'Unlocking AI: Practical Strategies for Business Productivity'

Introduction

On the 28th of January 2025, The Productivity Institute's Scotland Forum with Bridgette Wessels, Daniel Williams and Carolyn Currie, were pleased to host a workshop in partnership with Jordan Kay from Connect Three on *Unlocking AI: Practical Strategies for Business Productivity*. This practical workshop was convened to explore the role of AI in and for Scottish businesses. The session sought to demystify AI and examine how it can be leveraged to enhance productivity, reduce costs, and facilitate more efficient decision-making processes. Participants included business leaders, academic and industry experts representing a diverse range of Scottish organizations, from SMEs to large national companies like Scottish Water. The discussions addressed various aspects of AI adoption, including its applications in business operations, ethical and environmental considerations, and the evolving skills landscape required for effective AI integration. This briefing paper will detail the key insights from Jordan Kay's workshop, and the key discussions that were taken from the session

AI as a Tool for Business Productivity

The workshop highlighted the extensive ways in which AI is currently being utilised across business functions. In marketing and communications, AI is employed to generate content, automate customer engagement, and analyse audience behaviours and trends. AI-powered writing tools such as ChatGPT, Jasper and Ryter are increasingly being used for administrative tasks such as drafting contracts and summarising reports, offering significant time and cost savings for businesses. A compelling example was shared by an SME representative, who reported a cost-savings of over £75,000 in legal fees by using AI to draft contracts, with legal professionals providing oversight at the final stage rather than managing the entire process.

AI has also demonstrated considerable value in data analysis, particularly through tools such as Microsoft CoPilot, which can generate formulas and process large datasets with enhanced efficiency. Additionally, AI is playing an integral role in software development, with AI-driven coding assistants facilitating more streamlined coding processes and reducing the technical barriers faced by non-specialist employees; effectively working to reduce the skills gap to specialist professions. In creative industries, AI is increasingly being used to generate high-quality images, videos, and audio content, reducing production times and broadening access to professional-grade media tools. These developments underline the transformative potential of AI,

particularly for SMEs seeking to optimise their operations and expand their market reach. This topic was expanded on in a second workshop by Connect Three during Scotland's National Productivity Week, which highlighted how businesses can effectively scale.

The Environmental Considerations of AI Adoption

Despite its evident benefits, the widespread implementation of AI carries significant environmental implications, which can be overlooked when businesses are looking to scale their adoption of AI-related technologies. For example, it was highlighted that the computational power required to run AI is substantial, resulting in high energy consumption and the corresponding need for cooling systems to prevent overheating in data centres. It was noted that AI data centres are projected to consume six times more water than the entire country of Denmark, a country of some 6 million people! Further, it was highlighted that a single AI-generated response, such as prompting ChatGPT, currently requires approximately 25 times more energy than a conventional web browser search. While work is ongoing to reduce the environmental impact of AI-based technologies, these insights reinforced the need for businesses to adopt AI responsibly, considering sustainability when integrating AI tools into their operations. A good way of doing this is by adopting a triple-bottom-line approach, incorporating aspects of *people, profit and planet* into a businesses' ethos.

Workforce Adaptation and the Emergence of New Roles

The increasing presence of AI in business operations necessitates a reassessment of workforce structures and job security. While there is concern regarding AI's potential to displace certain roles, there is a counterargument that AI integration will create new employment roles and opportunities. The workshop introduced the concept of the "AI Facilitator" as a potential new professional role, responsible for managing AI systems within organizations. It was noted however, that upskilling and training would be required for people to fill these roles.

Moreover, AI has significant implications for leadership and management. Business leaders and senior staff in Scottish businesses in attendance discussed their increasing use and reliance on AI-driven insights to inform strategic decision-making, making AI literacy an essential competency for business leaders. The experience of a representative from Scottish Water (Scotland's publicly owned water supplier which provides the entire country with its water and sewerage services), provided a case study of AI's ability to bridge knowledge gaps within organizations. By employing AI tools to interpret complex coding, the company has been able to make technical expertise more accessible to a broader range of systems and employees, creating stronger links between technical specialists and non-technical staff. This is a particularly interesting

case-study and shows how AI tools can be used by large governmental and multinational companies to improve their overall efficiency.

Ethical Considerations and the Stigma Surrounding AI

A recurring theme in the discussions was the perception of AI-generated content and the ethical considerations surrounding its use. While AI offers efficiency and scalability, there remains a degree of scepticism regarding the authenticity and reliability of AI-produced outputs. One of the key arguments presented during the workshop was the importance of transparency in AI adoption. Businesses utilising AI-generated materials – whether in marketing, legal documentation, or creative production – should be explicit and own the role that AI has played in their processes. With this notion, it is worth noting that I used an AI-tool called Fathom to help me summarise the transcript from the workshop to help me produce this article! This approach is key to enhancing trust in AI-tools and ensuring that AI is positioned as an augmentative tool rather than a replacement for human expertise. As such, ethical frameworks should be embedded in AI governance policies to ensure responsible AI deployment.

Implementing AI Skills Training for Businesses

The successful adoption of AI is contingent upon the development of AI literacy and skills among employees. The workshop emphasised the need for businesses to invest in structured training programmes to equip their workforce with the necessary competencies for engaging with and using AI tools effectively. One of the key areas identified for training was the ability to formulate effective AI prompts, enabling employees to interact with AI systems to optimise outputs.

A further dimension of AI training involves its application in multilingual communication. Jordan Kay showed the group an AI avatar of himself that he had created with Synthesia, which he recorded a webinar with, that could be used around the world in over 150 languages. Translation tools such as these present an opportunity for businesses to enhance engagement with global stakeholders and enable better communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

The *Unlocking AI: Practical Strategies for Business Productivity* workshop provided valuable insights into the practical applications, challenges, and ethical considerations of integrating AI into business operations for organizations across Scotland. The discussions underlined AI's potential to enhance productivity, reduce costs and facilitate business expansion – particularly for SMEs seeking to optimise their operations. However, the environmental impacts of AI must be carefully managed, with individual and business users reminded to be mindful when they use AI tools day-to-day. Further, businesses must implement robust ethical guidelines to ensure transparency and accountability in AI usage.

The evolving role of AI in the workplace necessitates proactive strategies to equip employees with the required skills for using AI tools. This includes technical proficiency, and a broader understanding of AI's implications for business strategy, decision-making, and communication at the senior level. As AI continues to shape the business landscape as it reaches its inflection point, ongoing collaboration between business leaders, policymakers and academic institutions – like seen at this workshop – provide crucial platforms for ensuring AI adoption is both responsible and beneficial.

The TL: DR

AI presents numerous opportunities in marketing, data analysis and automation to enhance productivity, reduce costs, and streamline business operations, with real-world examples illustrating significant cost savings and efficiency gains.

Concerns were raised regarding **environmental impact, workforce adaptation, and AI-generated content stigma.**

Skills training for employees was highlighted as a critical step to effective AI adoption, ensuring AI literacy and ethical use. The workshop concluded that businesses wishing to adopt AI must do so in a **strategic, responsible and mindful** way, balancing efficiency with sustainability and transparency.