Learning about AI

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Artificial Intelligence – Learning to overcome the fear

The past couple of years have seen Artificial Intelligence (AI) catapulted into the business mainstream, thanks mainly to the rapid developments in generative AI in particular. As a topic, it demands vast amounts of senior leadership thinking time and accounts for an ever increasing amount of column inches, with new stories of its latest applications emerging on a daily basis.

Yet for every person – or business – embracing the technology with open arms, there's likely to be another that's far more reticent, unable to take full advantage of what's on offer. Much of that reticence will come from nervousness or uncertainty, which in turn stems from a lack of knowledge and skills.

All of which helps explain why there's a current boom in demand for engaging and accessible AI learning activities. Much of that demand comes from people who are only now taking their first steps into the world of AI, acknowledging how it's likely to become a major part of their daily working routines. Some of them may be sceptical about AI's potential. Some may have concerns over information security. Others may simply be worried about the technology making their role redundant. Overcoming their understandable fears is the primary aim here.

Chris Booth, a learning product leader with KPMG Learning Services, explains, "We need to remember that a lot of people remain somewhat lost or unsure when it comes to AI. As learning designers, we need to help these people understand the technology, what it's doing and how it's doing it, even at just a very basic level. Only then can they apply their own reasoning, critical thinking and judgement to its outputs."

"There's also work to be done on creating an 'AI-first' mentality where people's default reaction is to think about how AI could help them with a particular task. We've been here before though. When internet search engines first appeared, a major behavioural shift was required before people would default to using them to help complete a task. For now, it still requires more of a conscious effort for people to think, 'I'm going to use AI for this'."

Laying the foundations

Learning more about how AI actually works is a precursor to better appreciating the risks it currently comes with, such as inherent bias (when bias is already present within the data the AI is learning from) or hallucinations (providing fabricated responses to a prompt that the AI has no real answer to). It's also the first step towards a better appreciation of the ethical considerations that are part and parcel of being able to use AI responsibly.

With this in mind, KPMG recently released a suite of five new AI training products which will be available to all civil servants. Two of these focus on data and AI ethics, with the other three exploring the fundamentals of AI; AI for leaders; and realising the full potential of Copilot, Microsoft's own AI-powered productivity assistant.

The two ethics courses provide a high level introduction to the topic and a subsequent, more in-depth exploration of it. Doubling up in this way was a deliberate decision as ethics are a vital consideration when showing people how to use AI in a safe and innovative way and helping them to make well-reasoned decisions on when best to deploy it. In addition, ethics, risk, assurance and security are core considerations for a highly regulated business like KPMG, meaning that in-depth subject matter expertise was always going to be readily available to help design the learning content.

"There's a real balance to be struck when designing AI content," continues Chris. "You need to explain how AI works but not to the extent that you scare learners off. You need to provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate ethical risks and challenges, to think critically about AI outputs and to explain any decisions they make around using AI. These are the foundational skills they'll need if they want to keep pace with AI as it continues to evolve."

"That's why we needed to make sure that our content was packaged up in a way that would resonate with non-technical experts who make up the bulk of our AI learner population. But we've also really benefitted from the fact that the in-house AI experts who helped design our products in this way are also the people who deliver them. That means they're constantly refreshing the content in real time to reflect the latest thinking."

Up next

Pushed on what the next big development for AI might be, Chris opts for agentic AI, a version of AI that can be trained to semi-autonomously perform a specific task, such as running weekly status reports and other tasks that require a level of consistency and repetition. It might not be too long, he suggests, before people need to learn how to configure their own iterations of agentic AI models, making it important to get up to speed now on what this latest evolution of AI actually means.

"I'd say that's the next big thing," he concludes, "but, in some ways, it's already here. Applications like Copilot, for example, already allow users to create their own AI bots, although it's not something that many people are doing yet. Imagine what that could mean from a learning perspective though. We could have a world where, as part of any learning programme that they go on, learners could configure their own coaching bot. Having fed in their learning content, they could have a coaching session with a bot that's been designed specifically for them and so understands the way that they like to learn. These are the kinds of interesting ways in which we could use AI to take personal efficiency and productivity to the next level."

To find out more about the range of AI courses now available, head to Prospectus Online.

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