

Airtel rides the AI wave

Airtel's X Labs is working overtime to develop solutions that will make customer interaction smoother and help the firm avoid cost and time overruns

SANGEETA TANWAR

At a time when implementing artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning is hygiene, telecom leader Airtel is seriously looking at predictive maintenance and service chat bots to stay ahead of the curve. It has just deployed an AI-based predictive tool to serve its home broadband customers. Even before a customer connects with a call centre agent for complaint resolution, the platform identifies the probable cause of service disruption by scanning the vital parameters of the service and displays it on the screen of the agent. This makes the consumer experience better as the agent is able to conduct a more informed conversation with the user.

Talking about Airtel's focus on AI and the internet of things (IoT), Harmeen Mehta, global chief information officer, Bharti Airtel, says, "We are rapidly scaling up Airtel X Labs, our digital innovation factory. And AI-powered solutions will accelerate our journey towards rolling out intuitive digital products, particularly in vernacular languages." The operator is focused on using natural language processing to build capabilities in vernacular language chat/voice bots to support its call centre operations to deliver interactive, real-life like digital care.

To beef up its AI muscle, the compa-

ny has acquired AuthMe, a Bengaluru-based startup focused on AI solutions. The acquisition, it hopes, will fast-track innovation at the operator's existing data facility — Airtel X Labs.

The team at Airtel X Labs is working on a number of machine learning-based AI solutions that will support product recommendation engines to bring contextual offers to customers. Its robotic process automation-based solutions will help the operator accelerate data processing for functions such as billing/accounting and so on.

Airtel's Mehta says that in the IoT space, the team is looking at building solutions for the automotive industry (connected cars), the energy sector



(smart grids, smart metering) and smart homes and cities.

With AuthMe now part of Bharti Airtel, the company has access to two solutions developed by the start-up — Callup AI and Fintech OCR (optical character recognition). While Callup AI is a chat and voice assistant that helps resolve customer queries quickly over email, chat and phone calls. Callup AI features include voice integration, unsupervised learning and the application is built for vernacular languages with zero integration time. On the other hand, the Fintech OCR application is designed for processing KYC docs, bank/credit card/loan statements etc.

According to Bappaditya Mukhopadhyay, professor, Great Lakes Institute of Management, Gurgaon, "AI

DIGITAL DRIVE

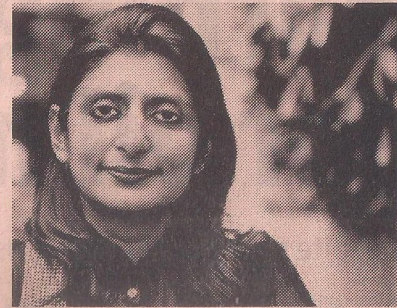
- With AI Airtel is looking to redefine user experience in the three stages — customer acquisition, experience and retention for its 450-million-plus users
- It is pushing for product and service innovation at Airtel X Labs, its digital innovation factory by deploying technologies like AI, IoT and virtual reality

solutions can help the operator redefine user experience at three stages — customer acquisition, experience and retention. While improving current experience, AI analysis can quickly classify customer queries into appropriate slots for better resolution. Data complaint analysis will be vital in predicting and handling customer churn." The new solutions will also make the process of collecting, verifying and authenticating documents much easier, says Mukhopadhyay.

The operator is hopeful that both these solutions will help it enhance customer experience by bringing down call resolution time and bringing in efficiency in routine functions such as billing and accounting.

Even as Airtel gears up to ride the intelligence revolution, it needs to remember that AI is not a substitute for domain expertise, warn experts.

"Any organisation that migrates to AI usage must look at the challenges that data presents particularly in terms of privacy and security. Further, AI related solutions can often give suggestions that can be deemed detrimental and examples of organisations losing customers because of push ads and unsolicited recommen-



“THE NEW AI-POWERED SOLUTIONS ARE A STEP IN OUR JOURNEY TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTUITIVE DIGITAL PRODUCTS, PARTICULARLY IN VERNACULAR LANGUAGES

HARMEEN MEHTA,
Global chief information officer
Bharti Airtel

dations when they should not have are plenty," suggests Mukhopadhyay.

While AI can capture, process and generate new insights, even identify patterns that weren't existing earlier, ultimately the user experience will depend a lot on what the organisation understands about consumer behaviour. People with AI expertise must compliment the processes with new skills. That is something Airtel has learnt the hard way. A few years back it used mechanical translation of one of its campaigns in Bangla that didn't go down well.

To this end, Bharti Airtel is looking to put together a team of 250 experts to work on technologies such as AI, IoT and VR to offer a digitally rich customer experience to its 450-million-plus customers.