

AI won't kill you, but ignoring it might kill your business, experts say

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Relax. Artificial intelligence is making our lives easier, but won't be a threat to human existence, according to panel of practitioners in the space.

"One of the biggest misconceptions today about [autonomous robots](#) is how capable they are," said Brenna Argall, faculty research scientist at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, during a recent Chicago Innovation Awards event.

"We see a lot of videos online showing robots doing amazing things. What isn't shown is the hours of footage where they did the wrong thing," she said. "The reality is that robots spend most of their time not doing what they're supposed to be doing."

The event at Studio Xfinity drew about 200 people, who mingled among tech exhibits before contemplating killer robot overlords.

Stephen Pratt, a former IBM employee who was then responsible for the global implementation of Watson, also was quick to swat down the notion that machines are poised to run the world.

The tech instead gives better ways to improve services, products and business, he said - besting humans in applications dealing with demand predictions, pricing, inventory, retail promotion, logistics and preventive maintenance.

"Amplifying human intelligence, and overcoming human cognitive biases - I think that's where it fits," said Pratt, founder and CEO of business consultancy Noodle.ai. "Humans are really bad probabilistic thinkers and statisticians. That's where cognitive bias creeps in and, therefore, inefficiencies and lost profit."

But machines won't replace humans when it comes to big-picture decisions, he said.

"Those algorithms are not going to set the strategy for the company. ... It'll help you make the decision once I come up with the idea," Pratt said. "But any executive that doesn't have a supercomputer in the mix now on their side - and they're stuck in the spreadsheet era - your jobs are going to be in jeopardy in a few years."

It'll be up to machines to decipher those spreadsheets anyway, as so much data is being collected it would be overwhelming for humans to understand, said Kris Hammond, co-founder of Chicago AI company, Narrative Science.

"We're no longer looking at a world with a spreadsheet with 20 columns and 50 rows. We're now looking at spreadsheets of thousands of columns and millions of rows," said Hammond, founder of the University of Chicago's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. "The only way we can actually understand what's going on in the world is to have systems that look at that data, understand what they mean and then turn it into something we can understand."

Mike Shelton, technical director for Microsoft's Azure Data Services, said it's also a time saver.

"What I see every day is it's giving time back," he said. "Through an AI interface, I can ask a question in speech or text and get a response

through that without having to go search for a web page or hunt for information."

Julie Friedman Steele, CEO of the World Future Society, said her organization is focusing on the advances that could be made using AI in education, where teachers in crowded classrooms can't give much attention to students individually.

"As a human, can you actually learn all the knowledge that you might have a student interested in learning?" said Steele, who's also CEO and founder of The 3-D Printer Experience. "I'm not talking about there not being a human in the room and it's all robots. I'm just saying that there's an opportunity in education with [artificial intelligence](#) ... so that if a teacher doesn't know something, it's OK."

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