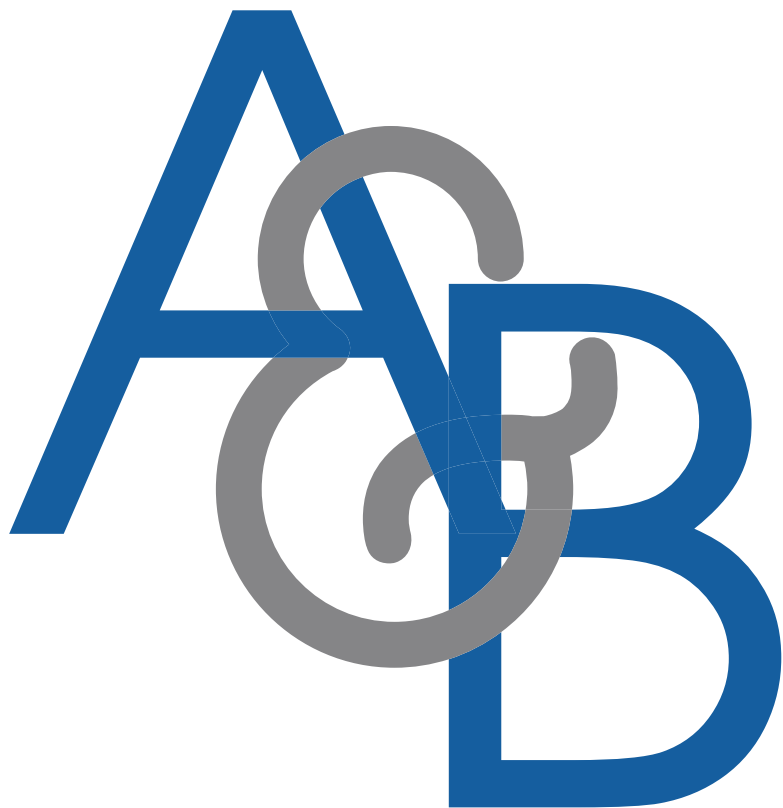


AI BUT NOT AS
WE KNOW IT



TOOL OF THE TRADE

Improves wellness, makes people and companies more efficient, processes bigger tracts of information or... will replace human beings and run the world, utopia versus dystopia. AI does, by any standard get mixed reviews but when applied judiciously, it can bring measurable benefits. And anyway, it is only as good as the data it is given – it needs a human factor.

In fact, AI has been part of our lives for a long time; it uses past orders on amazon to make suggestions to customers for other books or music, for example. Check-in and check-out machines and self-service points in supermarkets use elements of AI. And you didn't read it here first, but AI can take over repetitive daily tasks, leaving employees free to provide more attentive service.

For reporting and analytics, it is faster than people and can cut a swathe through big data, giving clear insights into customer behaviour or tracking preferences of loyalty programme members. Social media posts pushed to an audience are driven by AI-generated algorithms.

The same argument applies to luxury properties – people can be freed up to build relationships and give a better, more personal service.

It is also fun. Kimpton Fitzroy constructed Room to Dream for guests, using a VR headset and AI to create an immersive journey. "It allowed customers to experience lucid dreaming by going into their subconscious to give better wellness," says senior marketing manager Maria d'Amato.

TOOL OF THE TRADE

More practically, AI combined with predictive technology will tell organisations what stock they need and order it; it can also provide greater personalisation in customer relationship management (CRM) and loyalty programmes.

The sensationalist, Armageddonist approach – AI will replace humans – has to have an applicable advantage for hospitality. We may think the industry is digitised but most tasks are done by humans and we are sorely lacking in humans; worse, those who are employed on the ground, are doing the job of machines.

Chatbots and digital assistants are ideal for answering routine questions about parking, check-in, etc. that guests need answering quickly. “They are not about replacing humans, they are the best chance you have to deliver a human service because they are filtering requests,” says senior problem solver for French AI company Quicktext, Benjamin Devisme. “If they can’t answer the question, they can filter it to the right person.”

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GOOD AND EVIL

After steam, electricity, the internet, you could view AI and the Internet of Things (IoT) as the fourth industrial revolution; the fifth follows hot on its heels in the next five to ten years, and our approach to this will dictate how sustainable hospitality remains.

University of Greenwich did a report for the Queensland government in Australia and spoke to SMEs. "We asked how quickly they would replace their staff with robots or chatbots and a shocking proportion said, 'if we could afford it, we would replace them tomorrow'," says senior lecturer Dr Ryan Yung. "From a co-creation point of view, in regional Australia it's very difficult to find staff and good staff, but those staff might view that as co-destruction. These operators were saying robots don't arrive late, don't complain, work 24 hours, don't talk back to me, I pay them once."

There is, however, the drawback that chatbots sometimes give an answer that looks good but isn't strictly accurate; an adverse model of people pleasing. It is possible to ensure this does not happen when someone asks for the earliest check-in time, but it is important to remember that it could.

Once programmed, a bot will not replace the human factor; people are not paid to answer the same question 200 times, they are paid to deal with customer problems or work out that although a room is described as a double on paper, a receptionist would know a child could be squeezed in. AI can't do that.

Also, as technology evolves, so do people. Five years ago, guests asked whether a hotel had Wifi and is it free? Now they want the speed, number of access points, is it good near the swimming pool. "If you consider that the cake is going to get bigger, you can be scared of AI, but if you know a bit about technology, you know that people's needs expand so there will always be a role for humans," says Benjamin Devisme.

MOVE WITH THE TIMES

It is too high risk not to embrace AI because it will transform the way we work. If a company does not start introducing it little by little to answer repetitive questions, for example, then employees will not evolve, and they will not learn the skills they need to remain relevant.

But preparing teams for AI is a secondary challenge; first is to get the right data in the system so that AI is trained on relevant information. This will be overseen by a chief knowledge officer – a new job that comes with the new territory – who can ensure that the information requested by customers is available. According to Devisme, most hotels either do not even have this information or not in any structured form; it's usually in people's head and can vary from one individual to another.

It is entirely possible to engage employees on the introduction of AI so that they appreciate what it can do and be confident that it will not lay them waste. Zonal has a restaurant client who uses voice recognition for table bookings (like Alexa or Siri) and chooses the gender and where they are from. To make staff feel part of the process, they were invited to use the app to book a table.

"It was only about three quarters of the way through that they clocked this was AI, not a real person, because it did everything well," says chief commercial officer Tim Chapman. "It knew it had to check availability for the time slot they wanted, it did a fantastic job of extending the word – let me just che-e-e-ck – and at the end of the call he said thank you very much.

"This got buy-in from the staff that launched it and from customers, and most importantly, that call was not taken by front of house staff because the computer did it while employees could get on with hosting, which they should have been at 7pm on a Friday," he says.

AI is a tool; it is not an entity; identify where your business could run more efficiently by using it and employ it initially on obvious tasks before using it more broadly. If you try to make global change, you will fail.

At one 5-star hotel, the general manager saw an opportunity to use a virtual assistant for taking bookings, leaving the reservations team free to review customer requests and follow up those that did not convert. Not only have they become proactive, but they are awarded bonuses according to the value of conversions.

DOS AND DON'TS

Ensure you have the right data so that AI can give correct answers about prices, times, etc.

There are two types of AI.

For language recognition you need conversational AI to understand what the customer is asking and to connect that to a drawer that contains the right answer; this is controlled entirely by the hotel.

Generative AI is used to understand what the customer wants and to generate an answer based on data that is available; it is open to interpretation and should be used only when necessary, such as for two questions at once or one requiring an answer in several parts. It requires a mixture of the right data and AI.

For generative AI, do not use ChatGPT; you cannot control the parameters on ChatGPT, and you need to do that when giving information to guests.

TAKE THE PLUNGE

Don't panic! Humans usually make more mistakes than AI – information held in different forms in different heads is a good example. Although companies are promoting AI as something sexy, in fact, it is a basic tool for generating an image or answering a question about Wifi. Embrace the technology rather than using it for widespread replacement.

And finally, don't think about AI, think about the problems you want to solve and then apply AI as a solution, that way you will reap rich material benefits from your artificial intelligence.

FURTHER READING

Dr Ryan Yung PhD, BBus (Hons), Senior Lecturer, Digital Innovation and Transformation in Marketing and Deputy Director of Tourism and Marketing Research Centre, University of Greenwich <https://www.gre.ac.uk/people/rep/faculty-of-business/dr-ryan-yung>

IoH library - Peer reviewed, article 30 years of artificial intelligence (AI) research relating to the hospitality and tourism industry.

IoH Library – Book - Rise of Generative AI and ChatGPT

IoH Fellows Broadsheet – The Role of Artificial Intelligence

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