> **"But we are only scratching the surface of how when augmented with day-to-day analytics; AI can help to fuel and lead massive productivity gains in business."**
>
> **Clinton Scott,** Techsoft International

Businesses must look at how they can enable AI on the channels they are already using, for example, SMS, voice or email. If innovation and two-way conversations are required, then businesses need to look at how they will gear to migrate to an alternate channel. A major pain point when it comes to AI is data. AI is about an answer and response mechanism, which is built on a foundation of data. In order to provide appropriate responses and a useful two-way communication channel via AI, the underlying data needs to be up to the job, and built to enable interpretation so that AI can provide a meaningful response. Nothing is more frustrating to customers than a bot that is unable to do so, and poor customer experience will result in low adoption rates, which minimise the return on investment.

It should enable people at different levels in the organisation to engage with AI and receive various levels of data intelligence without them needing to be data scientists. Unless you understand and can extract value from the data, AI will be meaningless. Traditional report writers and data analysts will need to be upskilled in the art of AI, as this is a new paradigm of thinking. While current reports tell you about the business as it is, AI will tell you what the business should be, in order to be profitable, and productive, Dherman adds.

Speaking of the possible pitfalls of AI, Van Wyk says without an effective AI system, a business will frustrate its customers. "If you haven't planned the AI experience well and executed it properly, your investment will be wasted and adoption rates will be poor. It's essential to always have the option to transfer to a human being. It's important to cherry-pick processes to migrate to AI as it is suited to tasks that are particularly predictable, mundane and repetitive. Once an AI system is implemented, it needs to be maintained, updated and continuously optimised. It's also prudent not to implement AI if it's not necessary or will not deliver any benefits. Implementing any technology for technology's sake will inevitably result in unnecessary challenges. Talk to your customers, find out if they would actually use an AI system, and make an informed decision as to whether this is something your business needs or not. As the saying goes, if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Service design

For Sartini, one of the dangers of implementing AI is the potential emotional impact on staff and customers. "It's a well-established result in social psychology that when people feel anxious, they seek advice from others. Increasingly, AI is being implemented in high-anxiety settings (such as financial services, healthcare, and education).

"Giving customers the potential to be able to interact 'with a human' has been shown to reduce anxiety and increase customer satisfaction and trust, even though the majority of customers will not necessarily exercise this option. Knowing that human contact is readily available is important for anxious customers and should be incorporated into the service design when looking at implementing AI for service delivery.

Dherman believes that ethics need to be a consideration, too. "In fact, some researchers believe that AI should hold itself accountable. If AI is used to simply augment human ability, and not replace it, fears around the 'robot revolution' can be pacified."

Digital citizens

Of course, no AI conversation can be had without discussing whether it will take away jobs or create new ones. According to Gartner, AI-related job creation will reach two million net-new jobs in 2025. "Although AI will replace some jobs, I believe it's more likely that AI will augment human ability. In other words, AI will assist humans to do their jobs better. For example, chatbots or 'digital citizens' have enabled or augmented human ability by allowing manufacturing businesses to make decisions much faster. What is important is the fact that the chatbot is not replacing the human element in customer service, but rather adding value by offering customers a 24/7 touchpoint. Technology is simply enhancing human abilities in order to place the customer at the centre of a business," says Dherman.

The beauty of AI is that it doesn't get tired, it won't have bad days, and it won't make decisions based on emotion, says Noome. "AI will definitely increase productivity because it can work 24/7, 365 days a year. The other side of the coin though is that we should be encouraging human contact and not limiting it any further by technology. My ideal scenario then is that we see humans at the front-end and AI operating in the back-end; humans must keep connecting with each other." **b**