SMARTER COLLABORATION

COLLABORATING WITH GEN-AI: HEINEKEN'S USE OF THE "POWERBOT"

This case study illustrates how Heineken's legal department uses GenAI to boost the collaborative process that underpins their strong performance. Emerging outcomes include increased efficiency, enhanced quality of debate, and the disruption of dysfunctional team norms. Based on Heineken's experience and Gardner & Co's ongoing research, the case study also provides "how-to's" for leaders attempting to shift workplace culture and practices by effectively integrating and using GenAI.

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SMARTER COLLABORATION Case Study

Collaborating with GenAI: Lessons from Heineken's Use of the "PowerBot"

In today's fast-paced business environment, smarter collaboration is critical to staying ahead of the curve. Top leaders, in both corporations and private firms, recognize that experts must work seamlessly and proactively across silos to boost innovation, enhance financial outcomes, and engage and retain talent.

GenAI (generative artificial intelligence) holds immense promise for transforming collaboration as we know it. A recent study from Gardner & Co involving around 500 practitioners investigates the potential arising from collaboration with GenAI. For instance, 65% of practitioners surveyed believe that using GenAI in meetings leads to more innovative brainstorming. Similarly, 55% believe GenAI's ability to close gaps in knowledge and perspectives in real time. However, the study also shows that 40% of participants do not yet use GenAI in discussions, underscoring the need to shed further light on the topic.[i]

Using GenAI as a trusted ally makes the possibilities for smarter, more dynamic collaboration nearly limitless. This case study explores GenAI's transformative potential in enhancing smarter collaboration. It draws on insights from Heineken's legal department, which pioneered the company's use of GenAI across its business. Incorporating findings from Gardner & Co's research, this paper offers a major surprise: contrary to many doom-and-gloom predictions that GenAI would dampen human interactions, leaders can—and, we argue, should—create the context where AI becomes a full-fledged team member with the power to enhance interpersonal dynamics.

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The Use of GenAI in Heineken's Legal Department

Heineken's legal department is already using GenAI in advanced ways, both in real time during meetings and for preparatory and follow-up tasks. In doing so, they create efficiencies, enhance the quality of discussions, and disrupt suboptimal team norms. We spoke to Sabine van Woerden (Director, Legal Innovation), Ernst van de Weert (General Counsel), and Julian Eck (Senior Legal Counsel, Litigation & Regulatory Risk) to learn more about how they use GenAI in their day-to-day work, how it benefits them, and what lessons they have learned.[ii]

Ernst works with GenAI regularly and uses several different tools. For example, he employs the so-called *PowerBot,* an internally developed AI large language model. Initially, he used it primarily to gain efficiencies in basic leadership tasks such as preparing for town hall meetings and developing more inspiring team communications. Every minute he saved could be reinvested in more value-generating, strategic work.

His colleague, Sabine Huisman van Woerden, now the Global Director of Intellectual Property, is an even more experienced GenAI user. She says PowerBot, which she uses daily for a wide range of tasks, has been her best friend over the last six months. That said, it isn't a full-fledged replacement for a team member, *"The GenAI is only there to support you,"* she said. "*Because you will always need the nuance. Using a bot is like having a super smart and efficient intern on your team.*"

At first, she used PowerBot for basic tasks related to meeting preparation and follow-up. Today, she leverages it during meetings as a real-time collaborator. For example, it was particularly valuable during a discussion with about 10 participants on launching enhanced innovation governance:

Participants agreed on the need for a compelling marketing storyline that articulated the *"why"* of the new governance to internal teams. Instead of engaging in excessive brainstorming with all meeting participants, Sabine assigned this task to the PowerBot. Within seconds, it suggested an approach for "selling" the story along with the legal rationale behind it. The group made a few updates to the proposal, resolving the agenda item within a matter of minutes.

Collaborating with GenAI boosted efficiency *and* produced a higher-quality proposal in a short timeframe, according to meeting participants.

Enhanced Quality of Debate by Adding Missing Perspectives

By now, most people recognize the efficiency gains from using GenAI in day-to-day work. Beyond saving time, however, perhaps the biggest –and most surprising benefit of this new form of human-technology collaboration is that it adds healthy conflict to discussions and disrupts unproductive habits.[iii]

Although most people primarily associate GenAI with efficiency gains, it also has enormous potential to enrich the quality of discussions by adding missing perspectives. These novel perspectives can change the direction of a conversation or materially enrich it, with GenAI adding value by playing one of these predefined roles:

(1) **Corporate Functions:** Particularly with interdisciplinary topics, bringing together all relevant stakeholders is often challenging (e.g., due to parallel appointments, vacations, or other absences). If someone knows they cannot attend a meeting, they might arrange for a deputy to attend or share their opinion with other participants in advance. However, this often fails to happen because of "busyness," and is especially unlikely when people miss meetings unexpectedly. As a result, meetings often lack input from relevant specialists and functional areas. Gardner & Co's GenAI study showed that 90% of respondents saw added value in GenAI providing functional perspectives in meetings. The following functions cited most frequently were Information Technology (52%); Business Development (51%); and Marketing (51%).[iv] For further data on other corporate functions, see Appendix 2.

(2) **Personality Traits:** In addition to missing functional perspectives, a team or a meeting may also lack a diversity of personality types. Consider supervisory boards of listed companies that have long been, and in some cases still are, male dominated. Gender studies often describe men as more risk-taking than women. In such a scenario, GenAI could take on the role of a level-headed, risk-averse participant and thereby enrich the debate with valuable perspectives. Elsewhere, a team might inadvertently consist of only people drawn to complex, abstract problems. In this case, they would benefit from a GenAI "teammate" that prompts them to consider more concrete, action-oriented solutions, helping them conclude team meetings not only with creative ideas, but also ones with ideas likely to be implemented.

(3) **Outside Voice:** A third perspective often missing in discussions is the outside voice of the organization's stakeholders. Imagine discussing product enhancements—wouldn't having clients' opinions at the table enrich the conversation? Or what if you were expanding your business (e.g., through acquisitions or geographical expansion)— wouldn't it make sense to hear possible concerns of regulators or NGOs in real time? In Gardner & Co's latest research, 37% of respondents said they would appreciate having GenAI participate in a real-time discussion as an outside voice.

How GenAI Disrupts Dysfunctional Team Norms

Effective communication and smarter collaboration are paramount to success in today's dynamic organizational landscape. However, a lack of exposure to external influences or challenges can lead to comfortable routines and entrenched patterns of thought and ultimately dysfunctional team norms. Gardner & Co research shows that introducing GenAI revolutionizes how teams interact, addressing common challenges and fostering a more inclusive, productive environment:

(1) **Reducing Employee Silence**: Employees are often reluctant to challenge colleagues or superiors, fearing negative consequences for personal relationships, retaliation, or damage to their careers. This phenomenon, known as *employee silence*, is particularly prevalent in politically charged organizational contexts. GenAI allows employees to validate opinions on sensitive topics through the perspective of a neutral third party. Consequently, issues can be addressed more openly when GenAI is referenced.

(2) **Increasing Acceptance of Dissenting Opinions**: Dysfunctional communication processes often arise from when recipients do not accept the sender's opinion or point of view. The Gardner & Co study reveals that people are more likely to accept dissenting opinions or negative feedback if it is delivered by a GenAI tool – or validated by one. Recipients note they appreciate the objectivity of the information and do not have to worry about underlying interpersonal conflict.

(3) **Breaking Down Narrow-Mindedness:** Team with long-term collaborators often fall into entrenched patterns of thought and behavior. Comfortable routines settle in and become reinforced by a lack of external influences. The real-time use of GenAI infuses new perspectives and stimulates fresh ways of thinking, helping to break down the narrow-mindedness of a team.

(4) **Overcoming *"Fake Politeness"*:** Many meetings begin with lengthy introductions and, to some extent, fake politeness, where people pretend to be interested or strive to avoid conflict. Adding GenAI as a neutral third party to a discussion will help spark debate more quickly. Instead of losing valuable time, people can dig into substantive issues with guidance from a neutral participant (GenAI).

(5) **Disrupting Back Channels:** Who hasn't experienced meetings where a few participants reach consensus quickly and decisions are driven by pre-organized majorities or side agreements? By objectively challenging people and their arguments and asking tough questions, GenAI can reduce these choreographed outcomes. This ensures that decision-making rests on factual foundations rather than personal alliances.

(6) **Promoting Inclusiveness:** A common problem in organizations is that lower status often means an opinion is considered less relevant and less likely to be heard. GenAI counters this by evaluating arguments regardless of the employee's status. This objectivity increases inclusiveness, reduces status bias, and benefits all parties. Employees receive greater appreciation for their contributions, and the organization gains valuable viewpoints and ideas.

(7) **Reducing Intellectual Absence:** Adding GenAI to a real-time discussion helps prevents people from disengaging or becoming apathetic, partly because meetings become more efficient and productive. In addition, GenAI could track meeting participants' contributions, (measured by speaking time and content) and provide leaders with data on whom to involve more in the discussion.

How-To's for Effectively Integrating GenAI

Drawing on the experiences and expertise of Heineken's legal department, we have identified several best practices for using GenAI. The recommendations address specific requirements for using GenAI in real time:

(1) **One GenAI tool per discussion:** Only one GenAI bot should participate in each meeting. This prevents parallel discussions and subsequent inattention by meeting participants. Moreover, it prevents the GenAI personas from conversing with each other.

(2) **One user interacting with GenAI:** Interaction with GenAI should be managed by a single designated person. This ensures that communication follows a consistent thread and that responsibilities remain clear.

(3) **Prompting proficiency:** The GenAI facilitator must be proficient in prompting techniques. This skill is crucial for clearly articulating participants' requests to GenAI. Conversely, weak prompting skills can severely reduce the quality of GenAI output.

(4) **Multitasking skills:** Operating GenAI in real time requires strong multitasking skills. The facilitator must follow both the GenAI interaction *and* the ongoing discussion in parallel, while remaining visibly engaged to avoid appearing disinterested or distracted.

(5) **Separating meeting leader and GenAI facilitator:** Because real-time collaboration with GenAI requires significant cognitive resources, the facilitator should not also lead the meeting. Combining both roles could compromise the effectiveness of the meeting.

(6) **Transparency about the use:** The use of GenAI in meetings should be made transparent to all participants. This builds trust in the technology and in those using it, while preventing GenAI users from being mistakenly perceived as distracted or disengaged.

(7) **Optimal working environment:** The GenAI facilitator should have optimal working environment, for example, a quiet meeting room with no background noise to maintain concentration.

(8) **Technical equipment:** The GenAI facilitator needs the right technical equipment. For example, a second screen allows them to follow the main discussion while simultaneously interacting with GenAI.

Leadership Implications

In today's rapidly evolving business landscape, adopting GenAI is pivotal for organizations seeking to maintain and grow their competitive advantage. It is especially important that leaders demonstrate acceptance and willingness to use GenAI, as this enables them to better focus on strategic work. As Ernst says, "GenAI supports you in fulfilling your leadership role. It focuses on heavy workloads, and you can focus more on your strategic role, and GenAI is the enabler of that."

Leaders play a central role in guiding their teams through the GenAI integration process. A recent Gardner & Co study with more than 500 practitioners outlines several actions leaders should take to

successfully integrate GenAI into their teams:

(1) **Create a culture of true experimentation:** GenAI has enormous potential to boost efficiency and quality of output in many operations. However, the novelty and rapid development of the technology are creating uncertainty among employees. Thus, creating a culture of true experimentation is fundamental. One where failure is anticipated and employees know how to learn from their experience.

(2) **Share success stories:** Success stories help convince people throughout the company to use GenAI. Leaders must identify and collaborate with early adopters to create and maintain momentum for adopting the new technology companywide.

(3) **Set and communicate expectations:** Using GenAI drives efficiency and saves time. Leaders must set and communicate expectations for how employees should spend this "found time," such as collaborating on additional tasks. They must also clarify responsibilities for solving complex problems, especially in times of increased task fragmentation.

(4) **Ensure employees have the necessary skills:** Active participation in a discussion (*being* engaged and *appearing* engaged) alongside parallel communication with GenAI requires skills such as multitasking and prompting proficiency. Leaders must ensure employees have the skills to manage and structure nuanced, diverse inputs in real time.

(5) **Counteract widening performance gaps:** Employees often demonstrate varying degrees of acceptance toward new technologies. The study indicates that high performers see opportunities in using GenAI. However, if primarily high performers realize additional efficiencies and advantages from using GenAI, internal performance gaps may widen. Leaders must recognize this and take steps to engage technology skeptics.

(6) **Enhance mentoring and apprenticeships:** As GenAI relieves junior staff of traditional groundwork and their tasks become more fragmented, their learning and development paths will also change. Therefore, leaders must strengthen mentoring and apprenticeships to ensure junior staff develop intuition, professional judgment, and emotional intelligence.

(7) **Prepare for more demanding conversations:** With GenAI, meeting input will become more nuanced and diverse, while the sheer volume of unvalidated information will also increase. Leaders must ensure discipline in problem-solving (e.g., *Are we still discussing the right topic? Is everyone engaged?)* while simultaneously demonstrating their ability to structure and curate extensive amounts of information in real time.

(8) **<u>Challenge yourself to become a curious visionary:</u>** GenAI can effectively answer the questions we pose by drawing on past data, but who sets the future direction? Leaders must challenge themselves to become visionary advisors, who ask the right questions. In this era of GenAI, the ability to think ahead and challenge the status quo will increasingly mark the difference between effective and ineffective executives.

Conclusion:

As with any new technology, use cases and user sophistication will advance far more rapidly than any case study can capture. What endures, however, is the human aspect of that usage. While some people will quickly adopt a new tool and integrate them seamlessly into their work, others face the same psychological and structural barriers that arise when collaborating with human peers:

Employee concern	Leader Action
Interpersonal Trust: *Will AI take my job?*	Help employees understand the **unique value** they bring, something that GenAI can't rival.
Competence Trust: *Is the information accurate and secure?*	Run test pilots that showcase GenAI's **successes** and be transparent about failures
Time Pressure: *Is it worth it to learn yet another tool?*	Create and quantify GenAI use cases, including **efficiency gains** and **quality improvements**.

Leaders now have an obligation to help employees understand the trade-offs of using AI as real-time team members, and help them harness its power to enhance the human-human collaboration unfolds. In the right context, GenAI can revolutionize how teams interact and help to foster a more inclusive, productive environment.

Appendix 1: The Backstory: Building the PowerBot

In an interview with Lyudmila Todorovska (Head of Global Technology - HR, Corporate Affairs and Legal), she shared how the PowerBot was developed by the *Hyperautomation* team – which is a multi-skilled product-focused group following Scrum practices. The concept of PowerBot emerged from two key insights: the technical team's deep understanding of the capabilities of existing technology, and the clear need for support in daily operational activities by the business stakeholders. The PowerBot was born, using Microsoft's Azure OpenAI GPT-2 as POC (proof of concept), and later upgraded to GPT-4o.

- *Roles and skills required:* The development of a GenAI tool such as PowerBot requires different roles and skills from the technology department as well as the involvement of additional stakeholders; see Appendix 1 for details.
- *Principles of collaboration and development:* When introducing new solutions like PowerBot, agile working methods (Scrum) have proven their worth in Heineken's technology departments. Three-week sprint phases, in which the product team completes pending tasks/work items, alternate with recurring sprint reviews. In these review meetings, results of the previous sprint phase are presented in a demo session. In addition to the technology stakeholders, all other business stakeholders are encouraged to participate in the demo sessions and give feedback. Further needs, open work packages, and responsibilities for the next sprint phase are defined based on the work status.

Improvements to PowerBot are made on a constant basis. Aligned with the agile working methodology, these are implemented every few weeks, depending on the criticality of user feedback and the expected business value of the improvement. In addition to ongoing optimizations initiated by users, further developments and powerful releases from Microsoft ensure regular adjustments and improvements to PowerBot.

Appendix 2: Why Smarter Collaboration? Tapping into roles & skills beyond the technology department

The development of a GenAI tool such as the PowerBot requires different roles and skills from the technology department as well as the involvement of additional stakeholders:

- **Product Owner**: This role is responsible for defining the features and requirements of the product, acts as a link to all the different stakeholders of the PowerBot, and gathers input from all stakeholders to determine the next steps required.
- **Architect**: This role designs the structure of the application and the integration of its various components and interfaces.
- **Developer/Engineers**: Different development roles are required depending on the project's scope. On the PowerBot, one general developer (DevOps) and one developer with specific knowledge of the technology (Azure OpenAI) were involved.
- **Business Analyst**: This role acts between the product owner, the technology team, and the different stakeholders and records stakeholder requirements and the execution of project progress.
- **Users from the specialist departments/internal clients**: The users formulate their requirements for the solution from a practical perspective, test it during development, and provide feedback on the current work status.
- **Compliance**: Certain checks must be carried out before releasing a solution such as the PowerBot. Security, privacy, and legal perspectives must be addressed. It is recommended to start with these steps to avoid wasting resources in cases where unsolvable obstacles arise.

Appendix 3: Transformative potential of GenAI in Providing Valued New Perspectives

The Gardner & Co study explored the transformative potential of GenAI in enhancing smarter collaboration, drawing on insights from our study with nearly 500 global business practitioners, including interviews (N=138) and surveys (N=340). The following finding draws from the survey portion of the study:

If the GenAI bot was representing a different perspective, which would be valuable?[v]

Function (alphabetical)	**Acceptance in %**
Business Development	**52 %**
Compliance	45 %
Corporate Communications	40 %
Finance	35 %
Human Resources	25 %
Information Technology	**52 %**
Legal	45 %
Logistics	37 %
Marketing	**51 %**
Procurement	35 %
Quality Assurance	30 %
Research & Development	42 %
Risk Management	47 %
Sales	37 %
Outside Voice (e.g., client, regulator, stakeholder)	37 %

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About Gardner & Co and Smarter Collaboration International

Gardner & Co helps clients across professional services, industry, government, and non-profits to drive change through smarter collaboration.

Combining our unique blend of empirical research, academic rigor, and top-tier consulting experience, we partner with the board, C-suite, and leadership teams to help transform organizations. We also provide technology-based tools through our sister company, Smarter Collaboration International (SCI), including collaboration-focused psychometric and 360 feedback instruments and personalized guidance – to help individuals and teams collaborate more effectively.

We are passionate about collaboration because it creates opportunities for every employee to thrive when they contribute with their full potential.

Gardner & Co is led by Dr. Heidi K. Gardner and supported by a world-class team. Gardner & Co also draws on its network of top-tier experts for both research and advisory work. We not only deliver smart collaboration, we live it.

For more information, please e-mail Dr. Heidi K. Gardner at hgardner@law.harvard.edu.

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[i] Gardner & Co (2024): Enhancing Smarter Collaboration Through GenAI.
[ii] Interviews conducted in February-April 2024.
[iii] Gardner & Co (2024): Enhancing Smarter Collaboration Through GenAI.
[iv] Ibid.
[v] Ibid.