How Do You Know If Your Company Is Ready For AI?

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Brain Corp

An article written by Brain Corp's VP of Sales/Business Development, Brian Hughes. Published on January 7, 2019.

Regardless of the size of the company or industry in which it operates, adding automation into a business environment can mean a significant shift in the way an organization conducts itself. Artificial intelligence (AI) and the machines and software that utilize it are no exception; in fact, Deloitte found that 90% of companies surveyed thought cognitive technologies (like AI) would have a role in shaping company strategy. The inclusion of new tech requires some thoughtful consideration above and beyond what's being touted as the latest and greatest.

Businesses interested in embracing AI are often motivated by specific factors, including the ability to save time and money, create more efficiencies in getting certain tasks completed or be an industry leader with a technology-first mindset. According to TechRepublic, one study found that 49% of respondents saw increased competitive advantages with machine-learning initiatives. However, that does not inherently mean a business is prepared to modernize its approach. Several questions need to be asked and answered first before a transition to robotics and AI-enabled technology can be added to the mix successfully. As the VP of business development and sales at an AI and robotics software company, here's how I recommend approaching the process:

Position The Plan With Staff

A major concern among both workers and employers I've seen is the growing reliance on technology in business to get the job done more efficiently. A perception looms that utilizing autonomous machines will eliminate the need for a human workforce, or drastically reduce it. Recent reports suggest a different reality. A 2017 study from McKinsey about the future of the workplace and automation suggests between 9% and 26% of work hours in the countries studied could be automated by 2030. However, this does not necessarily indicate a net loss of jobs. Instead, it could create an environment where employees are encouraged or required to adapt their skill sets to keep up with the influx of AI technology.

Organizations considering AI and robotics must recognize the fear of job elimination workers are likely to experience. It could be beneficial to focus on the fact that in some cases, the addition of AI doesn't necessarily change how things

are done. For instance, delivery robots and inventory pickers that utilize AI are the same machines with which employees already have familiarity. The only change is that the work is done on its own without a human operator.

Employees could then be freed up to use their time elsewhere, like assisting customers or learning new skills that can be used on the job. I see positioning AI tools as a strategy for improving productivity and opening up job opportunities for employees as a necessary factor for successful implementation.

Train And Deploy Properly

When investing in AI, businesses should also implement training at the start of a change and consider the challenges that may arise in the deployment process. To avoid implementation delays, allow those who will be using or working with the technology to get involved early on in the process. Transparency with your employees is key.

From a training perspective, you can clearly communicate what you need from employees all the way down to the store or warehouse level. In my experience, training is simple and quick in most cases due to simplified AI user interfaces. If they don't have that information up front, employees may be hesitant to engage.

Companies ready for a shift to AI recognize this potential pitfall and can overcome it before deployment begins by managing expectations. Working to build trust between the employees and the AI-based product, providing visibility and assurance, and outlining the non-automated, higher-value tasks employees could perform can ensure smoother implementation.

Businesses should also work with their AI vendor to secure software support, hardware maintenance, and training as needed. The timeline for implementation should also be discussed with the AI provider in advance — focus on how long it will take to get the new technology up and running as planned. Share these details with the employees who will work closely with the technology so expectations are clear.

Manage Environmental Shifts

Companies in the most dynamic environments, including retail and warehouse operations, may see the long-term benefits of AI in improved efficiencies and bridging the gap between labor shortages and business needs. However, the ever-changing physical landscape of these types of companies can be cause for concern. Environments are continuously shifting, with new displays taking up space in the front or changes to inventory housing in the back.

Implementing AI does require some willingness to be flexible up front. The ability to influence the environment before introducing robotics helps create the most effective implementation. The business owners who are ready to adopt AI and

robotics are those who recognize it is a collaborative effort in partnership with the provider to ensure the solution is the best fit and is successful.

Companies ready to get started with AI can first look to their supply chain partners to determine what efficiencies and benefits they could reap by adding AI into the fold. Understanding which operational areas business partners are targeting can help you recognize where there may be an opportunity to involve AI in your own operations. This can also help determine if AI is the right technology for your company's specific business needs.

As you identify these areas, you can base the decision about whether or not to pursue an AI strategy on future outcomes. Companies need to determine which operational challenges AI can solve and what level of value that brings to the organization. Compare these attributes of AI technology — whether that's robotics, machine learning tools or other automation solutions — to the cost of continuing to do things the way they are to decide if it's a worthwhile investment.

Businesses steadfast in their approach to operating and who feel that the way things are currently done is the way things should remain are likely not ready for AI in practice. Successful deployment of new technology requires several key factors, but I've found it always begins with a willingness to change. Making the final decision requires a cost-benefit analysis based on business needs, a comprehensive strategy around positioning AI with staff, an effective training plan and careful consideration of how new technologies will alter and impact physical environments.

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