

[Rotary] The Competitive Edge in the AI Era: Relational Intelligence

I recently returned to Palo Alto, California, for the first time in a while to attend an AI Summit held on the campus of my alma mater. It is a place where I once wrestled with ambitions of seeing a bigger world and defining my own future. Yet the questions I carried with me this time were very different. Back then, I was focused on how I should grow as an individual. Today, my thoughts are centered on the future of people and businesses. Walking through the campus with colleagues, sharing old memories, I realized this visit was not simply a nostalgic trip down memory lane. It felt more like revisiting my roots to gain perspective on where we should be heading next.

The summit brought together speakers and participants from across the United States and around the world to discuss emerging technologies, the future, and the challenges each of us must address in our respective fields. The natural exchange of diverse perspectives and experiences reminded me of the long-celebrated idea of the American Dream—a culture that embraces talented people from every corner of the world and willingly invests in bold ideas to create a better future. It was a powerful reminder that true innovation begins not with technology itself, but with people and diversity. When this mindset becomes deeply rooted in our own companies and society, innovation will gain even greater momentum.

Although the summit focused on AI, its message ultimately centered on people. Across multiple sessions, one theme consistently emerged: technology matters, but the growth and role of people matter even more. Education was no exception. Its true purpose is not simply to produce the right answers, but to help people grow. AI may be able to generate answers, but it cannot replace the process of learning, collaborating, and developing as human beings. One speaker captured this perfectly with a humorous remark: *"If students use AI to write their assignments, professors can use AI to grade them—and then everyone can just head to the beach."* The audience laughed, but the joke carried an important truth: even in the AI era, the essence of education remains the growth of people.

Among the many ideas discussed, the one that resonated with me most was **Relational Intelligence (RQ)**. Relational intelligence is not simply about being sociable or maintaining a wide network. It is the ability to connect different perspectives, build trust, and create better outcomes together. During the industrial age, IQ defined competitiveness. In an era that increasingly values empathy, EQ became essential. Now, in the age of AI, success requires something beyond both intelligence and emotional

awareness: the ability to connect people with technology and people with one another. Relational intelligence is rapidly emerging as the new competitive advantage for both businesses and society.

This shift is also reflected in the qualities companies now seek in their people. Rather than those who simply arrive at the correct answer the fastest, organizations increasingly value individuals who ask thoughtful questions, connect diverse perspectives, and reconcile competing interests. As technology continues to advance, the importance of relational intelligence will only grow. Its essence is not measured by how many people you know, but by your ability to foster understanding, build trust, and enable people to grow together. In times of uncertainty and disruption, trust built over many years becomes the strongest competitive advantage. Technology improves efficiency, but relationships create sustainability.

AI will undoubtedly continue to perform more tasks with greater speed and efficiency than humans. Yet understanding the needs of people and society, connecting different ideas, finding optimal solutions together, and ultimately creating new value that improves human life remain fundamentally human responsibilities. That is why, in the AI era, our greatest competitive advantage will not be artificial intelligence alone, but the strength of our relational intelligence.