AI is a crucial tool to help all businesses thrive

Machine learning and artificial intelligence has been sold as an expensive supercar, an occasional toy for the wealthy to flaunt their fortune. That's a lie. Artificial intelligence is more like a bakkie: a tool that can help most businesses and adaptable enough to suit a wide variety of needs. And just like South Africa's best-selling vehicle, no matter how rich you are the top-end product only adds more comfort and lifestyle features - it still needs to do the bakkie basics as well.
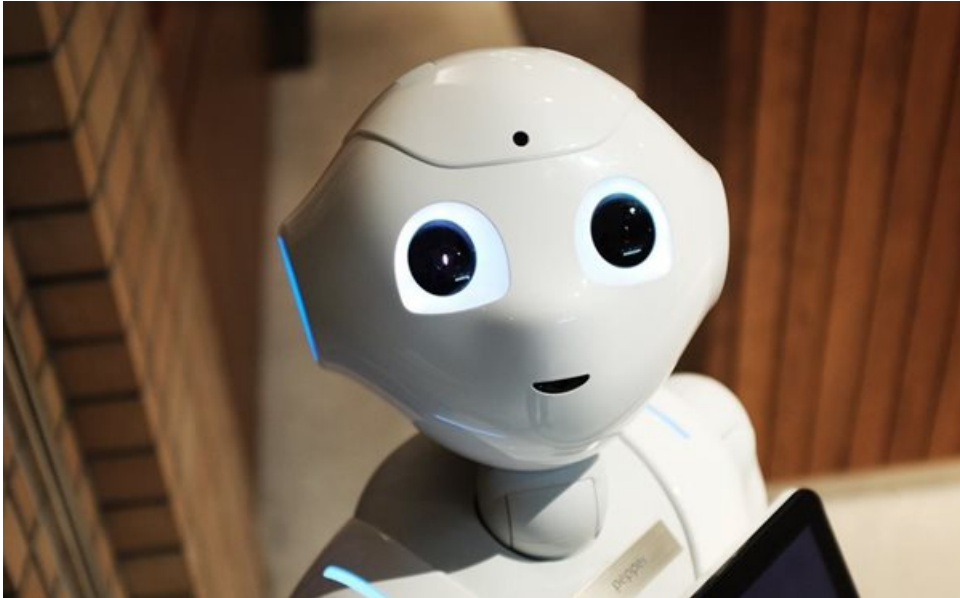

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The assumption is, however, that AI must be custom-built to align with the business goals and that means employing a specialised team. This misconception is perpetuated by the big companies in a bid to stay ahead of potential disruption by SMMEs.

The reality is far more democratic than most business owners think. That's the thing about technology, it gets cheaper over time. Just like you can produce a feature-length movie entirely on a smartphone, you can supercharge your business potential with off-the-shelf AI solutions.

"We started small, so we know that most SMMEs can't afford to do big data research," explains Mark Germishuys, CEO of NGA. "That's why we built one of the biggest AI services on the continent."

SocialListener is a software solution that can identify trends through an innovative internet search algorithm. The AI engine is trained to identify content related to the search terms and industry focus, so business owners can quickly get deep

insight into what actual customers are saying about their product, or get a snapshot on global trends.

"Our AI engine creates a dashboard tailored to our clients' specific needs. Because our interests are so varied in our company, we've trained the machine learning algorithm on a vast number of search variables and have refined the customer experience to surface the relevant information within about six clicks," says Germishuys.

The software solution is a lot like doing an internet search. The AI will search across all the Google listings in articles and social posts for those keywords and return a contextualised list of findings. From there it's a matter of sorting the data fields to meet your needs.

Germishuys demonstrates a search regarding Covid-19 vaccines and identifies the key institutions working on it, which are returning data that suggests a higher viability, who was the first to get started and when exactly they began working on it. There's also a column listing all the research papers the vaccine development is based on. It took about five minutes.

Data gathering and analysis is only a fraction of NGA's machine learning capabilities. The team of data scientists and software engineers have already fitted the AI engine to improve hydroponic farming by integrating machine learning into a network of IoT sensors like cameras and weather services. AI can ingest and sort through a near infinite amount of data and produce the results or answers that you need.

"One of our clients was manually capturing data off of forms, so we built a text recognition solution for them using machine learning and it saved them 40 man-hours per month," he says.

"That employee was then redeployed to a more strategic task and is contributing more to the business objectives now. And that's the beauty of this technology, you don't need a dedicated data analyst on staff because all you need to do is ask the AI for the information and you can produce a report within minutes. Now the business owner and key employees are free to work on the business instead of doing the time-consuming tasks in the business."

Integrating artificial intelligence into your business moves your work from reacting to market forces to predict future market changes and strategizing the response to those changes.

How AI can act as a tool

Here are three solutions AI can create for any enterprise:

1. **Speed up research and development**: SocialListener is intelligent enough to understand sentiment, which is a more accurate way of viewing trends. Because it's analysing the language in the articles and social media posts related to your search (in 110 languages), your results reflect the true feeling around your next innovation.

2. **Marketing secrets revealed**: Thanks to the magic of the internet we have a detailed timeline of any product marketing campaign. Machine Learning can build a detailed map of product launch strategies from the biggest brands in the world and you can plug those findings directly into your strategy.

3. **Scale to your needs**: Machine learning algorithms are only as good as the data it can train on. The other end of that equation means that it can adapt to the specific data related to your business, be it sales trends or the effect of next week's weather on your crop.

Every customer interaction, every sale, every expense, every minute of work done in a business is a data point. With so much free data being generated, those who can interpret it and apply those findings will adapt quickest to changing data trends. AI can digest all that data in minutes and machine learning can identify the patterns that you've been blind to because of the time spent doing the work to generate the data.

SMMEs don't have the manpower to sift through data. AI solutions are a shortcut to the small revelations that creates big business.

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