
MAKING THE COMMITMENT

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND MOBILITY

BY M. DIANE McCORMICK

Who's afraid of artificial intelligence (AI)? Very few people in mobility, apparently. Firms applying AI in the workplace are disproving old canards about humans being booted from the workplace. They are reporting enthusiastic employees, who have been given the gift of time to gain insights into customer needs, sharpen their skills, and pursue career growth.

AI is evolving so rapidly that the term itself evades definition and uniformity. At its most basic, AI teaches technology to analyze data and put human interaction into context. Its cousin known as robotic process automation, or RPA, is streamlining the mundane tasks of data management.

"With RPA, we can give rote tasks to machines," says Vince DiMascio, chief information officer for global immigration firm Berry Appleman & Leiden LLP (BAL). "And intelligent automation is the next level, where we bring in more advanced capabilities such as machine-learning models to help systems become cognitive."

THE MOBILITY CONNECTION

The mobility field, with its complex transactions and reliance on client communication and advisory, is "open to improvement from an AI perspective," says HomeServices Relocation President and CEO Steven John, SCRP, SGMS-T. HomeServices Relocation is a division of Minneapolis-based HomeServices of America, a Berkshire Hathaway affiliate.

Just one example: AI is learning to analyze sentiments, determining whether incoming messages express happiness, satisfaction, or frustration. The relocation consultant who manages an ongoing email stream could easily identify and respond to the upset customer at No. 35 in the queue, as identified by AI as the priority.

"Unless a quick scan shows urgency in a subject line, it's hard for the consultant to prioritize that email," says John. "With the right AI tools, you can scan through all of those emails and prioritize them."



FIRST STEPS

AI adoption does not require major reworking of systems. BAL chose in 2016 to “enable agility” through microservices, which develop “quick, independent systems that tie together, rather than one big system in a monolith,” says DiMascio. Instead of programmers writing software and installing it into systems, microservices quickly created internet-based bots that work nimbly.

BAL selects areas to tackle by evaluating relative value potential, reusability, cost of use, and predictable outcomes, says DiMascio. Big projects result, but so do quick, easy projects that promote momentum and spread the word among colleagues about the advantages of employing AI.

Successful AI adoption is also facilitating strategic plans.

“Enhancing growth, employee satisfaction, client-service quality—those are pillars of the strategy where AI fits,” says DiMascio. “AI is a mode of getting there. It’s not in and of itself a strategy.”

The challenge to management is leveraging the benefits of AI to attract new business, create jobs, and help staff upskill and reskill.

Crown World Mobility started its AI journey with a focus on people in its financial services division, says Matt Crockett, director of finance and technology. While AI can lower costs and relieve pressure on cumbersome everyday procedures, its primary purpose is “to empower people so they can provide better quality and better customer service,” Crockett says.

Committing to a “quadruple bottom line” meant scrutinizing the effort’s benefits for the customer, the employee, the company, and the environment.

“If it’s not going to be a win for all of the stakeholders, you’re going to have a problem,” says Crockett. To decide which tasks to automate,

Crown created a matrix revealing “the highest-volume, least complex tasks that were least satisfying for humans to do and which had the least variability in the use case.”

BAL established an “Automation & AI Development Center” to accelerate automation, selecting RPA platform UiPath for application across departments. BAL applies AI “wherever we see friction, high-volume repetition, strain due to volume or difficulty, or boredom,” says BAL Partner Edward Rios. “Those are the areas where tools like robotic process automation, and eventually AI and more sophisticated systems, will really help human beings fulfill their mandate.”

Global accommodations provider Oakwood Worldwide started by exploring the tools available to support needed functionalities. Officials chose Google’s Dialogflow—giving programmers an easy start in the job of directing computers to answer such customer service questions as available dates and pricing.

The tool, says Shree Khare, vice president of information technology at Oakwood, “is certainly just the starting point. The next step is understanding additional business areas we want to automate and what functions we are looking at.”

HomeServices of America first ventured into AI in 2015, addressing the “pressing need” of cybersecurity, says John. The full-service real estate firm partnered with Microsoft, adapting the cloud-based Exchange Online Protection email filtering service on Microsoft Office 365. An environment delivering a million emails a day offered the “huge repository of data” that AI needs for learning.

“It’s also an area where you’d never be able to do with humans the kind of work that AI is doing,” John says. “You’d need an almost infinite number of people to handle that kind of volume. It’s significant that AI allows us to tackle tasks that appear unattainable based on manpower alone.”

IMPLEMENTING AND COORDINATING

Mobility firms approach AI with deliberation and planning. John believes in collaborating with skilled partners, especially because the field is new and “changing every day.”

“It is an area of sophistication and complexity, so it’s important that we work with the best and the brightest,” he says.

Crown started with two pilot programs, thoroughly testing its robot and analyzing outcomes.



“Once you’ve seen enough benefit from automation, you can decide if you want to build it into the actual system,” says Crockett.

Crown equipped its financial service center queue management with the logic to make trade-off decisions such as assigning expenses to customer service representatives familiar with the client, or those readiest to resolve the issue quickly. The more data the bot received, the better it could be reprogrammed to adjust, says Crockett.

Oakwood focused first on digitizing many core processes, such as direct bookings that allow guests to bypass agents. The next step, says Khare, was enabling guests to converse with chatbots over details such as room availability and length of stays.

The “supervised learning” of feeding good data to the bot and thoroughly scrutinizing results requires a continued investment, says Khare. Because the same question can be asked in many different ways, “AI is interpreting the question and then formatting the context and the intent so we can answer the question appropriately.”

LEVERAGING TIME

After Crown trained staff to work with AI, officials gathered with the team to ask who supported the robots and wanted them to remain switched on.

“The hands were up unanimously,” says Crockett. “The robots could address human needs.” One team leader no longer came to work 30 minutes early, because the robot was allocating the day’s assignments. An analyst said the robot provided peace of mind about accuracy, and more customers were able to process expenses the same or next day.

From there, Crockett adds, the challenge to management is leveraging the benefits to attract new business, create jobs, and help staff upskill and reskill.

BAL reinvested the time saved into strengthening the subject matter expertise of staff attorneys responsible for keeping clients current with a dizzying global immigration scene, says Rios.

Both BAL and Crown have harnessed the talents of staff eager for training in leading-edge automation. Crown shed a couple of positions by attrition but did not lay off anyone and, in fact, trained willing personnel for new positions responsible for managing and tuning up the technology.

Oakwood’s chatbot improves the guest experience with 24/7 answers to questions, while it frees

staff to provide more intensive service on thornier issues, such as extending a stay in a particular apartment, says Khare.

“Some things will always require human interaction,” he says.

AI training equips staff to leverage available tools and pinpoint customer needs according to fact, not feel.

At HomeServices of America, AI has helped staff perform additional duties or improve outcomes through enhanced effectiveness. Evaluating leads, for example, becomes more sophisticated, allowing sales professionals to pursue the most promising ones, John says.

“I’m focused on effectiveness,” he says. “If today I have a 10% capture rate and I want a 50% capture rate, how can AI help me do that in the same amount of time with the same number of people?”

Ideally, AI training equips staff to leverage available tools and pinpoint customer needs according to fact, not feel.

“It’s not about having half as many consultants,” says John. “It really means there are twice as many delighted customers.”

BRIGHT FUTURE

Challenges remain as the mobility industry adopts AI. BAL addressed language and empathy divides between technology and nontech personnel through concerted efforts to embed staff in other departments and “walk in each other’s shoes,” says DiMascio. Legal professionals learn computational-thinking terms, while tech professionals build empathy for the pressures attorneys face to resolve human problems.

“In the long run, the benefit makes sense, because you bridge that gap and can move much faster,” says DiMascio.

Oakwood is exploring the use of AI toward the dynamic-pricing model honed by the airline industry,



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says Khare. Capitalizing on years of legacy data, the revenue management team can analyze busy times—and downtimes—for every apartment it owns and set prices accordingly.

HomeServices of America is developing use of Salesforce's Einstein AI to apply such factors as advanced machine learning, predictive analytics, and neural-linguistic discovery "to help predict future behavior," says John. "Ideally, it will recommend next steps in working with clients and customers and prospects."

John cautions that AI isn't ready for use in all areas. AI's application and effectiveness should be measured against real need and used only when full development has been proven.

"The worst thing we can do is implement artificial intelligence features that create frustration within

our employee environment or with our customers because they don't work properly," he says. "We have to have processes that are really going to work."

For Crockett, AI applies technology to "make this digital experience more personal. For the customer, it's asking how we can do things quicker, cheaper, more personally, and provide a more intimate service. That's front of mind when we're thinking about what we should do next."

PART OF THE TEAM

Mobility firms making the leap into AI are blazing trails for the industry to follow. Artificial intelligence, they know, doesn't replace team members but becomes part of the team by streamlining communications, improving efficiencies, and reenergizing employees focused on delivering personalized, professional guidance to clients and transferees at every step of relocation. *M*

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