

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

How to Embrace AI for Enacting Humanitarian Change

Artificial intelligence brings new opportunities for social change. Here are four steps for improving your startup's compassion quotient.

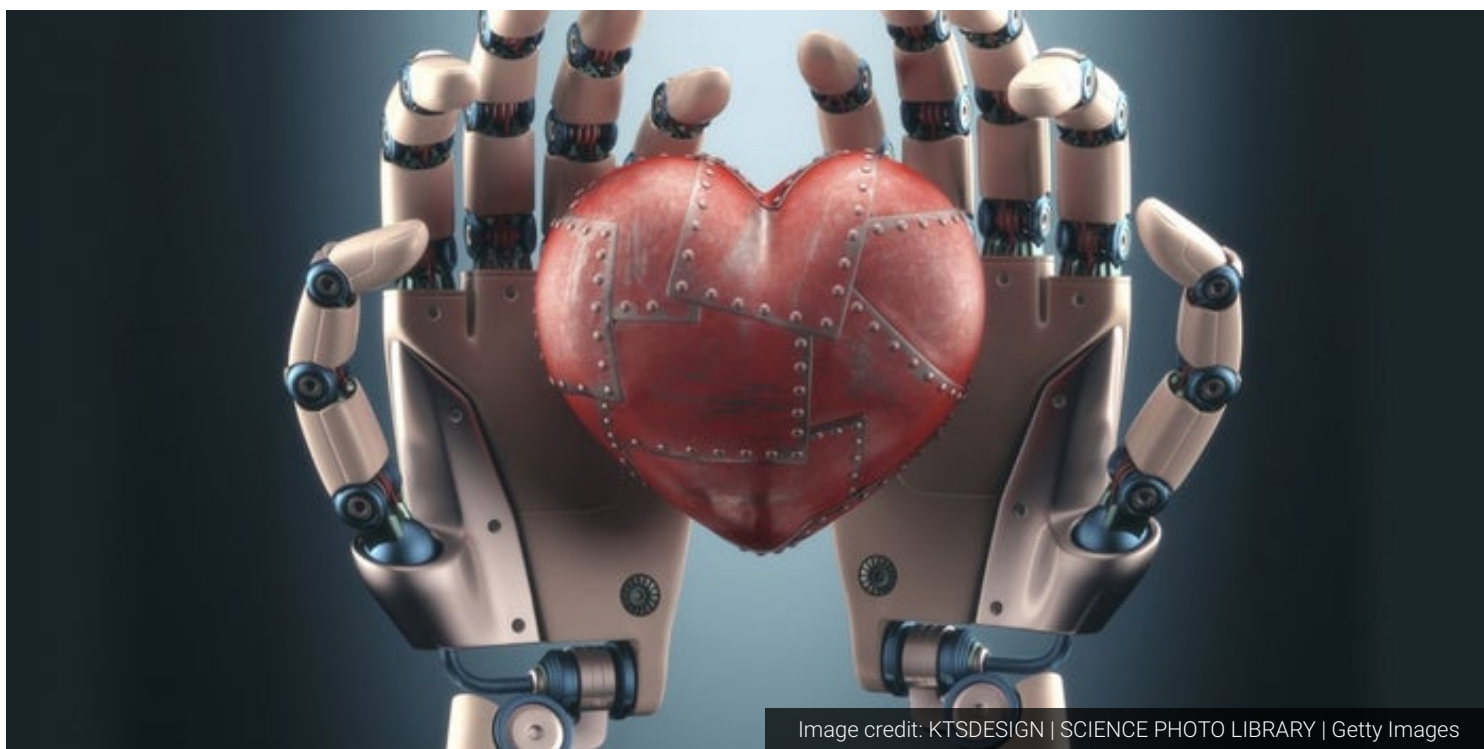


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Artificial intelligence is one of the heralds of a smarter tech world -- but could it help us be a more *compassionate* one, as well?

The University of Southern California thinks so. Last fall, it christened its [Center on Artificial Intelligence in Society](#), dedicated to deploying AI toward humanitarian ends. In particular, it's aiming toward two social entrepreneurship challenges: the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative from the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

How can AI help these noble projects? One of the first efforts is an AI-based tool that will use social media and other data to pick good candidates for peer leaders among homeless youths around Los Angeles. The algorithm has already been shown to help [increase HIV testing](#) among that population.

Why not just use standard statistical models to make these selections? Unlike traditional approaches, AI systems can reveal novel ways of looking at social data, finding patterns or indicators that social scientists may overlook. These systems can make measurable differences to at-risk communities -- and tech entrepreneurs are the movers who will take those first essential steps.

Software for a better world

Building on an open-source codebase and leveraging tools such as IBM Watson's backend, the best solutions for social problems will likely come from those who are local to the issues and who understand them firsthand.

But openness won't be the only hallmark of this new wave of AI. In fact, a new way of thinking of AI is "IA," or intelligence augmentation, and it already has applications in the humanitarian sphere. For example, Global Empowerment Mission has [deployed an AI](#) to assist with community planning in Haiti.

Beyond IA, algorithms can perhaps even give us a kind of "EA," or emotional augmentation, to benefit some of our most vulnerable citizens' mental well-being. Companion robots using AI have been shown capable of providing emotional support and monitoring for ailments such as mental-health issues. The [PARO robot](#) -- a cute, AI-driven baby seal -- is an official treatment option of the U.K.'s National Health Service and is already in use with dementia and Alzheimer's patients worldwide.

Why join with humanitarian causes?

Today's conscientious tech leaders should look for opportunities to engage with social entrepreneurship for several reasons. First is, of course, because it's the right thing to do. Another

is that the time is now: "Doing well while doing good" has never had a better chance of going high-tech.

Partnering with these causes also can help with public relations for AI. People still hold a certain amount of mistrust toward what amounts to superintelligence -- particularly if it is emotionless and happens mysteriously in silicone. The "Terminator" and "Matrix" series don't exactly help that perception.

And it's not just cyborg Armageddon scenarios: People [fear for their jobs](#). Good reasons exist for believing we will adapt successfully to new forms of AI-backed automatization. But on the road to that, it will be a boon to the tech industry if companies can show how AI already makes our world safer, cleaner and healthier.

Sometimes it's hard to know just where to begin. Here, then, are a handful of actionable steps toward fruitful partnerships with organizations creating positive social change.

Related: [4 Reasons Why Startups Committed to Social Responsibility Succeed](#)

1. Determine the social areas with the most need.

A great place to start would be the Grand Challenges for Social Work and the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals. With a sense of the areas with the most need, companies are better prepared to deliver maximum impact.

Remember here to think broadly: Opportunities are everywhere. For example, data-driven early intervention systems proactively identify police officers likely to have adverse interactions with the general public. Decision support systems identify high school students who are likely to need additional support to graduate on time. Even wildlife park rangers now use game theory-based software assistants for more effective patrolling and protection of tigers and rhinos at risk from elusive poachers.

2. Encourage active education.

Your employees should be continually up-to-date on the potential positive impacts of AI. By inviting them to attend seminars, either in person or online, you cultivate that curiosity and forward momentum. The [Center for Artificial Intelligence in Society](#) offers such seminars, but myriad opportunities are available.

Another approach is to bring in active learners as part of your hiring process. Part-time employees who are Ph.D. students or junior researchers can continue their studies while feeding your company

with the knowledge they accumulate in school. These are also often the only people eligible for relevant fellowships (for example, with CAIS).

3. Start small and local.

AI is a daunting field, but you need not feel overwhelmed. Take the information received from the above steps and hold brainstorming sessions with your team as to what social problems exist in your community. Allow employees to spend paid time working on social-good projects. Even employees volunteering for a local charity will help bring ideas about social good into the company.

You can also sit in on a few city council or city commission sessions to hear members debate topics important to the community. For example, in Miami where I live, sequential planning algorithms have been used to decide which areas of coastal habitat to protect in order to mitigate [sea-level rise](#) locally.

Related: [When Should Entrepreneurs Pursue a Social Good?](#)

4. Seek partners that will help support your vision of social impact.

Investors may even [increase interest](#) in companies with strong cultures that are informed, educated and motivated by social impact. Conventions such as [Sustainatopia](#) can help make these critical connections.

As if the opportunities in AI weren't compelling enough, now we see a new era coming. Tech that once seemed like science fiction is now being put in the service of compassionate social good. It's an exciting time to be part of the vanguard, and it has never been easier to jump in and help.

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