IDEAS AT WORK

AI: Hope or Hype?

Takeaways

- AI is a powerful tool for reinvention and driving efficiency
- Effective use of AI requires human guidance
- Use AI as a partner to your team members

One of my favorite parts of being an NFL quarterback was getting to install the offense every year during training camp. Football is a constant chess match between offenses and defenses, and there were some truly exceptional defenses during that era, so it was a real challenge to find ways to beat them.

During my time with the New York Giants, we quickly realized that we wouldn't be able to win playing with the typical style of offense at the time – establishing the run and then throwing deep passes downfield. Instead, we set up an offense that started with short passes, using the full width of the field. It was incredibly successful, and we used variations on that offense through the rest of my career in New York and Minnesota. If that offense sounds familiar, that's because it's the forerunner of the famous West Coast Offense, used by coaches like Bill Walsh with his Super Bowl-winning 49ers teams.

New strategies in football are a lot like new technologies in business; some of them make a huge splash but quickly fizzle out as other teams figure out how to stop them. Others are useful, and still others change the game. In the same way, we can all think of "innovative" technologies that ultimately went nowhere, even as others have completely changed our lives. The trick, in both football and business, is to know which is which. Read the article below for insights into how we should think about one of the fastest spreading technologies ever, artificial intelligence.

AI: Hope or Hype?

It's hard to avoid stories about artificial intelligence. Since launching in November 2022, OpenAI's ChatGPT has seen the fastest growth numbers of any new technology, with more than 100 million users in just the first two months. Microsoft integrated ChatGPT into its Bing search engine, and Google soon released its own similar AI, Bard. Social media feeds are filled with AI-generated artwork created by tools like OpenAI's DALL-E and Midjourney. Still other AIs offer to create your social media content.

But as a leader, should you care about these and other forms of generative AI? Are they game-changers, or fads? Will AI replace human labor? Will it soon become just another anecdote of failed promise? It's easy to find voices on either side, but businesses have to make big decisions on whether this is hope or hype.

To answer those questions, let's take a step back. At Tarkenton, one of our core values displayed on the wall of our office is "Reinvent Yourself Every Day." No one should be content to stay still; always look for ways to get better. AI is a tool for reinvention that's worth understanding and using right now. It increases efficiency, removing minutiae from your job, freeing up more of your mental energy, and providing time for a few more lightbulb moments every week. Consider some of these very real benefits.

The Hope of AI

AI is excellent for research. Better than Google for certain tasks, we dare say. How? Search engines like Google are in a constant battle with people trying to beat the algorithm for clicks and traffic. At this point, web search content is so optimized that if you don't key in exactly the right search, you may not find what you need – or the results you actually want are buried beneath pages of links you aren't looking for.

Here's an example of AI's research power. When our clients are developing novel products and services, our researchers often need to turn to Google to determine which business category these services fall into, and what competitors we need to be aware of. After a few hours scouring the results, the researchers will curate a list of categories for the client. We work together to choose the best fit, and the project moves forward when everyone is happy.

Skipping ahead to the present day, with the skyrocketing popularity of ChatGPT, we became curious about whether AI could streamline this process for us. Recalling one recent project, we described the same service to ChatGPT that our researchers had spent hours studying, and asked which category it fell into. Within seconds, we had five options that resembled what we had presented to our client, along with competitors in each category, no matter how niche. Making some slight refinements to the prompt, we got the exact category we had chosen.

Does that mean that we no longer need human researchers? Hardly! On the contrary, we now had a tool that could allow our researchers to use their time more effectively and focus on tasks that require human judgment. This is where AI is at its best: synthesizing information and generating logical conclusions.

Relatedly, here's another strength of AI: brainstorming and idea generation. While it may not provide the final idea that you run with, it can help you get started. For some people, the hardest part of brainstorming or overcoming writer's block is getting started, staring down that blinking cursor. AI can help get those wheels turning for you and spark further idea generation.

AI makes writing easier. There are many people who are uncomfortable writing, even with things like email, because they're self-conscious about their written communication skills, and have found that AI gives them a way to communicate clearly and professionally. AI can also proofread and make recommendations for adjusting the tone of a message before the email is sent off.

The Hype of AI

But for all these benefits, today's AI has some serious drawbacks that can't be overlooked. First, AI won't give you something entirely new. As we said, it can start the brainstorming process for you and provide ideas, but anything it gives you is only a synthesis of its immense database of information. AI can't make the intuitive leaps and do the creative, unexpected, and bold things that the human mind is capable of.

AI programs have had issues with racial and gender biases. For example, as cited in both the Wall Street Journal and academic studies, some image generating AIs have been found to default to images of white people unless explicitly prompted otherwise. Images depicting specific professions often default to either exclusively male or female rather than a mix that accurately reflects modern society. In a world where representation matters, AI can still fall back on stereotypes.

Also, AI-generated content often sounds the same. While each tool has its own parameters, once you use it for a while, you'll recognize its distinct tone and organizational flow that lacks human feel. ChatGPT content, for example, can often be recognized with its extreme politeness and exact repetition of prompt terms. If your goal – as it should be – is to differentiate from the competition, content that sounds exactly the same as everyone else using the same tool is not the answer.

Finally, no AI program is built on a database of "infinite" data. This means that when you ask the program a question that it doesn't have an answer to, it may create a fake answer rather than tell you it doesn't know (sounds very human to us!). If you ask it questions on a subject that you are an expert in, you will spot the errors – popularly called "hallucinations" – pretty quickly. Otherwise, you run the risk of getting basic facts wrong.

To demonstrate the point, we fed an AI tool one of our own URLs and asked it to generate a social media post that would drive people to check out the site. In doing so, the program confidently stated that this particularly service would drive a 25% increase in revenue. The only problem? While we proudly stand behind our work for our clients, that "fact" was nowhere to be found on the original page. It was generated by the AI out of thin air.

Partnering With AI

If this discussion of the pitfalls of modern AI has you running for the hills, slow down. While we recognize AI's current shortcomings, we're excited about how much efficiency AI is creating for us and our clients. Every job, no matter how important, comes with tedious tasks. AI can take some of those tasks and perform them in mere moments. It gives individuals – creatives, engineers, anyone – confidence to take on projects that may have seemed intimidating in the past.

In a broader sense, without human guidance and guardrails, AI can go wrong. AI is most effective as a partner for people, something that we use and diligently oversee as it becomes more widely adopted. You can incorporate AI by using it to empower your people, and you can leverage your people to steer the AI. It's a both-and, not an either-or.

In short, AI is more than hype. We don't believe it's here to take over your job, your business, or even your email inbox, but it is here to stay. Used strategically, you can incorporate it into specific work tasks that will make you, your team, and your daily operations more efficient, confident, organized, and better informed. And that's a great place to start.

If you're thinking about incorporating new technology into your business, we'd love to talk with you! Contact our team and we'll help you find the most impactful strategy for your organization.

By Edwin Bevens
Senior Content Strategist, Tarkenton

Edwin Bevens helps Tarkenton partners plan, develop, and implement content and communication strategies, including instructional content, marketing messages, video scripts, UX copy, internal training materials, and more. He works with stakeholders to identify the content needs for a given project, and coordinates production and delivery with our internal content teams. Since joining the Tarkenton team in 2011, he has been involved in nearly every partnership and project for the company.