

AI: Who, what, where?

It seems it is virtually impossible to avoid hearing about Artificial Intelligence (AI). Ever since ChatGPT hit the market, AI has become a never ending source of news, articles, advertisements, and lots of gloom. Artificial intelligence isn't exactly new--the term goes back to the mid-1950s. Artificial Intelligence is a broad term and encompasses a few different subsets of processes. Generally, it refers to machines or computers doing things that we consider a skill limited to human intelligence. What has caught the public eye is what is labeled "generative AI." Generative AI (e.g., CHatGPT) refers to the AI tools that can create content, music, images, code and voice. One of the reasons generative AI is so widespread in its applications is that it doesn't require coding skills for a layperson to use them, instead the user can instruct the tool to create content by using natural language.

Questions about generative AI

The media has certainly been filled with concern about AI and has raised many questions about areas where we potentially interact with it. How do we know the content we are reading is accurate and can be trusted to have come from reliable sources that have been vetted for accuracy? Can it be used to create misleading information that could misdirect our understanding of social, political, cultural, legal and other issues that affect the well-being of society? Others worry it could displace whole sectors of human labor. These are heavy questions best left to another venue of discussion.

Where is the average person interacting with AI?

We interact with artificial intelligence everyday in places we probably never give much thought. Those recommendations for purchases that you see on every shopping website you visit? That is done by a form of AI known as machine learning. Your thermostat that turns the heat up and down by learning when you usually leave the house? The refrigerator that makes your shopping list? Those are all examples of AI and machine learning.

If you use a Managed Service Provider or a Managed Security Services Provider, AI is a new line of higher quality defense against cybercrime that they may be using to protect you. One of the greatest risks a business faces is a breach of its data by cybercriminals: malware, ransomware, et.al. and the tricks being used keep increasing in sophistication. Ransomware is particularly insidious. It can seize your data and hold it hostage for a ransom of currency, crypto or traditional. Once attacked, there are very few alternatives to submitting to the ransom request. AI can help MSPs respond faster to specific threats and concerns, and assist in diagnosis and troubleshooting. Also, as every SMB knows, 24/7 monitoring and support is a critical service that an MSP can provide far more efficiently than a company can do in-house. This has to do with the benefits of economies of scale. AI can improve 24/7 monitoring because AI can evaluate an enormous amount of data, far faster than humans, and likely identify problems before they affect business.

One area where AI tools can help even the smallest business is in sales and marketing. Every business is marketing and selling in the online digital world. Marketing on social media is a given for every business, and can be a game-changer for a small startup. However, a lot of the tasks of marketing on social media and through your website can involve tedious, time consuming tasks. Marketing tools that use AI can help with drip email campaigns, website visitor tracking, and understanding where each customer exists in the sales funnel at any given moment. Other digital tools that increase customer engagement and drive sales are available and are an excellent introduction to AI as a marketing tool. Using these tools, you can focus your limited sales resources on other, more critical tasks such as closing a sale with a customer that is now ready to buy and not simply exploring vague options. These AI tools are readily available and your MSP can guide you in the adoption and use of them.

AI and that data you collect

An MSP or MSSP can also be a resource for data protection. As you begin using such tools, you amass enormous amounts of data about prospects as well as customers. How you hold, use, transmit and store this data is subject to some data regulations, either by your state, a federal agency, or even the European Union. Regulation is growing because of the increasing concern about an individual's online privacy. Because so much personal data is being collected about each of us, there is increasing concern about misuse of that data, protecting it from bad actors, and other privacy rights issues. While you may not be physically located in a state that has data privacy regulations, if you do conduct business in a state or country that regulates data privacy, you are likely subject to their rules. An MSP or MSSP is an important resource to determine where you are subject to those laws. More importantly, if you are subject to those laws (for example: HIPAA, The FTC Safeguard Rules, the CA Privacy act or the General Data Protection Regulation of the EU), you may also be required to prove that you have developed protocols for the protection of data as defined under those regulations. It isn't enough to say “everything is safe.” You may have to provide evidence you have created the specific data protection protocols specified under the regulation.

In short, AI can be a helpful tool to grow your business, but it comes with responsibilities and concerns that may not have concerned you before. An MSP is an important resource as you wade into the world of marketing, sales, and other operational areas.

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