South African businesses should be investigating AI (now)

By Colin Thornton

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As both consumers and working professionals, we have come to view internet connectivity in the same way as electricity and running water - it's an essential! Yet as more of our devices become synced and begin to communicate with each other, connectivity will soon take on an entirely new meaning.

Colin Thornton, managing director of Turrito Networks and Dial a Nerd

Today, as broadband internet is becoming more widely available at a cheaper cost, more devices are being created with smart Wi-Fi capabilities and sensors built into them. If you pair this with increasing reliance on software and smartphones and businesses looking for digitally-driven insights, you have a 'perfect storm', in a sense, for the emergence of the internet of things (IoT) and artificial intelligence (AI).

There is simply too much data, derived from too many devices, for humans to process effectively.

Expect to see businesses devising clear strategies around IoT

This year, we expect to see businesses devising clear strategies around IoT, which, simply put, is connecting any device with an on and off switch to the internet (and/or to each other).

> *As IoT develops, it will automatically create opportunities to leverage artificial intelligence within almost every sphere of life, and work.*

By way of example, imagine the massive amount of data being generated by Fitbit-type wearable devices across the world. Now, imagine if there was an AI program monitoring this data and looking for signs of an impending heart attack. It could be pre-programmed with some obvious signs, but could also 'learn' from real-life examples.

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Maybe, with enough learning, AI could detect heart attacks days or even weeks before they happen!

AI to be a top five investment priority

As a recent press statement by Gartner indicated, the term "artificial intelligence" was not in the top 100 search terms on gartner.com in early 2016. However, by May 2017, the term ranked at number seven, indicating "the popularity of the topic and interest from Gartner clients in understanding how AI can and should be used as part of their digital business strategy."

Notably, the company predicts that by 2020, AI will be a top five investment priority for more than 30% of CIOs.

Investing heavily in skills, processes, tools

Similarly to other key technology trends, organisations will need to invest heavily in skills, processes, and tools that are specific to the development and evolution of AI - and it is suggested that businesses focus on tightly scoped solutions, targeting specific tasks.

Take a look at chatbots being used by online retailers, for example. At some point in the not-too-distant future, when you engage with an online 'agent' to ask if they have stock of a certain item or what their warranty policy is, you will be answered by an AI 'bot', not a human.

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A new frontier

Unsurprisingly, within the technology industry itself, AI has become a major battleground for software and service vendors - with AI and business intelligence soon to be incorporated into every application, app and service within the enterprise.

Gartner highlights augmented analytics, which uses machine learning to automate data preparation, insight discovery and insight sharing as an area of growing strategic importance. There is also a strong view that organisations should explore intelligent apps that augment human activity, and identify use cases across advanced analytics, intelligent processes and new user experiences.

However, regardless of application, the real power of AI lies in its contextual awareness: its ability to sense and respond to the current context. As a result, the potential of AI is especially seductive in the sphere of sales and marketing.

People browsing the internet are, often unknowingly, creating huge amounts of data. Their likes and dislikes, shopping habits, budgets and more are being recorded on a daily basis. It would be impossible for humans to sift through this data in a scalable (and sustainable) way to customise a specific user's experience.

It will, therefore, be left to AI to monitor and learn, so that people are engaging with content (and advertising) that appeals to them.

> *For South African businesses of all sizes and across sectors, AI undoubtedly presents new channels for growth and innovation – at a time when both are badly needed.*

The key, however, will be investing into smart technology and smart people…and sooner rather than later!

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ABOUT COLIN THORNTON

Colin founded Dial a Nerd in 1998 as a consumer IT support company and in 2002 the business- focused division was founded. Supporting SMEs is now its primary focus. In 2015 his company, merged with Turrito Networks who provided niche internet services outside of the local network. These two companies have created an end-to-end IT and Communication solution for SMEs. Colin has subsequently become the managing director of Turrito. Contact him at info@dialanerd.co.za

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