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## ARE HUMANS A SPENT WORKFORCE?

The West Australian (Saturday edition), Perth



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# ARE HUMANS A SPENT WORKFORCE?

AI has the potential to increase productivity and profits, but many are concerned over the pace of change

## THE CEO VOICE SERIES

CHEYANNE ENCISO

The rise of artificial intelligence has opened opportunities for companies to potentially mimic staff in a bid to improve business efficiency and cut costs.

This was one futuristic scenario Natasha Blycha, managing director at law firm Stirling & Rose, put forward at a recent CEO Voice boardroom lunch hosted by The West Australian and the Australian Institute of Management

— WA.

“If . . . I can produce content and have employees who are actually screen employees but literally look the same as you, are smarter than you, and increasingly have the correct emotive faces . . . imagine that trajectory is getting better and better,” she said.

“Do you think (companies) are going to employ 5000 people if even your consumers would prefer you to charge them \$1 a day, rather than \$1000 a day because you hire synthetics rather than people.

“These are real meta questions that are ahead of us and it feels like there’s a bit of death by a thousand cuts.”

Many participants agreed AI offered massive opportunities if harnessed and applied correctly.

WA Data Science Innovation Hub director Alex Jenkins expects to see certain sectors fade away as a result of AI but said it was exciting to see which new industries would be created.

“Three hundred years ago, 90 per cent of us were farmers, so if we zoom out and look at it from a technological perspective — the development, the agricultural revolution and the

industrial revolution — humans always find ways to keep ourselves occupied,” he said.

“I’m really excited to see what we do with our time if we can have AI fill out forms for us.”

Scotch College headmaster Alec O’Connell said all the educational discussion around technologies such as AI immediately becomes about plagiarising assignments.

He said AI could be used for administrative tasks, including creating lesson plans.

“You can take the administrative task and leave a really great educator to educate, inspire and have fantastic classrooms,” Dr O’Connell said.

“Teachers have been inundated with unnecessary jobs, assessments are one of them. We assess way too much in WA. “So if you can free that space up and teachers focus on the art of teaching and engaging students, that’s what students want.”

Artrya co-founder John Barrington likened AI to a sunset because “you might not like it but it’s going to happen and it’s going to happen at an exponential rate”.

“The challenge is for people, groups and enterprises to actually just get in and start playing with it because the connection and the interconnectivity is actually very easy now,” he said.

“You’ve got to encourage your organisation to be curious, start applying (AI) and bring the humanity to it because . . . it is our very humanity that is going to save us in this great



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existential threat.”

Deloitte managing partner Tim Richards agreed that while certain roles and departments would disappear, AI could create “things we’ve never even thought about”.

“The research shows that if we could adopt some of the technologies that are already here, let alone what’s coming, then this aspiration of people moving

into a four-day week . . . (becomes) possible,” he said.

Marketforce chief executive Adam Marshall said he used AI as a co-pilot.

“(AI) is not there to replace, it’s there to enhance,” he said.

Mr Marshall added the ethics around data collection must be considered when adopting technologies like AI.

“We need to have better provisions in place to protect individuals (with their data),” he said.

“The onus needs to shift from the individual being responsible for that to everybody that collects the data, handles that data and holds the data.”

Pawsey Supercomputing Centre chief executive Mark Stickells said his company and the Royal Perth Hospital had partnered to develop an AI-powered tool aiming to diagnose a brain injury within a window of 20 to 30 minutes.

“It’s an indication of the type of integration of digital, accessible data, real-time and advanced computing tools in an environment where you’ve got to manage the security of that data,” he said.

But some leaders said there were challenges that needed to be addressed.

Not-for-profit FORM chief executive Tabitha McMullan raised the issue of infrastructures and the inequity

between regional and metro areas.

“Up in the regions, it’s very difficult even to get proper internet at the moment, let alone to have the capacity to develop these tools properly, where there actually is so much hunger for it,” she said.

Royal Flying Doctor Service chief executive Judith Barker agreed and said her organisation struggled to access medical files in some of the regional areas.

“But (AI) could mean so much for my business, for our clients, our consumers and our patients in terms of more safety when they’re flying, more safety when we’re treating people,” she said. “It can

bring great staff satisfaction because they’re not doing mundane tasks anymore. There are huge benefits but I’m not-for-profit and so much of my funding goes to frontline services.

“How do I keep up with the corporates in the room and how do I bring AI in for my strategy.”

Bunbara Group director Nikky Barney-Irvine said although most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists had the desire to work digitally, there were fears around losing authenticity.

But Cannings Purple director and chief innovation officer Ruth Callaghan said giving staff access to OpenAI’s GPT-4 had been transformational.

“Even if you do nothing else other than say, ‘Let’s start to think about it, where we’re going to give it a chance to go and play a role, a goal, a constraint,’” she said. “If you do nothing else but try that you will find that \$30 investment for GPT-4 is extraordinary.”



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