Artificial Intelligence faces scrutiny

Simon Bailey

Cabinet Committee to oversee the strategic direction of government AI policy ■

Let's face it, no-one likes answering the phone or responding to emails, especially when the questions posed could have easily been answered by the resident looking at a web page or by a simple google search. Using expensive staff resources to answer these queries is not efficient, especially as there are alternatives currently available.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is gaining ground in local government. More and more authorities are looking to AI and chatbots to make efficiencies and deliver better services to residents.

A survey carried out by Agile Datum, local government AI and chatbot specialists, published in January 2020, found that 90% of councils plan to have a chatbot strategy within 12-18 months (57% in the next six months) and that 91% of councils plan to have an AI strategy within 12-18 months (53% in the next six months).

The report also found that the reasons councils were looking to use this new technology were; reducing call volumes (86%), financial savings (80%) and improving customer services (64%). Other reasons were faster resolution of issues (55%), the ability to offer responses 24 hours a day (52%) and gathering data (43%).

'Planbot', run by the London Borough of Redbridge, is a good example of the use of AI and chatbots. The Head of Planning and Building Control at the council highlighted some key findings. He reported that visitors to the Redbridge Council planning pages on the website can communicate directly with the automated system. Over 200 planning requests and queries can be handled quickly with no human intervention, while more complex cases can be channelled efficiently through to the relevant department. The Head of Planning and Building Control also commented that staff were reporting a marked increase in time available for dealing with complex cases as they were not distracted by basic, time-consuming administrative tasks as these were handled by the chatbot.

However, the issue with AI and chatbots is that the technology only works if it can gather data, and more and more people are becoming suspicious about the amount of personal data that is being held on them.

As AI and chatbots are going to become common place in Local and Central Government, this is something that has not escaped the attention of Parliament. Late last year, The House of Lords Liaison Committee published a new report called *"AI in the UK: No Room for Complacency"*. This report examined the government's progress against the recommendations made by the Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence in their 2018 report *"AI in the UK: ready, willing, and able?"*

The committee found that the United Kingdom's approach to artificial intelligence has grown significantly. In 2015, the UK saw £245 million invested in AI. By 2018, this had increased to over £760 million. In 2019 this was £1.3 billion.

The government wants to ensure that the public understand AI, its powers, its limitations and its opportunities, but also its risks. Back in its 2018 report the government acknowledged that *"Artificial intelligence was a growing part of many people's lives and businesses. It is important that members of the public are aware of how and when artificial intelligence is being used to make decisions about them, and what*

implications this will have for them personally. This clarity, and greater digital understanding, will help the public experience the advantages of AI, as well as to opt out of using such products should they have concerns."

The liaison committee was so concerned about the need to coordinate AI and chatbot policy it has made some recommendations. These include creating a new Cabinet Committee to oversee the strategic direction of government AI policy and suggests that one of their first tasks should be to commission and approve a five-year strategy for AI in Central and Local Government.

The committee also recommended the appointment of a Chief Data Officer whose responsibilities should include acting as a champion for the opportunities presented by AI in the public service. The remit would include explaining to the public the use of their personal data by AI, which was seen as prerequisite to its wider adoption.

Automation via AI and chatbots has also come under scrutiny by the Local Government ombudsman. For example, a case was upheld whereby a man with severe dyslexia kept getting parking tickets in his borough that used automated text systems to process payments, which he was unable to use.

The ombudsman highlighted the fact that local authorities are providing complex public services to a complex public. This creates vastly different challenges to selling car insurance or booking a holiday online, so it is not enough to simply copy commercial practices and hope they will work.

Whilst there is a race to find efficiencies and digital solutions, opportunities such as AI and chatbots may appear to be the answer. However, I think we need to keep this quote from the ombudsman in the back of our minds *"No amount of automation, no matter how sophisticated, can replace that human judgement when things go seriously wrong".*

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