

**ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, HUMAN LABOUR AND THE FUTURE OF WORK: A STUDY OF
KAZUO ISHIGURO'S KLARA AND THE SUN**

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Abstract

The growing presence of artificial intelligence in the workplace is changing how labour, productivity, skill and human value are understood. Artificial intelligence is increasingly used not only for routine tasks but also for communication, decision-making, monitoring and forms of assistance that were once closely associated with human judgement and interaction. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* offers a useful literary space for examining these changes. Through Klara, an Artificial Friend designed to provide companionship and care, the novel unsettles the boundary between machine and human and raises questions about the value of work that is emotional, relational and supportive. This paper examines the representation of artificial labour in the novel through posthumanism, Marxist perspectives on labour and commodification, and the concept of emotional labour. It argues that Klara's usefulness cannot be separated from the human relationships she enters, and that her presence exposes a wider anxiety about human replaceability. The paper further connects these literary concerns with contemporary Human Resource Management, particularly recruitment, performance evaluation, employee surveillance, automation and workforce displacement. The study suggests that the future of work should not be understood simply as a competition between human beings and machines. Instead, it calls for a more careful distinction between tasks that can be automated and forms of judgement, care and responsibility that require human accountability. Ishiguro's novel therefore remains significant for thinking about the ethical meaning of work in an increasingly automated world.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Human Resource Management; Human Labour; Posthumanism, Emotional Labour; Commodification; Future of Work.

Artificial intelligence has gradually moved from the world of specialised computing into ordinary social and professional life. Systems that can analyse information, generate language, recognise patterns and respond to human requests are now becoming part of many areas of work. In Human Resource Management, artificial intelligence is increasingly associated with activities such as recruitment support, employee analytics, performance assessment, workforce planning and automated communication. These developments are often presented in terms

of efficiency and productivity. Yet the growth of AI also raises a more fundamental question: what happens to human labour when machines begin to perform activities that once depended on human judgement, communication and interaction?

This question is not entirely new. Literature has long imagined worlds in which technological change alters the relationship between human beings and work. Fiction allows readers to see technological transformation not merely as a technical development but as a social and emotional experience. It can ask what technological efficiency means for dignity, relationships, identity and the sense of being useful to others. In this respect, literary representations of artificial intelligence are particularly valuable because they make visible the human consequences that may be overlooked when technology is discussed only through productivity and innovation.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* presents such a situation. Klara is an Artificial Friend, a technologically produced companion purchased to support a young girl, Josie. She is designed to observe, learn and respond to human needs. Although Klara is not a conventional employee, her position is closely connected to the idea of service. She is selected because of what she can do for another person. Her work involves companionship, observation, emotional support and care. These functions are significant because they are commonly understood as deeply human forms of activity.

The novel therefore creates an interesting space for thinking about artificial intelligence and labour. Klara is simultaneously a product, a service provider, a companion and a figure who appears capable of emotional understanding. Her presence makes it difficult to maintain a simple division between human work and machine work. At the same time, the human characters continue to measure value through usefulness, ability and social expectations. The novel consequently raises an important question for the future of work: if machines can increasingly perform forms of labour that involve communication, care and decision-making, what remains distinctive about human labour?

This paper argues that *Klara and the Sun* questions the reduction of human labour to usefulness and productivity by presenting an artificial being capable of performing emotional and relational functions. Through Klara's position as an Artificial Friend, Ishiguro exposes anxieties surrounding human replaceability and the changing value of human work. Drawing on post humanist thought, Marxist perspectives on labour and commodification, and the concept of emotional labour, the paper examines how the novel can be read in relation to contemporary concerns in Human Resource Management. It suggests that the future of work requires not only technological efficiency but also careful consideration of human dignity, ethical responsibility and the value of forms of labour that cannot be adequately measured by productivity alone.

The meaning of labour has changed considerably across different social and technological contexts. Labour is often associated with physical production, economic activity and professional expertise, but contemporary workplaces also depend heavily on communication, emotional intelligence, cooperation and care. These less visible forms of work can be difficult to measure because their value is often found in relationships rather than in a physical product. Artificial intelligence complicates this situation because some systems can now imitate or assist with activities involving language, communication, prediction and interpersonal interaction.

Klara's role is particularly relevant to this changing understanding of labour. She is not designed primarily to manufacture an object or perform a repetitive industrial task. Her purpose is relational. She watches Josie, learns about her needs and attempts to support her. Her usefulness comes from her ability to participate in a human relationship. This makes her different from the traditional image of a machine as a tool that simply performs a mechanical function.

The significance of Klara's work lies precisely in its human character. She provides companionship and emotional attention, activities that are often associated with care work. By giving these functions to an artificial being, Ishiguro invites readers to reconsider the assumption that emotional and relational labour necessarily belongs to human beings. If companionship can be purchased as a technological service, then the boundary between care as a human relationship and care as a commodity becomes uncertain.

This issue has direct relevance to Human Resource Management. Modern organisations increasingly use AI to assist with communication, recruitment, employee support and the analysis of workplace behaviour. The technology may make some processes faster, but it also changes the role expected of human workers. The question is therefore not simply whether AI can perform a particular task. It is whether the introduction of AI changes the meaning and value of the human work that remains.

A Marxist reading of Klara and the Sun draws attention to the relationship between labour and value. Marxist criticism is concerned, among other things, with the ways in which labour becomes part of systems of production and exchange. In Ishiguro's novel, Klara exists within a consumer environment in which artificial companions are bought according to their perceived usefulness. Her identity is closely connected to the service she can provide.

Klara's position therefore resembles that of a commodity. She is produced, displayed, selected and purchased. Her value initially comes from her function. This does not mean that the novel presents her as nothing more than an object; rather, the tension between her status as a product and her developing capacity for attachment is central to the novel's effect. The more Klara appears capable of understanding and caring, the more uncomfortable the idea of treating her simply as a purchasable object becomes.

This tension can also be connected to the treatment of human workers. In many organisations, employees are evaluated through productivity, performance indicators, efficiency and measurable outcomes. Such measures are useful, but they can also create a narrow definition of value. A worker may become valuable because of what they produce rather than because of their creativity, relationships, experience or ethical judgement.

Klara exposes this problem in an unusual way. Since she is literally created to perform a service, her usefulness is visible from the beginning. Yet her behaviour gradually encourages the reader to see that service cannot always be separated from emotion and moral significance. Her actions become meaningful because they affect another person. The novel consequently asks whether value should be understood only through economic usefulness.

The comparison is important for the future of AI-based HRM. If organisations begin to treat both artificial

and human workers primarily as units of measurable productivity, the difference between technological efficiency and human value may become increasingly difficult to recognise. Ishiguro's novel therefore provides a literary warning against allowing the language of efficiency to become the only language through which work is understood.

One of the most productive concepts for reading *Klara* is emotional labour. Arlie Russell Hochschild uses the term to describe forms of work in which the management and expression of emotion become part of a job. Emotional labour is especially visible in occupations involving care, service and direct interaction with other people. Although *Klara* is not a human employee, her function resembles this kind of labour.

Klara is expected to be attentive to Josie's emotional condition. She observes changes in behaviour and attempts to respond appropriately. Her work is therefore not limited to completing instructions. She must understand a social environment and behave in a way that makes another person feel supported. The novel thus imagines a form of artificial labour that enters an area traditionally associated with human emotional capacity.

This representation is significant because emotional labour is often undervalued precisely because it is difficult to measure. A successful act of care may leave no physical product, yet it can have a profound effect on another person. *Klara*'s role makes this invisible labour visible. Her value lies partly in her ability to remain present, attentive and responsive.

The development of AI creates a contemporary version of this question. Chatbots, virtual assistants and automated support systems can now communicate with users in increasingly natural ways. In organisations, similar technologies may assist employees with routine questions, training, scheduling and communication. Such systems can reduce administrative pressure, but they also raise questions about the limits of automated empathy.

Klara's literary significance lies in the uncertainty she creates. Readers may recognise her as artificial, yet her actions invite emotional responses. The novel does not offer a simple answer about whether a machine can genuinely feel. Instead, it asks what happens when a machine behaves in ways that humans interpret as caring. This distinction is important in the workplace. An AI system may successfully imitate supportive communication, but responsibility for decisions affecting human employees cannot simply be transferred to the system. From an HRM perspective, this suggests that AI may assist emotional and relational work without necessarily replacing human responsibility. The challenge is to use technology without reducing care to a technical performance.

Klara complicates the human-machine distinction because she displays qualities that readers usually associate with human beings. She observes, remembers, forms attachments and makes decisions. Her actions are directed toward the well-being of Josie. At the same time, she remains a manufactured being whose existence depends upon a technological system.

This contradiction is central to the novel. *Klara* does not simply become human, nor is she presented as an ordinary machine. She occupies an uncertain space between the two. That position allows Ishiguro to question whether qualities such as care, loyalty and ethical action should be understood as exclusively human.

The posthumanist reading is particularly useful for thinking about AI and work. If intelligence and

communication are no longer exclusively human capacities, then traditional definitions of skilled labour also become unstable. A machine that can analyse data, produce language or interact socially challenges the assumption that these activities automatically prove human uniqueness. However, the novel also suggests that technical ability is not the same as moral responsibility. Klara can perform functions associated with care, but the human characters remain responsible for the decisions that shape Josie's life. This distinction is important when thinking about AI in HRM. Artificial intelligence can support decision-making, but organisations still need human beings who can take responsibility for decisions involving employment, dignity and fairness.

The posthuman workplace, therefore, should not be imagined as a workplace without humans. It should be understood as a workplace in which the boundaries between human and technological activity become more complex. Ishiguro's novel encourages readers to think carefully about what should remain a human responsibility even when machines become capable of performing the associated tasks.

The question of replacement is one of the strongest anxieties surrounding artificial intelligence. When machines become capable of performing tasks once carried out by human beings, workers may fear losing not only employment but also a sense of social usefulness. The concern is therefore economic as well as psychological. *Klara and the Sun* explores this anxiety through the broader social environment surrounding technological and biological enhancement. The novel presents a world in which technological intervention has become closely connected with opportunity and social status. Human beings are encouraged to become more capable, while artificial beings can provide functions that humans may no longer need to perform themselves.

Klara's role creates an especially interesting form of replacement. She does not replace a factory worker or office employee. Instead, she occupies an intimate space that might traditionally be filled by a friend, family member or caregiver. This suggests that automation can affect not only economic tasks but also social relationships.

The possibility of replacement becomes troubling when the task being replaced is connected with human identity. If a machine can provide companionship, what becomes of the human need to care for another person? If an AI system can evaluate an employee's performance, what becomes of the manager's judgement? If an automated system can communicate with workers, what happens to the value of human interaction?

The novel does not suggest that every technological development inevitably produces human redundancy. Instead, it encourages a more careful question: which human capacities are being transferred to machines, and what social consequences follow from that transfer? This is an especially useful question for HRM because the introduction of AI may change jobs rather than simply eliminate them. Some routine tasks may disappear while new forms of supervision, interpretation and ethical decision-making become more important.

The future of work should therefore be understood as a process of redistribution. AI may perform some tasks, assist with others and create new responsibilities. The challenge is ensuring that human workers are not valued only according to how efficiently they compete with machines.

Another important dimension of Ishiguro's novel is the unequal distribution of technological opportunity.

The idea of being “lifted” suggests that technological and biological enhancement is closely connected with social expectations and privilege. Technology does not automatically create equality; it can also deepen existing divisions. This concern can be related to contemporary workplaces. Access to AI tools, digital skills and technological training is not equally distributed. Organisations with greater resources can adopt advanced systems more quickly, while workers with fewer opportunities may struggle to adapt. The result can be a new form of inequality based on technological access and literacy. From an HRM perspective, this makes training and reskilling important ethical responsibilities. If AI changes the nature of work, organisations cannot simply expect employees to adapt without support. Human resource development must become part of technological transformation.

The literary value of Ishiguro’s novel lies in its ability to connect technological progress with human vulnerability. The novel does not present technological advancement as an uncomplicated good. Instead, it shows how attempts to improve human life can also create pressure, exclusion and uncertainty. This suggests that the future workplace should be designed around inclusion rather than replacement. AI may provide considerable benefits, but those benefits need to be accompanied by opportunities for human learning and adaptation. Technology should expand human possibilities rather than make some workers disposable simply because they cannot immediately keep pace with technological change.

At the centre of *Klara and the Sun* is a deeper question about human value. What makes a person valuable? Is value determined by intelligence, productivity, physical ability or social usefulness? Or does human value exist independently of these measures? Klara’s presence makes this question difficult because she can perform functions that are normally used to distinguish human beings from machines. She can observe, communicate and provide care. If these abilities can be technologically reproduced, then they can no longer serve as simple proof of human uniqueness.

This problem has a direct relationship with contemporary workplaces. Performance management systems are necessary in organisations, but excessive dependence on measurable indicators can encourage the idea that a worker’s worth is equivalent to their output. Such an approach risks overlooking creativity, experience, mentorship, emotional support and ethical judgement.

Ishiguro’s novel suggests that relationships cannot be fully understood through productivity. Klara’s actions matter because of their emotional consequences, not because they produce an economic result. Her story therefore encourages a broader understanding of value. For HRM, this is an important lesson. AI can help organisations measure performance, identify patterns and support decision-making, but measurement should not become a substitute for judgement. A workplace that values only what can be quantified may become more efficient while becoming less humane. The question, then, is not whether humans can outperform machines in every task. They cannot, and they do not need to. The more important question is how organisations can preserve forms of human value that are not reducible to computational efficiency.

The ethical questions raised by Klara become particularly relevant when considered alongside the growing use of AI in HRM. AI can support recruitment, employee analytics, performance evaluation and communication,

but these applications can also produce ethical difficulties. Recruitment systems, for example, may process large numbers of applications quickly. Yet if the data or criteria used by an algorithm reflect existing social biases, the system may reproduce unfair patterns. Similarly, automated performance monitoring can provide useful information but may also create a workplace in which employees feel constantly watched.

Klara's story provides a literary way of understanding this tension. She is designed to observe human behaviour closely. Her capacity for observation is part of what makes her useful, but it also reminds readers that observation can become a form of control. The distinction between assistance and surveillance therefore becomes important.

AI in HRM also raises questions of accountability. When an automated system contributes to a decision affecting an employee, responsibility cannot disappear into the technology. Someone must remain accountable for the decision and capable of explaining it.

This is where Ishiguro's novel offers an ethical rather than merely technological lesson. The important issue is not whether machines can become sufficiently advanced to imitate human behaviour. It is whether humans can use technological systems without surrendering responsibility for their consequences. An ethical approach to AI-based HRM should therefore include transparency, fairness, human oversight and respect for employee autonomy. Technology can assist human judgement, but it should not remove the human responsibility attached to decisions about other human beings.

The discussion of AI and labour does not have to end with the opposition between humans and machines. A more productive approach is to consider collaboration. Artificial intelligence can perform certain tasks with speed and consistency, while human beings can contribute judgement, contextual understanding, ethical reasoning and interpersonal sensitivity.

In HRM, this may mean using AI for administrative and analytical work while retaining human involvement in decisions that have significant consequences for employees. AI can identify patterns in data, but managers can interpret those patterns within a human context. Automated systems can answer routine questions, while human professionals can deal with complex or sensitive situations.

Klara and the Sun encourages this balanced approach because the novel shows both the usefulness and the limitations of artificial beings. Klara is capable of remarkable forms of observation and service, but her understanding remains shaped by her particular perspective. Human beings, meanwhile, are imperfect but capable of taking responsibility for their choices.

The future of work should therefore not be organised around the simple goal of making machines more human or humans more machine-like. Instead, the aim should be to identify which tasks benefit from automation and which responsibilities should remain human. This distinction is especially important in areas involving dignity, fairness, care and ethical judgement. AI can contribute to these areas, but contribution should not automatically become replacement. A humane workplace will be one in which technological capability is balanced by human accountability.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* offers a valuable literary perspective on the changing relationship between artificial intelligence and human labour. Through the figure of Klara, the novel presents an artificial being whose primary function is not mechanical production but companionship, observation and care. Her role consequently challenges the assumption that emotional and relational labour belongs exclusively to human beings.

A posthumanist reading reveals how Klara destabilises the boundary between human and machine. A Marxist perspective highlights her position as a purchased service and raises questions about the relationship between usefulness and value. The concept of emotional labour further demonstrates how the novel transforms care and emotional responsiveness into forms of service that can be technologically reproduced. Together, these perspectives show that the significance of AI lies not only in its ability to automate tasks but also in its capacity to change how human beings understand work itself.

The novel is particularly relevant to Human Resource Management because contemporary organisations are increasingly exploring AI for recruitment, performance analysis, employee communication, workforce planning and other activities. These developments may improve efficiency, but they also create questions about privacy, bias, accountability, employee dignity and the possibility of technological displacement. Ishiguro's fictional world reminds us that technological progress always takes place within human relationships.

The future of work should therefore not be understood as a simple movement from human labour to machine labour. It is more accurately understood as a transformation in the distribution and meaning of work. Some tasks may be automated, some may be shared between humans and machines, and some forms of human responsibility may become more important precisely because technology has advanced.

Ultimately, *Klara and the Sun* asks readers to look beyond the question of whether machines can perform human tasks. The deeper question is what human beings choose to value when machines can perform more and more of what they once considered uniquely human. If AI is to become part of the future workplace, technological efficiency must be accompanied by ethical responsibility. Human labour should not be valued only for its measurable productivity, and human dignity should not become secondary to technological convenience. Ishiguro's novel therefore remains a powerful reminder that the future of work is not simply a technological question. It is, above all, a question about what kind of human society we wish to build.

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