

There's No Magic in AI— So What's the Problem?

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I teach graduate students; most are techies who hang out in chinos and hoodies. I also coach corporate executives; who are mainly “corner office” occupants dressed in suits. Nowadays, the common topic in these two disparate audiences is artificial intelligence (AI). The motivations of both are aligned on the subject — feeling the pressure to stay relevant. Why is this uncertainty so prevalent in both, pupils and practitioners?

AI is the product of human creativity. Its concept is simple, namely, using machines to mimic human behaviors. The idea has been around for over fifty years, so it's not novel. Yet,



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my students act like it's a newly discovered technology revolution. And business people are foggy about what AI is or does, but they are adamant in wanting it now.

The Hype Obscures Reality

It is often difficult to have a meaningful discussion without the quick inclusion of underlying AI technologies as substitute descriptors of, or being synonymous with, AI in general. The tendency to label speech recognition, machine learning, robotics, virtual agents, and a host of other terms as AI, leads to unfocused analyses of purpose, need, and desired outcomes. Even a well-intentioned, constructive dialog finds the need to lump AI with its underlying technologies in order to improve meaning. Look no further than the title on the cover on this magazine. There's no criticism intended; the fact just reinforces this point.

Both my students and clients are excited about what they hear regarding AI. But I get a blank stare when I ask them what they want AI to do for them. AI is a general label for a myriad of technologies. I find it productive to change the direction of these discussions away from technology altogether. At its core, AI is about the speed, scale, and accuracy in creating work product. By extension, AI is more correctly about workforce shaping than pursuing the greatest and latest bot, widget, or app.

In terms of work product, AI comes in two flavors, automation or augmentation. You've likely heard of the former expressed as the Internet of Things. Automation uses sensors, processors, collectors, and controllers that take machine inputs to create machine outputs, often in some form of robotics. Augmentation on the other hand takes machine inputs to feed into human actions. In my graduate-level course, I call this the Internet of Persons. The compo-

nents found in this area are content overlay (such as augmented reality), immersive experience (often seen as virtual reality), and managing data & apps (robotic process automation). Understanding the difference between automation and augmentation is vitally important if one is going to succeed at an AI implementation.

Ready, Set, GO!

The starting point is not as hard to find as many make it out to be, but only if one starts simple and builds from there. The key is to triangulate a business problem, desired outcomes, and cultural acceptance of a potential change — in precise terms. It is important not to deal in a nuanced language, but rather to clarify purpose and usage that promote a broad understanding among those who will be most affected. But at this juncture, organizations often make a critical mistake. Namely, they bring in an AI expert to offer possible technical solutions.

Experts are smart people with deep knowledge and are indispensable to the AI journey. However, the tyranny of experts is their inability to properly account for the broader organizational factors and workforce implications of any given proposal. Experts make recommendations, not decisions. Those should be left to leadership.

Before undergoing a comprehensive, process deconstruction and investing in a neural network of complex algorithms, definitively answer three questions. First, what is the value of the potential improvement and the measure of its success? Second, is the improvement an automation of a process or is it aimed at augmenting a human component of work product? Lastly, what kind of handle do we have on the most critical AI component — our available data? Now, you stand an excellent chance of succeeding with the right AI implementation.

AI and Change Accelerate the Impact of the Other

When the workforce hears that AI is coming, their first thought tends toward employment security, followed quickly by wondering about future job satisfaction. The ability to put AI in the right context is the tipping point toward it being successful. The more people understand the tools, methods, and logic behind such an investment, the easier it is to make AI work for pupils and practitioners at all levels. ■

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About The Author

Dr. Dale Meyerrose, Major General, U.S. Air Force (retired) is President and Chairman of the Board for Imcon International, a technology company, which sells digital services in remote and rural areas. He is an adjunct instructor for Carnegie Mellon University, Institute for Software Research running their Cybersecurity Leadership Certificate program. General Meyerrose, a Southwest Asia veteran, was the first Senate-confirmed, President-appointed Chief Information Officer for the U.S. Intelligence Community after three decades of military service.