, my advice is if you want to steal somebody from Google, for example, you can offer things like cheap credit but you won't be able to get that person for the entire week.

Then there's the bridge component which I don't think will impact agencies in any major way. It's more for traditional companies, which will have to get comfortable with essentially taking people – bank tellers, for example – and giving them the time and the space to build new capabilities and transition over time into the next business. I think that's a challenge unique to conglomerate businesses.

Finally, does anyone know Marie Kondo*? If we use automation right, we can use it to Marie Kondo our workforces. I think this is the biggest opportunity we have. People are overwhelmed, overworked and exhausted. If we use automation to get rid of the crap, the bullshit, the useless approval steps and all of the garbage that we have to do, that will free us up to develop the cognitive capacity we need to learn the skills that the robots can't do.

We have to be reinventing and relearning constantly now – and recognising that there's going to be pain through that. It's OK if it hurts; it means we're learning and growing through it. Resilience and having the right mindset are going to be huge, because the skills keep evolving. It is less about what we do and more about how we're applying ourselves and how we're continuing to grow.



CAROLYN

What can everyone here today do to prepare for the future of work?



AARON

Marie Kondo your life as much as you can so you've got the cognitive capacity to learn and relearn. Also, digital dexterity is going to be so key to everyone's future success. Buy yourself a Google Home or an Amazon Alexa and get comfortable talking to and interacting with a robot, and allowing automated technology to help you do your jobs. If you've not got involved in augmented reality yet, get involved with it and focus on how that emerging consumer technology could be used to help your clients.



ALISON

Remember what makes you human. Let the technology do the technology bits and you do the human bits. We are really hard to replace and we are inherently really special. Remember what makes you human and leverage that.



ELIAS

The magic happens when the people aspect is underpinned by machine learning and it becomes more of an expansive thing. We didn't study to do the manual optimisation work and that hardcore churn work; we studied to really make significant change not only in the industry but to our clients and agencies. So really lean into it.

** Marie Kondo is an organising consultant, the author of four books on organising that have sold millions of copies worldwide and the star of the Netflix series Tidying Up With Marie Kondo.*

ATOMIC 212^o

SYDNEY

9/23 Hickson Road
Sydney, NSW, 2000

MELBOURNE

31 Ross Street
South Melbourne, VIC, 3205

DARWIN

19 Smith Street Mall
Darwin, NT, 0800

W. www.atomic212.com.au

E. reception@atomic212.com.au

P. (02) 9247 8388