IBM Watson to Replace Salespeople?

A question answering machine like Watson could be applied to almost every level of commerce. You could have a Watson on the floor at Best Buy, or the support departments of large companies could keep a pet Watson for answering trickier questions. Telemarketers, which are famously bad at handling off-script questions, could be saved by Watson. In a beautiful, self-fulfilling prophetic twist, the first application of this new technology will most likely be internally at IBM, to help IBM sell Watson to other companies.

IBM Watson, which is powered by Big Blue's DeepQA software, is fundamentally a huge search engine that can be used to answer questions. You fill it with gigabytes or terabytes of raw data — such as general knowledge for Jeopardy, symptoms for medical diagnosis, or product specifications for sales and support — and DeepQA turns it into useful information; it performs analytics, in other words. As you well know, though, search engines like Google have been successfully doing this for a long time. DeepQA, however, has one other trick up its sleeve: it's also exceptionally good at understanding natural language.

The scary thing, though, is that Watson can quite happily operate without human intervention. Once you fill DeepQA up, it will answer questions all day long. You might be a little terrified the first time you pick up your phone to hear dulcet but unmistakably-computerized tones of Watson saying "Hello, can I interest you in cheap home insurance?", but when you realize that you're dealing with a computer that can answer all of your questions, and in a neutral way without emotional blackmail, you'll probably warm to the idea. The appeal of an entirely-computerized sales team must surely be an attractive proposition for many big companies, too.

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