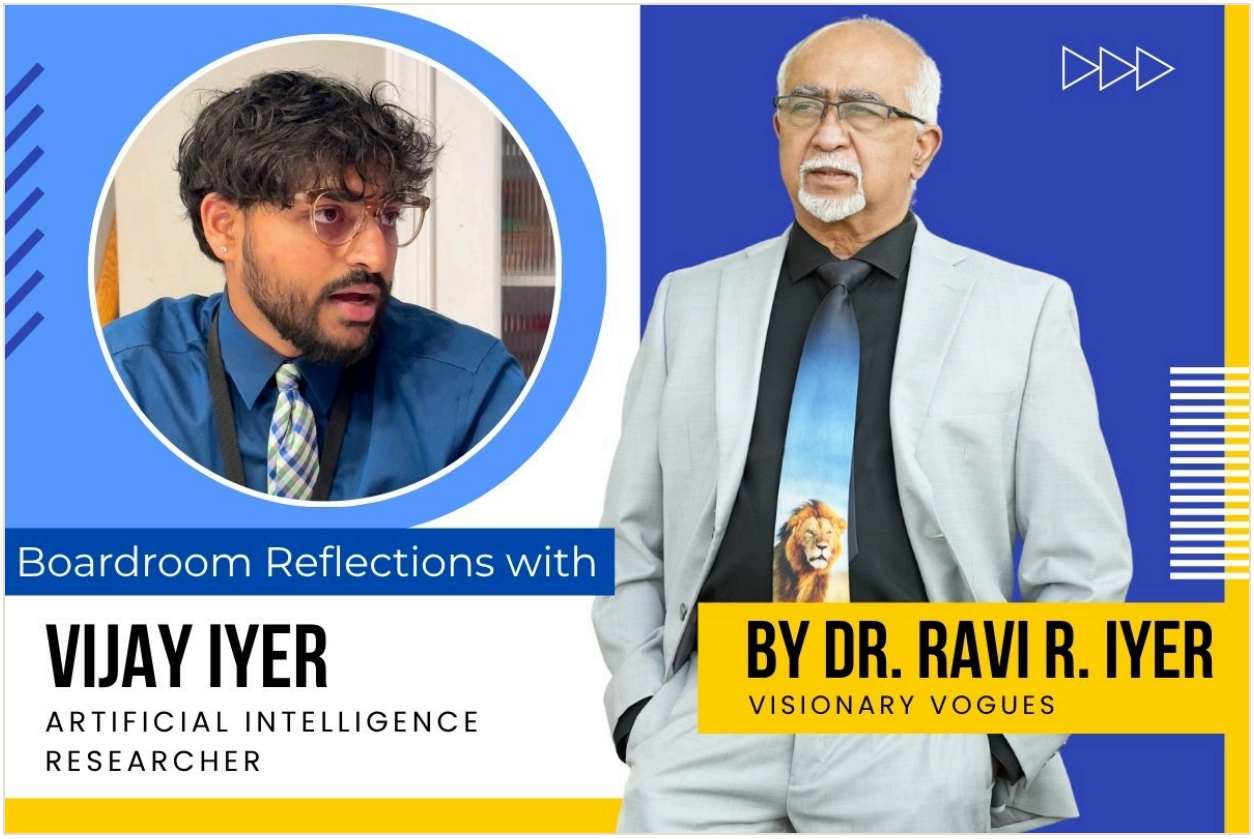
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BOARDROOM REFLECTIONS

When AI Is the Commodity, What Becomes the Value?

In conversation with Vijay Iyer.

By **Ravi R. Iyer, MD**



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Why the Human in the Middle Is Becoming the Most Valuable Asset in the Enterprise

There is an emerging conversation taking place quietly among technologists, boards, investors, and operators across the country, one centered not on how powerful artificial intelligence has become, but on what remains scarce once it is everywhere.

- For the past few years, the story of AI has been told almost
- entirely through the language of capability. Larger models.

- Faster inference. More parameters, more benchmarks, more
- astonishment. Yet an uncomfortable reality is becoming
- increasingly difficult to ignore among those building these
- systems from the inside:

As the machine grows more capable, the value of raw capability itself is falling.

- What is rising in its place is something older and harder to
- manufacture: human judgment, domain expertise, and the
- discipline to decide what is real.

That was the throughline of a recent Boardroom Reflections conversation with Vijay Iyer, an artificial intelligence researcher who entered the field nearly a decade ago, long before it became the defining business story of the era. Iyer leads AI research initiatives at a Fortune 500 company, advises senior leadership on technological transformation, and specializes in a corner of the field that rarely makes headlines: real-time embedded computer vision. His perspective is neither evangelist nor skeptic. It is that of a practitioner who has watched the hype cycle from the workshop floor.

An Accidental Entry Into an Inevitable Field

- Iyer did not set out to build the future. He was, by his own
- account, pulled into it.

In 2016, as a young intern, he was handed an assignment by his mentor: design a computer vision model capable of detecting human pose and motion, the foundation for an AI-driven physiotherapy system. He was skeptical. It seemed, he recalled, like an enormous investment for very little payoff. His mentor's reply has aged remarkably well.

> *If you don't get into this field today," Iyer remembers being told, "in five years, this will be what everyone's talking about, and you will regret it for the rest of your life for missing out.*

By the time the pandemic arrived four years later, that prediction had become the global consensus. But the more striking part of Iyer's origin story is not the timing. It is the fact that he was building software to rehabilitate the human body while recovering the use of his own. His story reads like that of his idol Steve Jobs. A crippling accident in 2016 left his right arm paralyzed for nearly a year, ending his dream to become a concert violinist as well as his ability to finish college. He dropped out and began to self-learn the nascent discipline of AI and machine learning while working on an internship project on computer vision. He was moving through intensive physiotherapy for his paralyzed arm even as he was engineering a machine to guide others through the same process.

That dual vantage point, patient and builder at once, became a design philosophy.

- "I don't write code," he told Boardroom Reflections. "I create
- experiences. I create worlds."

It is an unusual thing to hear from an engineer, and it frames everything that follows. For Iyer, the technology is never the point. The end user is. A model, an agent, a service, each is merely the medium through which a human being's experience is shaped. It is a philosophy he traces to Apple's insight that people do not want products; they want what products let them do.

Separating Signal From Slop

- Ask Iyer how much of today's AI boom is real and how much is
- theater, and he does not flinch from the answer.
- “By and large, the majority of it is slop.”

He means this less as cynicism than as scientific realism. Artificial intelligence, he points out, is a branch of data science, and the operative word is science. Some experiments change the world. Others consume millions of dollars and produce nothing. That is the nature of research, and it does not resolve into the clean predictability of conventional software engineering.

But within every niche, agentic systems, robotics, embedded intelligence, Iyer sees pockets of genuine, durable value already reshaping portfolios and workflows. The difficulty is that it is rarely obvious in advance which initiatives will transform an industry and which will quietly collapse. Both are funded with equal confidence. Both are marketed with equal certainty.

He is also clear-eyed about how quickly market position can be squandered. In a field this competitive, he noted, a single misstep in how a product is launched or communicated can hand an advantage to a rival overnight. The market, in his words, is simply too tight for missteps to go unpunished.

When the Model Becomes a Commodity

The most consequential shift Iyer sees is not a breakthrough. It is a demotion. The large language model, he argues, is becoming a commodity.

As tools emerge that let a user draw on many models at once, orchestrating them, routing each task to whichever engine handles it best, the individual model matters less and less. Iyer already works this way, moving fluidly between several systems to build a single product. The intelligence has become an ingredient.

He offered a useful frame for where the value migrates. Picture the models as competing encyclopedias, each a vast repository of knowledge. The winner is not any single volume on the shelf. It is the librarian who knows which books to pull, and how many to open at once.

- That librarian, the orchestration layer that automates multi-
- model workflows, is, in Iyer's view, where durable advantage will
- accumulate.

The economics reinforce the point. He cites analysis suggesting that the cost of running these models is climbing steeply, and that the providers face real pressure to reach a return on their enormous investments by the end of the decade. Absent a level of global adoption that is difficult to imagine, some consolidation appears likely. In that scenario, Iyer expects the survivors to be less the makers of individual models and more the platforms that turn a scattered toolbox into something coherent, a business pattern that echoes an older idea: the computing timeshare, concentrated capability purchased in fractions and distributed to many.

The Collapse of Certainty

If commoditization is the business story, the erosion of reality is the human one, and it is the risk Iyer takes most seriously.

- Generative systems can now produce text, images, and code
- that look entirely authentic while being false, malicious, or
- simply wrong. The danger is not that machines lie. It is that
- human beings can no longer reliably tell.
- We have, he argues, seen the rehearsal for this before.

Social media handed billions of people a voice at a scale the world had never witnessed, and much of that was genuinely good. But it also trained a generation to encounter information without knowing whether to believe it, to live with a permanent, low-grade doubt about what is real. AI does not introduce that doubt. It multiplies it.

The consequence is a culture in which the provenance of a claim matters more than ever, precisely because it has become so easy to counterfeit. When people can no longer verify reality for themselves, they begin to look for someone who can.

The Human in the Middle

This is where Iyer's argument turns from warning to strategy, and where it should command a board's full attention.

The anxiety that AI will erase human work is, he believes, both understandable and misdirected. He reaches for history: when the railroads arrived, coach and carriage drivers did lose their livelihoods, and the fear was real. But the work did not vanish. It moved. New industries formed around the very technology that displaced the old ones.

> *Work isn't going away," he said. "Work is transforming. Positions will change, but people won't.*

He is careful not to wave away the pain of that transition; the angst of being told that a skill cultivated over decades must now be rebuilt is, he acknowledges, valid and real. But the destination, he insists, is not obsolescence. It is a shift in role. In his own practice, Iyer now writes less code and instead directs the machine, reviewing its output and steering it toward or away from particular solutions. He has become, in effect, the architect.

And this is his central conviction, the sentence that anchored the entire conversation:

- Artificial intelligence is always going to be that artificial, and
- unless you want artificial problems to become real ones, you
- need the human in the middle.

That human, he argues, is not only the credentialed specialist. A factory-line worker with fifteen years on a particular line holds domain knowledge no model can fully absorb, the intricacies that make the difference between a system that works and one that merely appears to. No matter how capable the AI, someone must verify, monitor, and own the outcome. Not merely for compliance, but for something more fundamental: to keep the artificial from quietly becoming real.

The organizations that will thrive, Iyer suggests, are those that cultivate a trusted human authority, a person of genuine expertise to whom others can bring the flood of plausible-looking information and ask the essential question: is this real, or is this slop? In an economy drowning in synthetic certainty, the domain expert who can authenticate becomes a repository of value in scarce supply.

What the Boardroom Must Do Now

Iyer's counsel to leadership is direct.

Within the next five years, he believes, any company large enough to do so should build its own data science capability. Not to chase novelty, but to generate the one thing that tells an organization what is worth adopting: its own data. Without data science, a company is left guessing at which tools serve its bottom line and which are merely fashionable.

But he pairs that recommendation with a caution boards frequently miss. Data science is not software engineering. It does not run on fixed directives, clean constraints, and predictable timelines. It behaves more like academia, or like investment, a portfolio of experiments, some of which will fail by design.

Governing it well, therefore, requires a particular posture:

A genuine seat and voice for data science leadership, because only they hold the domain expertise to guide the work. A board literate enough in the discipline to understand what data science is and is not. Constrained, deliberate budgets with clear decision points when targets are missed. Disciplined risk management treated as a non-negotiable, not an afterthought.

- The failure mode Iyer sees today is boards that either starve the
- function of authority or fund it without understanding its
- fundamentally experimental nature. Neither ends well.

The same discipline applies to how leaders themselves work with these tools. The temptation, which Iyer admits he feels as acutely as anyone, is to hand the machine a vague prompt and walk away. The correct practice is the opposite. Before any significant effort, the human writes the plan, the intent, the sequence, the shape of the outcome. The AI may help refine it and will certainly implement it, but ownership of the design must remain human.

> *Make it a doer," he said, "not a thinker.*

The Overlooked Frontier

- For all the attention lavished on ever-larger conversational
- models, Iyer believes the most consequential work is happening
- where almost no one is looking.

The field began, he reminds us, with targeted tools that did one thing exceptionally well. That focus, he argues, is precisely what the current moment has forgotten. Some problems cannot wait for a network request to a distant model. A robot pulling victims from a fire must perceive its surroundings in milliseconds. A surgeon needs an instrument that reads the operating field in real time.

This is the frontier Iyer finds most exciting and most neglected: embedded, real-time intelligence, running at the edge, where lives and outcomes hinge on speed. Identifying a tumor in the moment of surgery. Bringing augmented reality to the microscope in a pathology lab. These are not the systems that dominate the conversation, and in his view that is exactly the oversight worth correcting.

Biological, Financial, and Now Cognitive Capital

- Perhaps the most important insight emerging from this
- conversation is a reframing of where advantage now lives.
- For a generation, competitive edge was measured in data,
- compute, and model scale. As each of those becomes abundant
- What remains scarce is judgment. The capacity to plan with
- intent, to verify what a machine produces, to hold domain
- knowledge no training set can replicate, and to serve as a
- trusted arbiter of the real, these do not commoditize. They
- appreciate.

Many enterprises have spent the last few years accumulating artificial intelligence. The next frontier may be deliberately cultivating the human intelligence required to direct it. Because ultimately, the organizations that thrive in the decades ahead may not be those with the largest models or the most automation.

- They may be the ones who never let go of the human in the
- middle.
- YouTube Podcast Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?
- v=T9VgsTXvyQg

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ravi R. Iyer, MD, is a physician-scientist, entrepreneur, author, and 5x TEDx speaker who has spent four decades exploring a deceptively simple question: What makes human beings, and the organizations they create, perform at their best? A Harvard-trained physician, corporate strategist, and the founder of multiple healthcare and performance ventures, he is the creator of Neuroalignment, a framework for building high-performance organizations around the realities of human cognitive diversity. His work sits at the intersection of biology, leadership, technology, and human behavior. Boardroom Reflections is where those worlds meet.

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