

AI-Powered Simulation

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# Virtual Co-op at Athabasca University

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**Athabasca University**  
FACULTY OF BUSINESS

# Overview



## Introductions

Dr. Pam Quon, Athabasca University, Faculty of Business

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## Background

Student Barriers to Co-op Education

Leveling the Playing Field

Demonstration

What we learned from the students

Students – having the final word

# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Early artificial intelligence stirs excitement.



1950's

1960's

1970's

1980's

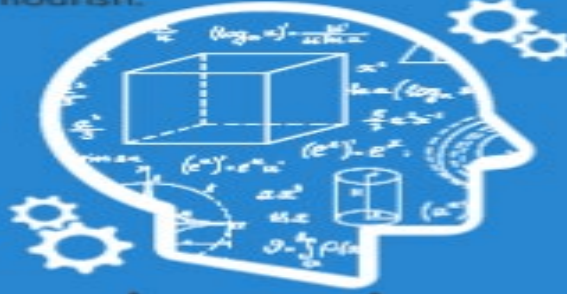
1990's

2000's

2010's

# MACHINE LEARNING

Machine learning begins to flourish.



# DEEP LEARNING

Deep learning breakthroughs drive AI boom.



Virtual  
Co-op

## Background to the Virtual Co-op

- Why we started the Virtual Co-op
- ADMN405 is capstone course in BComm
- Work-ready graduates
- Recombinant Innovation
  - Combining Athabasca's pedagogical approach with AI-powered technology
- Accessibility



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# Student barriers to Co-op Education

- First Nations, isolated communities, and education gaps
- Full-time jobs
- White privilege
- Single parents
- Disabilities including physical, sensory, or hidden



2019-20 to 2022-23 Cohort of  
Canada's House of Commons'  
Page Program

# Leveling the playing field

- Virtual Co-op: Financial Services
  - Working for a large financial institution as it purchases an indigenous company
- Virtual Co-op: Digital Business Consulting
  - Working as an implementation consultant, addressing the people and management issues when leaders introduce AI, machine learning, and big data into organizations
- Virtual Co-op: Construction Industry
  - Working at a construction firm that is building a new school that needs leadership to address stakeholder concerns while creating shared value
- Virtual Co-op: Sustainable Business
  - Working for sustainable business consulting company advising electric vehicle, solar farms, and sustainable tourism
- Professional leadership
  - AIA has developed a course with us that uses this AI technology



# The Virtual Co-op in Financial Services



- Logistics of the Co-op – A workplace experience
  - Students are management trainees at the Monet Bank.
  - Project from acquisition analysis to due diligence to purchase to marketing.
  - During this time, they work through 30+ tasks with a dozen AI-powered characters or sims.
  - Workplace challenges include employee personal disagreements, nepotism, unethical behaviour, terminating a person's employment, team building, facilitation, persuasion, gathering information, negotiation, and plagiarism.
  - After each project, students debrief with an AI-mentor, and in a discussion forum, at the end of the course there is self-evaluation paper
  - Evolving: coming in May 2024 the AI technology upgraded to give personal feedback to each student on how they did in each module (combines factual and soft skills evaluation)

# Demonstration

## Setting the scene:

- Now mid-way through the Co-op experience students have completed the acquisition negotiations but final approval is needed. There is some internal pushback as people realize the project can go through. The AI mentor prepares you to lead the “strategic conversations” necessary to finalize the deal.

## What we hoped students would do:

- Use appropriate skills in reassurance, persuasion and strategic foresight to convince Charles that the acquisition is a good idea.

## Diagnostic Conversation With Melinda

Ahead of performing the due diligence, Melinda would like to discuss some of the potential challenges you might experience working through this part of the process.

Don't worry if you don't know the answers to all of her questions - that's exactly what this conversation is for! Melinda just wants to check in on where you're at in terms of knowledge and give insight where you might need it.

Your Mentor



**Melinda Torez**  
Program Director(Monet Bank)

**Now that we've negotiated the terms of the acquisition it seems that some of the leadership who were on board with the strategy are starting to become hesitant. We need to complete some due diligence on why the strategy to acquire a startup is a good one. As before, don't worry if you're unsure of some of the questions I'm about to ask you, this meeting is purely to level-set what you already know about due diligence and to fill in any gaps as needed!**

**Let's consider the concept of strategic foresight. What are some elements of strategic foresight that we should consider?**

Strategic foresight is essential for all businesses. In our case, it will allow us to plan ahead and prepare for future scenarios. We will need to apply strategic foresight in order to understand how issues developing today could affect us tomorrow.

**I like to think that there are two main elements we'll need to dig into when speaking about Strategic Foresight; first projecting possible risks that may come up when we choose a plan of action and second is working out strategies to mitigate these possible risks.**

**As we engage in the strategic conversation surrounding this initiative I'll need your support. What are some key steps in the strategic conversation and challenges we're likely to face?**

Key steps in a strategic conversation are to have a basic agreement on the strategic issue with the acquisition, analyze the future, have the strategic conversation, and then finally develop an implementation plan. The conversation should enable our team to explore the purpose, strategy, dilemma, problems and a solution as it pertains to this acquisition.

In terms of challenges, we need to identify key uncertainties pertaining to the acquisition, and compare likely outcomes and changes that will affect them. Based on that, implement a plan that will mitigate the risks concerning the acquisition.



## Feedback for Diagnostic Conversation with Melinda

### Strategic Foresight



Missed

#### Strategic Foresight

Applying strategic foresight to a situation requires you to project possible risks your current strategy may face in the future and then develop strategies to proactively mitigate these risks.

### Strategic Conversation





Missed


#### Strategic Conversation


Strategic conversations need to focus on the future. When engaging in a strategic conversation you can make certain assumptions about the future to test how a given strategy will perform if those assumptions come to pass.


Charles sends an email voicing his concerns about the FundRace acquisition across the division, attempting to torpedo the acquisition.


To  **Charles Wimble**  
Senior Accountant

CC  **Melinda Torez**  
Program Director

CC  **Lachlan Bing**  
Associate VP of External Relations

CC  **Justin Beau**  
Director of Market Strategy

CC  **Robert Schmit**  
Managing Director

CC  **Kayleigh Dixon**  
Vice President Operations

## Subject: Growing Concerns about FundRace

Hello All,

I hope this message finds you well.

Some of my associates and I have been talking and... well, we have become a tad dubious of this acquisition, to say the least.

The strategy itself is riddled with flaws. There are rumblings that our carefully cultivated and ageless brand will become tarnished by this acquisition, as FundRace is... less than reputable and targeted at, to put it delicately, a younger audience. We are worried that this will create a fallout with our current demographic.

Also, I don't know if many of you were aware of [this social media scandal](#)? This does not look good on Monet Bank. I can not stress enough how many years we have spent cultivating this untarnished brand. Not to mention that it shows a culture that does not mesh with our more traditional leanings.

On the note of company cultures, don't these FundRace people wear ironic sweaters and work remotely? That definitely does not align with everything we hold dear and proper at Monet Bank. How will they acclimate to our structured, punctual, and presentable company culture?

I know that I am voicing concerns that many here at Monet share and I simply want to ensure that everyone has all of the facts before deciding to go along with this foolhardy strategy. I trust you will all make the right choice now that you have been able to see all the facts.

Kindly,  
Charles Wimble

# What we learned

- These “work” experiences in debriefing sessions become **valuable teaching moments**.
- Students will respond in sometimes very **unexpected ways**.
  - One student pushed back at Charles and threatened to go around him.
  - Students discussed why you may not want to respond to a boss by threatening to go over his or her head and what might be a better response.
  - Discussion of how to respond to difficult bosses.
- AI characters adapt their responses even to the tone of the student’s response.
- Students treat these AI characters as real people and real workplace situations.

## What students learned about themselves

### ***In working with the difficult boss – emotional regulation***

- *My biggest takeaway for the future: to regulate emotions. While I am usually excellent in regulating my emotions, [This from a student who tried to have “Charles” fired]*
- *It seems to me after reviewing resources that the best strategies about managing difficult employees or employers revolve around positive-driven long-term plans, patience, and constructive feedback.*
- *In some situations, the students cited Canadian CPA Codes of Ethics as being applicable to the situation.*

# Feedback from the Students

- “Be prepared to be amazed!” That is what I would tell students considering this course.
- This simulation was not only a learning experience for me in a manager’s perspective but, I learned a lot about myself as well, I know my managerial style will need some improving and I would need to incorporate some empathy to help me.
- I thought I was good at problem solving, teamwork, and leadership. But these skills failed me when they were put to the test.
- Helped build confidence in my interactions with co-workers
- Monet bank simulation was a great way to test and experience the true reality of making important management decisions
- Provides a controlled learning where you can turn mistakes into positive learning experiences. By making mistakes in the controlled environment, one will be less likely to make those mistakes when embarking on a professional career.

# Thank you!

- Thanks to the CPAEF for grant funding
- Q and A

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