

Nothing artificial in AI productivity gains

There seems to be as many doubts and worries as there are prospects for artificial intelligence. What can it do for your business? Joe O'Halloran examines how travel distribution firm Zumata is making AI pay.

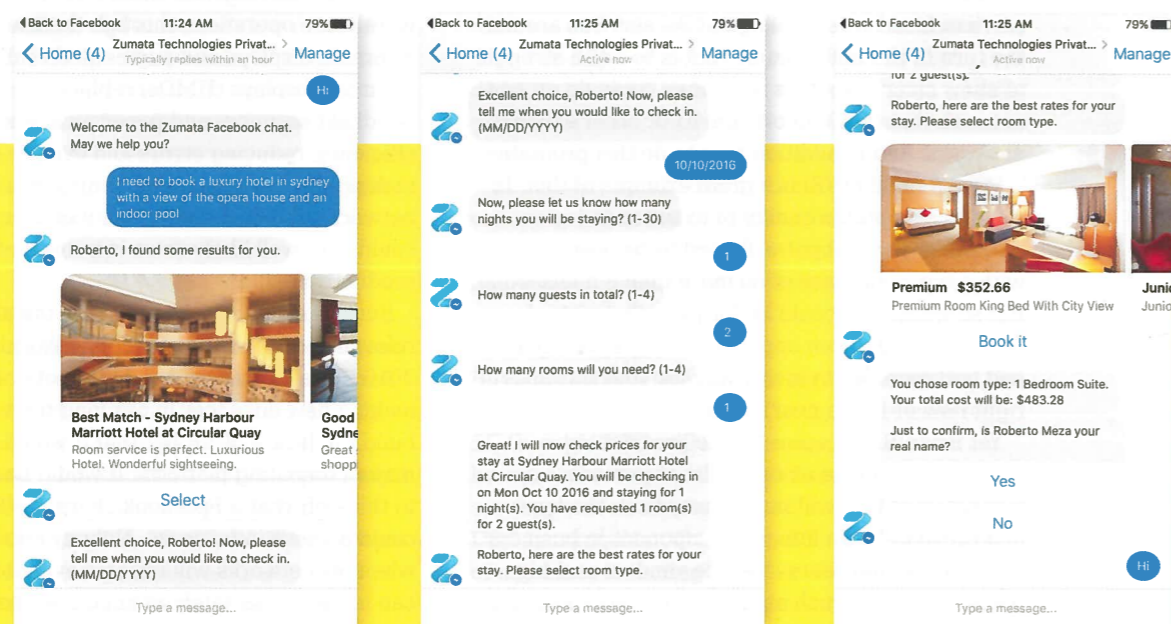
For something that is hardly out of its infancy in terms of mass usage, there are some pretty lofty claims being made for artificial intelligence. Indeed, some are saying that the fourth Industrial revolution is all about the automation of the human intellect, reimagining the workplace of the future in terms of information systems, company organisation, and business processes.

Yet even if the automation of work will probably affect job tasks rather than whole occupations, there also some, maybe not unreasonable, worries as to how AI will affect labour markets and the growing so called 'gig economy.' And is it all just hype? Where are the use cases? In that regard, travel distribution technology specialist Zumata certainly have one.

Founded in 2010, Singapore-based Zumata claims to be the only AI-powered hotel distribution company in the world, delivering consolidated online hotel inventory of over 500,000 properties

globally. It boasts that accurate mapping, cognitive computing and significant supplier overlap help its B2B partners achieve lower cost prices, decrease reliance on a single supplier, and optimise customer conversions.

The travel industry has long embraced technology and in doing so similarly empowered a lot of end users with personal apps, especially those on mobile devices. But in the famous words of Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg nobody wants to download an app just to book a hotel. Of course what the man behind The Social Network didn't say was that it was far easier to use an app that people already had: such as Facebook Messenger. Using this principle, Zumata has integrated natural language processing (NLP) into a chatbot app that uses IBM Watson's artificial intelligence technology to process customer hotel search requests, resulting they say in a new level of individualisation and personalisation.



Robert Meza, Zumata Director of Business Development



Magnus Jern, MI International President

80%

"Automating some of the tasks which we're working on in terms of travel, with the chatbots; being able to answer 80% of the questions that are repetitive and easy to answer, and kind of assisting people. So I think AI is here to enhance our job..." Magnus Jern

Zumata director of business development Robert Meza explains the business advantages. "I think it's essential with any of the chatbot platforms, we want to be where the customers are at, then we want to be able to give them the experience on those platforms. We're using Watson, and we're basically innovating a space that has not innovated in a long time, starting, say, hotel bookings. So say you've been kind of using the same tool to book your hotels, so you pick a city, you pick the dates that you're staying at, you pick the rooms, and you get the result. Say you were looking for something in Rome, you'd probably get around 3,000 hotels, so how do you get what you need? - what exactly you need? With Watson, you can make queries kind of like in the same way you would with a travel agent. So say I need a hotel in Rome with a view of the Colosseum, that is child-friendly and has a great rooftop bar, and free Wi-Fi. So you can do that whole search, or that whole query, by writing to the bot, and the bot is going to find you the highest-matching result for that query."

AI development

But what the Zumata also needed was a company that could deliver the integration of the Watson API and its travel API into Facebook. For Meza, end-to-end mobility firm DMI was the obvious choice. It not only offered expertise but DMI had worked with the firm before on a separate project. Nine years ago DMI was making bots for IKEA adds, but things are so different now adds DMI International president Magnus Jern. "When we did those, I've got to say that the AI was simply not good enough," he remembers. "It meant that [what] you end up with becomes more like an FAQ. You can pick up on keywords, and you can try to get back to the response, but it wasn't really that great, and that said, the big revolution that we've seen in the last year or two is that it's becoming good enough to use."

Jern is clear as to what good mobile AI development has to offer: it's not just about the front end user experience — "because you aren't really understanding how you solve the problem," he argues — but also the complexity of back end integration, performance, and stability. This task is not becoming easier.

What Meza believes is that for the likes of his company and other AI will be a strategic imperative with cognitive technologies coming to the fore. "You see it already in everyday news, in banking, in healthcare, communications, travel, so I think it's kind of the start of a new transformation for what we're doing, and for what people are doing in general," he points out. "Automating some of the tasks which we're working on in terms of travel, with the chatbots; being able to answer 80% of the questions that are repetitive and easy to answer, and kind of assisting people. So I think AI is here to enhance our jobs, it's not really here to replace a lot of the things, so in customer services it's there to kind of take away that time that's not productive from an agent, to focus on the more complex kind of issues that they need to deal with on a daily basis, so it's just going to make everybody more productive in that way."

Zumata's plan is to build more platforms, on mobile especially, and to continue to improve on what it's doing now, especially in terms of AI. DMI will be there to help, Jern assures. "Every single company needs to reimagine their product services and processes and so on in the mobile world, so actually, in a lot of cases, they're actually starting over from scratch now with their mobile approaches, because it's now talking to that turning point, where it's more important than anything else. Specifically, if you look at AI and chat and messaging, I would say it's part of every consumer brand from now on." **DB**