



Ismail is leading business development, sales and marketing to support our transformation and organic growth plans. In 2018 he was named as one of the top 100 most influential Black, Asian minority ethnic (BAME) leaders in the UK tech sector by Inclusive Boards. He previously led IBM's Global Business Services division in North America.



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# AI isn't replacing, it is transforming: AI and Automation in a post-COVID world

While COVID has put the brakes on a lot of things – normal schooling, visiting family and friends, holidays and music festivals, commuting and meetings in the office, it has enabled and accelerated the uptake and development of a number of other trends. Trends like wide-spread home working, remote learning, virtual medical consultations and social care provision – many of which felt a long way from routine before the crisis. And one thing that has been clear that certain technologies have been instrumental in that.

## AI is at the front of those technologies.

AI has been able to capitalise on the lessons learned pre-crisis, to deliver truly transformational services and experiences at pace. If we look at retail for example – what started with self-service checkouts and offers based on personal data, has progressed to AI being used to map peak usage, manage customer flows, provide automated grocery delivery for the vulnerable, create cashier less stores and repair fractured, threatened supply chains. Concepts that may have felt alien a few months ago, suddenly don't seem so strange. Social distancing has become a forced reality and these forms of automation are now seen in a different light.

The real power in AI, however, isn't in the tasks it completes but the connections it can create. There is real power in understanding and adopting AI in this manner.

Take chatbots as an example. Used well they can be much more than a question and answer relationship, leveraging conversation with the customer to improve the service offered. We can answer questions but also

have the conversation inform the service, the products, the wider information offered, and, improve security and reduce cost.

AI provides a means of allowing an open, two-way flow of information between the human and machine which is at the heart of designing and delivering better solutions and services. Advancements in natural language processing (NLP) machines are playing an increasingly integral role in this as they master contextual language. Being able to understand the context as well as the content is a game changing element of AI. EI meeting AI. It is one thing to see your surroundings but quite another to understand them. As AI becomes increasingly sensitive to the emotional resonance of what users are saying, a natural by-product is increasingly trust based relationship.

Nowhere is that more important than where AI is being used in healthcare. The track and trace approach to managing COVID-19 is a compelling example. Countries such as South Korea and Singapore, who got out in front of the COVID-19 the fastest, have closely monitored, traced and tracked their populations. As a result their infection and death rates are significantly lower and day to day life has been far less affected. By comparison, when similar forms of data were considered in the UK in the past, they were deemed to be too intrusive. Biometric passport data has been watered down due to privacy concerns for example. COVID-19 may change all that – it has been established that data can be used responsibly and that positive outcomes for both sides will then reduce resistance. The tension at the moment (June 2020)

isn't around how data will be used by AI systems, but more the delay in implementing the track and trace system. AI is also transforming virtual health and social care, moving thousands of low risk appointments and requests online, identifying vulnerable members of the community and protecting shoppers as they increasingly turn to online shopping.

While economic pressures might limit ongoing investment in the short-term, there are clear demands for AI in all aspects of our lives. And in a climate of increased cost constraints and higher demand from customers for additional value and personalization, AI's ability to improve the service AND reduce costs will keep it at the forefront of investment priorities. Current estimates suggest that productivity can increase up to 40% when organisations capitalise on AI – and crucially this does not come with a human cost.

It is essential that organisations start to organise around this transformation. By focusing heavily in cleansing and perfecting their data and refocusing

their talent strategies on data and AT skills. This is where organisations need to re-focus their investments around those priorities. And to do that, the Board and executive committee need to be on board and as educated in the value of this strategy as the managers tasked with delivering it.

AI isn't about replacing it is about transforming. We are limiting ourselves in thinking about AI and automation as simply replacing people, costing jobs, simplifying processes. It is about an end to end reinvention of the way we think about and interact with technology. If nothing else COVID-19 and the shockwaves it has sent through our lives have provided an opportunity to abandon old ways of thinking and operating. What was once strange is now normal, and the sooner we fully embrace AI the sooner we can harness its capability to transform services and solutions for the better, for everyone.

The bottom line is that you will be an AI business or not be in business at all.