

Publication: The Business Times Online

Date: 17 October 2024

Headline: AI adoption in businesses demands focus on reskilling, say panellists

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From left: SMU Professor of Finance Zhang Hong, chief executive of Revulate Technologies Ken Guo, chief executive of Eco Sustainability Group Vincent Lim, Microsoft (Asean)'s area chief financial officer Fabiano Siufi, and ING Bank Singapore's managing director and country manager Anand Sachdev. PHOTO: SMU

AMID the growing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in business operations, firms must balance technological advancements with efforts to upskill and reskill their workforce, panellists said at a conference on Thursday (Oct 17).

One of them, Anand Sachdev, managing director and country manager of ING Bank Singapore, said: "It's not AI that will take your job. It is the people who do AI better than you (who will)."

In the banking sector, AI has already been implemented in areas such as financial crimes and anti-money laundering, where it is being used to reduce false positives flagged by monitoring systems.

"Historically, people were deployed to look at what was genuine and what was not, but now, AI does a lot of that," he said.

But this does not mean the bank no longer requires the "intelligent graduates" who used to handle such tasks. These employees now focus on more analytical work instead, he said.

Fabiano Siufi, area chief financial officer of Microsoft Asean, echoed similar views. He noted that processes like outsourcing and offshoring have historically led to job losses in some areas and job transfers in others.

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“With AI, it’s almost the same thing – just that now, that job can be performed by a machine,” he said.

He and Sachdev were speaking in the panel discussion at the conference on AI in business and finance, hosted by Singapore Management University (SMU) and held on the university campus.

Other panellists were Vincent Lim, chief executive officer of Eco Sustainability Group, and Ken Guo, CEO of Revulate Technologies. The discussion was moderated by Zhang Hong, professor of finance at SMU.

Guo noted that, for smaller companies, identifying the instances where AI can replace certain job functions is “kind of the easy part”.

“It (just) has to fit certain criteria, right? Is it repetitive? Is it predictable? You just go down this list and you’ll be able to find opportunities in every organisation, as long as data is used.”

He added that the bigger challenge lies in determining what a worker’s new role will be once his or her job function is replaced by AI.

Assuming the objective is to retain human capital, it then becomes a challenge for the human resources department to determine how best to manage this – including efforts to reskill and upskill employees, Guo said.

The sustainability of AI

Thursday’s panel also discussed the sustainability implications of AI. The technology has come under scrutiny because of its significant energy consumption, in that vast computational resources are needed for both training and real-time deployment.

This has raised concerns about the environmental impact of AI, even as companies hope to leverage it for greater efficiency and productivity, the panellists said.

But Eco Sustainability’s Lim noted that the efficiencies brought by AI far outweigh the environmental concerns.

“It’s a short answer to the question, but AI wins against sustainability concerns, because AI can help sustainability (as a concept) achieve its higher goal,” he said.

Teo Ser Luck, president of the Institute of Singapore Chartered Accountants, said in his keynote address at the conference that the Singapore government has dedicated significant resources to advancing research, fostering innovation and establishing a robust regulatory framework for AI development.

He emphasised the government’s “great responsibility” in ensuring that AI’s ethical considerations and the moral implications are addressed.

Teo also noted Singapore’s goal to triple its AI workforce to 15,000, and that upskilling opportunities are available through initiatives like SkillsFuture, which offers over 600 AI-related courses.