

Embracing a new era of AI



By [Akhram Mohamed](#)

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The term 'Artificial Intelligence' has invaded our lexicon over the past few years and seems to be infiltrating almost every aspect of our lives. It inspires fascination, fear and bewilderment, fuelled by Hollywood's frequent portrayals of machines taking over the world.

As we witness the technology around us getting 'smarter' with each passing day, the hysteria around job losses, compromised privacy and humankind's demise also accelerates.

But what is 'AI', really?

There is a prevailing misconception that Artificial Intelligence (AI) involves anything where machines can do what people do, and even do it better, such as a computer beating a World Champion chess player at chess after just one game. But a lot of what we term to be 'AI' is, in fact, machine learning, a subset of Artificial Intelligence. That computer chess champion is an example of narrow Artificial Intelligence. It is a computer system that has processed and analysed vast reams of data on chess strategies with the explicit outcome of winning each chess game it plays. It has become really efficient at one specific task.



Akhram Mohamed, chief technology officer at Huawei Consumer Business Group South Africa

The computer chess champion is not truly intelligent, as its capabilities are limited to its pre-determined inputs and outputs. Sure, it can beat a Grandmaster at chess, but it can't even make the first move in beginner's Scrabble unless it has specifically been inputted with data on this game. It is useful or relevant only when there is a game of chess that needs winning.

AGI or Artificial General Intelligence is where a machine can understand and do multiple activities generally associated with humans. We are not there yet, however, this forms the basis of AI studies and development.

A changing workforce and evolving roles

One of the areas where AI is seen as the most threatening is job security. As technology is enhanced, and data processing

capabilities increase, machines can be taught to complete more tasks that humans would usually do.

Will smart machines of the future replace workers? Yes. It's inevitable but it's also not a new phenomenon.

Each of the Industrial Revolutions in our history has brought change, as we've mechanised production, developed mass production, and automated production. In the process, jobs have been lost, but new employment opportunities have also been created simultaneously, even though we might have not been able to imagine this beforehand.

As in the past, the job responsibilities that will fall away are usually the mundane, administrative aspects of our jobs that we loathe. These could be the weekly reports that take up a lot of our time that could be put to better use or the endless spreadsheets that need to be pored over at the end of the month to find a careless error. Having AI process these tasks will free us up to do work that is more meaningful and creative. It will also mean more time available to spend with family.

The true threat of AI

It seems to me that a lot of our fear around the capabilities and limits of intelligent machines is misplaced. Machines are not inherently evil – they don't have the self-awareness to be. We should not be worrying about the robots whom we fear will take our jobs, but rather how the data that allows the robots to do these jobs are regulated and protected. While AI's potential is accelerating, rigorous discussions around the ethics of how this technology is used have stalled. In a new era where data is prolific, and privacy and security are continuously being threatened, regulation is imperative.

This was one of the key focus areas of the Huawei Connect event held in Shanghai earlier this year, where we explored how large organisations and governments across the world can work together to more rigorously monitor how new technology and data should be used. It is vital that these conversations take place regularly, and result in concrete actions so that the potential abuse of AI can be kept in check.

In conclusion, then, I would encourage South Africans to be open to the changes that AI will continue to bring to our lives in the coming years. We have adapted to so many changes, especially over the past few decades, and AI will enhance how we work and play. At the same time, however, we must demand that corporates and government be held accountable for ensuring that AI technology and data is used responsibly and to the benefit of greater mankind.

ABOUT AKHRAM MOHAMED

Akhram is a Telecommunications professional, passionate about how technology improves lives. As the CTO of Huawei Consumer Business Group he is responsible for implementing the technology and innovation strategies that help transform the way we communicate. As the company's former Product and Marketing Director he is credited with driving the premium segment transformation in South Africa. Akhram has 14 years industry experience at various multinationals in the telecoms space.

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