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MACHINE LEARNING is a branch of artificial intelligence in which computers automatically “learn” and improve from experience. A.I. systems such as these do not start out perfect. Rather, they rely on collaboration between people and computers: Humans make machines more intelligent, and A.I. makes humans more efficient.

When applied to expense management, machine learning can accurately evaluate reports by observing patterns in what human reviewers approve or reject over time. “You could think of it like an apprenticeship,” says Thomas W. Malone, founding director of the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence. “Sometimes the apprentice may ask some explicit questions or the expert may make an explicit comment, but the apprentice learns a lot just by watching. I call it a cyber-human learning loop.”

Already, with A.I.-enhanced tools, expense reports are far less burdensome than they were even five years ago. Employees can now scan and upload receipts with their phones, and their travel information is pulled into reports from booking sites, corporate cards and email messages. Managers can review reports by mobile device, then approve them with one button click. But as humans continue to work with machine learning over the next year or two, expense management systems will advance at an even faster pace — and transform how we do business.

“We expect that many companies will transition to A.I. expense reporting

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AUTOMATING EXPENSES is a smart move for businesses. "Not only do you free the manager from the drudgery of having to approve the expense report, you actually get much better results for the company," Lambert says.

Sixty-two percent of accounts payable costs stems from labor, according to a recent report by the American Productivity and Quality Center. "With machine learning, we're approaching a period where you bring the human into the process only when you need to," Lambert says, "as opposed to making that person review everything."

Managers can stay as involved as they want. For instance, a supervisor wondering whether the department has the budget to send an employee to a particular conference may confer with a bot that pulls conference costs and quarterly spend predictions to expedite a decision. With real-time reporting and faster reimbursements, employees will likely be more content, and financial decision makers will have increased control and knowledge.

Free from the burden of creating and approving expense reports, companies can focus on propelling their businesses forward. Case in point: Cardinal Health, a global healthcare organization that

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