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A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO AI

EQUATOR
TAKE ON TOMORROW

Introduction

A pragmatic approach to AI

There should be no doubt: artificial intelligence isn't going to disrupt your industry; it is already doing so. You either use it or fall behind the competition.

Many companies understand this. You've heard the hype, the talk about its limitless potential. You might be using it tactically, in isolated parts of the organisation; you might even be unaware that many of the tools you rely on increasingly incorporate AI elements.

But this is all undercover. The lack of transparency hinders efforts to truly understand what AI can do. Many are struggling with how to deploy AI strategically and where to get started. This must be overcome if you are going to deploy AI in a way that gives you a truly competitive edge.

So, we brought together leading experts to discuss how you can make that shift.

All are actively working with AI and applying it to drive tangible results. Now, we've gathered the insight shared to give you a better understanding of how to take that first crucial step.

"AI IS GOING TO CHANGE HOW WE INTERACT WITH ALL THE SERVICES WE USE NOW. IT'S NOT A REPLACEMENT FOR ONE PLATFORM, IT'S NOT A NEW SOCIAL MEDIA, IT'S A NEW INTERACTION MODEL FOR ALL OF DIGITAL"

Jamie Jefferson, Co-founder & Chief Creative Officer, Equator

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THE PANEL



Chaired by **Jamie Jefferson, Co-founder & Chief Creative Officer at Equator.**



Alix Jules, Digital Transformation Lead at AI Strategy at Google, who helps leaders rethink the consumer experience with data and artificial intelligence strategies.



Alastair Brown, Generative AI Consultant & Speaker at AI Upskill, which is focused on helping companies acquire the skills they need to use the technology effectively.



Stephen Coia, Joint Managing Director at VKY Automation, which uses AI and intelligent automation to help customer service teams achieve more.

“THERE’S BEEN A CHANGE OVER THE LAST 12 MONTHS. I DON’T THINK ANYONE HAS YET GOT A DISTINCT MODEL OF HOW TO START. IT’S EMERGING IN DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS IN DIFFERENT WAYS FOR ORGANISATIONS”

Stephen Coia, joint managing director, VKY Automation

AI for everyone

AI is touching every part of business, with the potential to drive significant value. The last year has seen a huge shift in attitudes towards the technology, driven by the widespread adoption of Generative AI. Leaders are waking up to the fact that AI is no longer a nice-to-have but a strategic imperative.

Yet, there is a gap between businesses knowing they need to act and knowing how to act. Few companies are actively scaling AI deployments, with many at the early stages of pilot projects. While it is sensible to test, AI moves fast; adopting the same approach to trialing AI that you did with older technologies will only result in you falling further behind more agile, decisive competitors.

The ability for AI to lower barriers to entry for businesses of all shapes and sizes is causing digital evolution to accelerate and competition to become more fierce than ever. For instance, thanks to GenAI, companies without huge marketing teams can create content, personalise communications and deploy campaigns at a scale that previously only global giants could deliver.

“89% OF EXECUTIVES RANK AI AND GEN-AI AS A TOP-THREE TECH PRIORITY FOR 2024”

BCG

Elsewhere, housing associations wrestling with tight budgets and small customer service teams deploy chatbots that speak in multiple languages and handle large volumes of queries. As a result, AI frees up human agents to deal with more complex interactions. This, in turn, unlocks the ability to deliver greater experiences for both customers and employees.

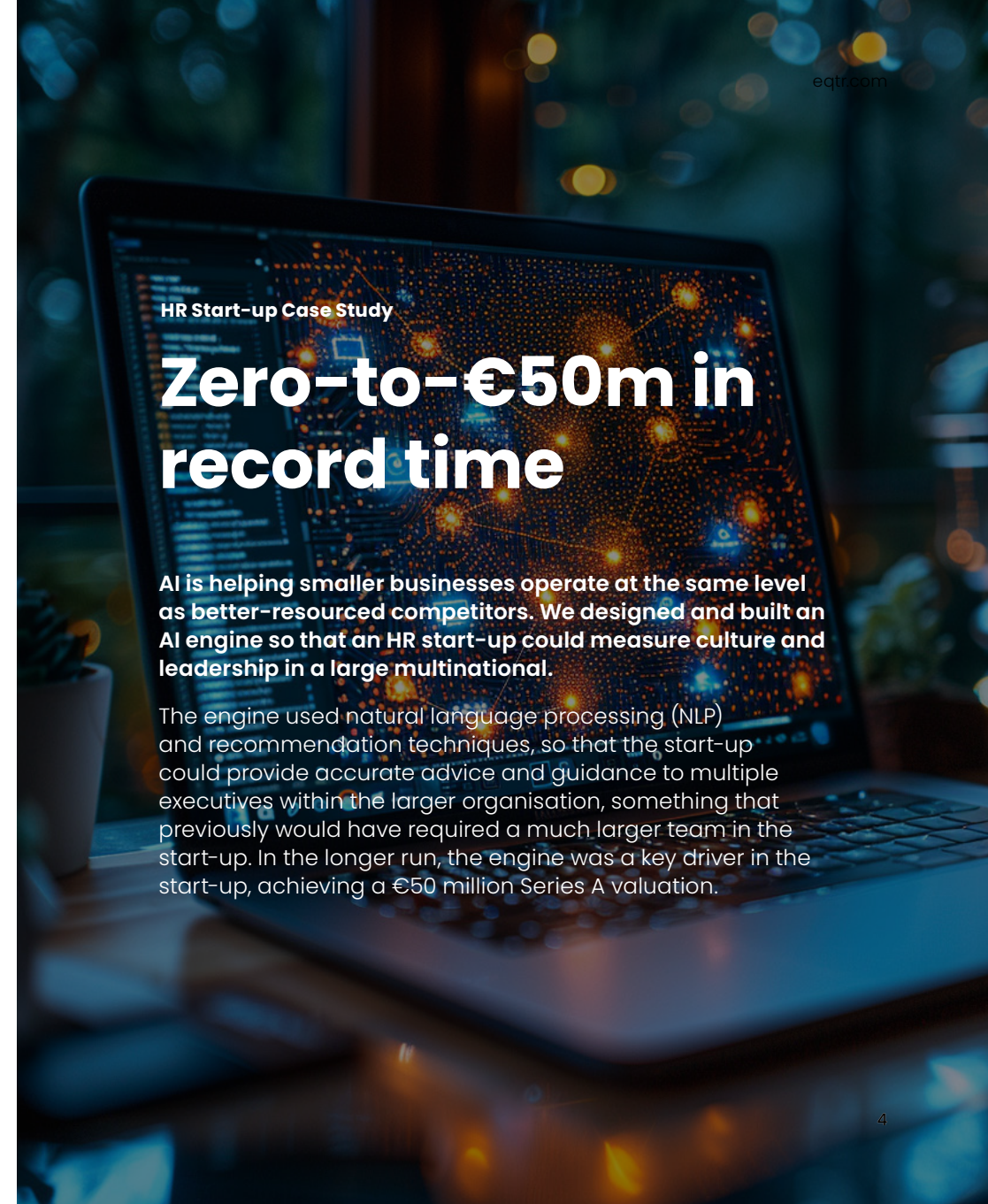
The fact that these are not organisations that traditionally had access to cutting edge technology highlights AI's democratising effect. "It's becoming more accessible and, relatively, cheaper, so AI is no longer the preserve of larger organizations with big budgets. It's coming down to SMEs and startups," said Brown.

And those smaller companies are reaping tangible benefits. Our work designing and building an AI engine for an HR start-up was a key driver in achieving a €50 million Series A valuation.

Businesses cannot afford to stall, yet most leaders are not satisfied with their progress on AI and GenAI. What, then, do companies need to do to accelerate effective AI adoption?

**"66% OF LEADERS ARE
AMBIVALENT OR DISSATISFIED
WITH THEIR PROGRESS ON AI
AND GENAI"**

BCG



The themes shaping AI's business implementation

While the goals and circumstances of individual businesses are unique, there are common concerns that all companies should address.

01

How will AI disrupt your sector?

The first point to consider is how, not if, AI will be used to disrupt your sector. And it will be a disruption: in 2015, Gen AI was registering at human-like levels in its ability to recognise handwriting and speech. Today, it's matching us for language, maths, and common-sense capabilities. It has even started outperforming students in university-level exams.

There is not a single function in the business that will escape being touched by AI in some way. It is the same for industries; one study noted that auto and transport had the lowest levels of AI adoption, yet even then, 60% of respondents from that sector were adopting or evaluating at least one AI use case.

“RESEARCHERS FROM STANFORD UNIVERSITY REPORTED THAT CHATGPT, ON AVERAGE, SCORED MORE THAN FOUR POINTS HIGHER THAN FIRST- AND SECOND-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENTS ON A CASE-REPORT PORTION OF THE UNITED STATES MEDICAL LICENSE EXAMINATION”

BCG

To understand how AI will disrupt your sector, consider where the conflict is. What are the frustrations, the manual processes, and the inefficiencies that continually impact not just you but everyone you know? These are the low-hanging fruit, the incremental gains that, once fixed, will give you a significant edge over the competition.

What's exciting is this first step. AI will unlock capabilities we can't yet see because they were impossible before. But to get to that point, we need to build the foundations, and tackling the basics is the first step.

“THERE'S A TENDENCY TO THINK 'LET'S TRANSFORM AN ENTIRE PART OF THE BUSINESS', BUT ACTUALLY IT'S THE LITTLE ADVANCES IN EXISTING INTERACTIONS THAT ARE REALLY WHERE THE VALUE IS.”

Jamie Jefferson, Co-founder & Chief Creative Officer, Equator

02

How can AI enhance your processes?

By identifying where AI will disrupt your industry, you are laying the groundwork for the next point, which is understanding how you can evolve your processes.

Businesses run on process. They might not always be documented or acknowledged, but they're there. And they're designed by humans. As such, their efficiencies vary dramatically. Some are simple and effective, others complex and labour-intensive. AI can remove the human from the equation when appropriate and support teams when proper oversight is needed. However it is deployed, the net result is the same: faster, more efficient, and less prone to error.

For instance, a lack of quality assurance

inspectors can hinder production in industries such as automotive manufacturing. In such a scenario, deploying AI models (alongside other technologies) would do a first pass, only flagging products that require detailed attention. Preliminary processes have been handed over to the AI to accelerate and make them more efficient, freeing up the limited resources of human QA to focus on the actual problems.

"AI CAN HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT IN AREAS THAT REQUIRE A LOT OF HUMAN ATTENTION, WHERE WE ARE MORE PRONE TO ERROR, AND HELPING REDUCE THE NUMBER OF MISTAKES THAT ARE MADE."

Alix Jules, Digital Transformation Lead - AI Strategy, Google

03

How can AI accelerate individual skills?

Next, we need to focus on how AI can accelerate individual skills and capabilities. Your teams are using GenAI, possibly clandestinely; if not, as mentioned above, AI is embedded in the tools they use daily. Now, it's time to get strategic about incorporating it in ways that help them work better.

"YOU WON'T BE REPLACED BY AN AI, YOU'LL BE REPLACED BY SOMEONE EMPOWERED BY AI."

Jamie Jefferson, Co-founder & Chief Creative Officer, Equator

Knowing how AI can be used to improve skills is also important if you are to address what the deployment of the technology means for your workforce. Whether you buy into the narrative of AI threatening jobs is irrelevant; it's still an issue you must address with your teams.

Answering personal questions, such as how jobs will change, is critical. Your people want to know what's in it for them, as they do in any transformation. Talk up the opportunities for individuals willing to develop their skills and understanding. There is a huge demand for AI; even those with a relatively small amount of knowledge have a new skill that many others don't.

There are different ways AI supports individual skills. These include:

- **Speeding up time to value** – creating first drafts or outlines of content that creatives can then refine and finesse.
- **Removing routine work so experts can focus more on complex issues** – healthcare consultants using image recognition AI to highlight anomalies that need closer inspection.
- **Upskilling** – supporting contact centre new joiners by suggesting responses or solutions to customer queries.

Software development is one area that should use all three approaches. With tech talent in such short supply, companies could build and ship high-quality products using smaller teams, all while upskilling junior staff, supported by AI.

"57% OF ENGINEERING TEAMS ALREADY DEPLOY AI ASSISTANTS FOR SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT, WITH 63% OF EXECUTIVES SAYING IT IMPROVES CODE QUALITY"

Bain & Co

04

How can you accelerate, improve, and scale customer service with AI?

The themes covered so far all build a foundation for the next area to consider: how do you accelerate, improve, and scale the way you service customers?

AI in customer service isn't particularly new: chatbots and interactive voice response (IVR) triaging queries are integral to most CS organisations. But looking at AI as only a tool to relieve the pressure from stretched contact centres, while important, is to miss the point: it can fundamentally upend how service is delivered.

Look at the way customer expectations

are changing. It doesn't matter what industry you are in; digitisation means we now expect an Amazon-like experience no matter who we're dealing with. Delivering that without Amazon-like resources seemed impossible, but AI is changing that. As we've noted, businesses can operate the same way as much bigger competitors without radically increasing the size of their operations.

And we don't just mean using Gen AI to create relevant self-service content or deploying multi-lingual chatbots to meet the needs of international audiences.

While valuable, those are still tactical implementations. You need a strategy based on clear mapping of the customer journey, split into steps that become data points. These data points feed the AI, so that it can propose the optimum approach and identify how and where improvements might be made.

And this ties into the final theme...



05

How can AI analyse performance data to identify weaknesses and opportunities?

The common narrative in an area such as customer experience is that it isn't the responsibility of any function but all parts of the company. Yet the stumbling block to making that a reality is picking up on the signals from various functions, identifying the trends, and acting decisively.

AI can take a lot of that work and do it automatically. Rather than manually identifying an insight, speaking to colleagues in other departments, putting a business case together, and getting approval for a pilot at the next board meeting, this can happen in a more automated virtuous loop. Even if there's resistance to reviewing data outputs, teams can create prototypes and examples in minutes, helping make decisions in hours, rather than days and weeks.

"75% OF THE VALUE THAT GENERATIVE AI USE CASES COULD DELIVER FALLS ACROSS FOUR AREAS: CUSTOMER OPERATIONS, MARKETING AND SALES, SOFTWARE ENGINEERING, AND R&D"

McKinsey

Your checklist to take the next step

These five themes need to be considered and answered if businesses are to capitalise on AI. Once you've done that, it's time to get started. But where? We've highlighted before about finding those early opportunities, the little advances that can have a radical impact. But even getting to that step requires work. To make it clearer, we've put together this checklist.

01

Define where you want to go

First, be clear on what you're trying to achieve. Do you want to impact the user experience, bottom line, profitability? Be clear on what your vision is. It may sound counterintuitive, but none of your goals should be explicitly about AI – they should focus on the results you want to see.

02

Know where you are

Next, understand your current state. Initiate a deep dive into your business that looks at your capabilities, resources, and capacity for change in the following critical areas:

- People
- Technology
- Marketing
- Data
- Processes
- Experience

03

Report your findings

Third, create a diagnostic report that details critical aspects of your business, its strengths and weaknesses, and identifies priorities. These initiatives should be graded on factors including ease of success, resource requirements, and transformative potential. At this point, you may wish to readjust your goals. That doesn't mean making them more achievable; it could well be that you realise you have the potential to be more ambitious.

04

Work out how you bridge the gap

This is where you identify how AI will help your business and break down what you need to do to implement it. AI might be used to manage costs while driving revenue if you're going for profitability. If it's about user experience, AI could improve personalisation beyond communication, to how you build and deliver offers.

05

Educate your people

As part of step two, you'll have looked at your people, so you should have a clear picture of how they'll be affected by the changes you're implementing and their ability to adapt. This will inform how you educate them on what's coming and ensure they are on-side.

“YOU NEED TO GET PEOPLE ON-SIDE TO GET ENGAGEMENT WITH AI. THERE ARE GREAT OPPORTUNITIES, AND PEOPLE WANT TO USE THIS TECHNOLOGY IN A HUGE WAY. SO EVEN IF YOU HAVE A SLIGHT ASSOCIATION, A LITTLE BIT OF KNOWLEDGE, THEN YOU’VE PROBABLY GOT A BRAND-NEW ADVANTAGE THAT YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO RIDE FOR YEARS”

Alastair Brown, AI Upskill

06

Pick your tools

Too often, companies decide they want to use AI and then search for a problem that it'll fix. To improve your chances of success, you want to examine which AI tools can help several steps into the process. They need to align with your goals, strategy, and existing resources. There is no point in investing in a complex solution that requires a huge amount of coding and integration work if you have a small team that's never worked on AI before. You must also ensure that the partners you choose align with your values, particularly around data privacy and security.

07

Build a project and go

With your people on side, your objectives clear and your tools ready, it's time to pull the trigger. Your work up to this point will highlight those initiatives that are best suited for your first project. You want to balance ambition with your ability to deliver it effectively; as with any new project, anything that delivers quick wins can help influence sceptics and generate results that unlock the next stages.

08

Assess, optimise and learn

Once launched, you must continually assess and adjust based on findings and learn as the project progresses. As with any technology deployment, the worst thing you can do is stick to rigid goals. You need to be able to adapt, not just so that you stay aligned with the overall business strategy but also so that you're able to seize new opportunities. One of the exciting things about AI is its ability to unlock capabilities that no one previously thought about, but you'll miss what could be a genuine competitive edge if you focus too much on pre-determined goals.

Conclusion

Time for a pragmatic approach to AI

It can be easy to get sucked up in the hype – to either go all-in or be turned off by the magnitude of AI and run away from genuine opportunity.

Ultimately, you've got to ignore the extremes of both the doomsayers and hype-folk. AI is here, and it is a huge opportunity. The barriers to entry are falling; those with even a little knowledge can develop a significant advantage, and those who don't move now will get left behind by more decisive competitors.

To get up to speed, focus on what it means for your organisation. Achieve this by applying a rigorous approach to understanding where you currently are, what you want to achieve, and identifying how AI can help you get there.

If you want to maintain a competitive edge in constantly growing and rapidly changing markets, you need AI – it's that simple.



We turn challengers into champions

Equator is a Digital Transformation Consultancy. We create the market leaders of tomorrow by reimagining their customer experience and digital platforms to ensure they remain relevant, embrace innovation, and have the building blocks to evolve fast.

Our mission is to help our partners harness the power of AI, meet strategic objectives, and fortify profitability. Working with businesses in healthcare, professional services, logistics, utilities, marketing, financial services, education, manufacturing, and automotive we identify where and how AI can add value. We partner with ambitious organisations to:

- determine their existing capabilities,
- define the challenges holding them back and;
- highlight the opportunities that enable them to be the disruptors not the disrupted.

From strategy to digital transformation, we are guided by insights, driven by data, powered by technology, and inspired by people. We are agile, work at pace, and quickly create value.

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