

Buyer beware of AI washing

Sonja Bernhardt July 10, 2024

Educate yourself so you can navigate the AI hype and make informed decisions about AI technologies, writes Sonja Bernhardt.



In 2024, AI has emerged as one of the most talked-about topics. While AI holds immense transformative potential, it's also evident that there's a considerable amount of hype surrounding it. For aged care providers, staying informed and discerning about AI technologies is crucial for making educated decisions about AI products and services.

When exciting new technology emerges, it's common to fall for the statements and claims made by vendors. Here I aim to help you, and aged care organisations, avoid this trap by navigating the AI hype and making informed decisions about AI technologies.

I recommend critical thinking skills and a touch of scepticism to evaluate AI claims and seeking out educational resources for further learning.

Start with understanding your expectations. As vendors in the care and health sectors rush to meet the flurry of AI expectations, you're likely to encounter a range of statements regarding AI-powered and AI-driven innovative products.

Some vendors – especially those already using AI methods for routine tasks such as requirements analysis, automated code review and predictive maintenance – may claim to include AI.

This assistance with routine tasks allows more time for creative design and problem solving and technically could qualify as stating that AI is deployed. However, it is also likely that your expectations of AI are beyond that routine task used by vendors.

AI washing misleads consumers about a product's true capabilities

While algorithms are common in software, they don't equate to AI. Features like advanced search algorithms, spell check and autocomplete functions are valuable, but they don't necessarily constitute AI. True AI goes beyond algorithms; it learns from data to enhance decision-making processes.

This mismatch in statements from vendors and expectations from providers forms a gap of knowledge that indicates it is becoming increasingly important to be able to critically evaluate any proposed AI solutions.

AI washing

It is important because of what is known as AI washing. AI washing involves exaggerating the capabilities of a product or service labelled AI to make it appear more sophisticated, innovative or intelligent than it actually is. Similar to greenwashing in environmental claims, AI washing misleads consumers about a product's true capabilities.

An illustration of AI washing often arises when appliances – spanning from refrigerators to kettles, vacuum cleaners and thermostats – are marketed as smart or intelligent when a more accurate description would be connected.

While these appliances undeniably offer value and often enhance productivity, labelling them as AI can be misleading. However, it's possible that the connectivity they provide fulfills the desired functionality, and the exaggerated hype surrounding AI has led to the belief that every technological product must incorporate AI to be competitive.

As technology vendors vie to be first to market with AI solutions, it's crucial for aged care organisations to understand and potentially challenge what they are promising. It is in your governance purview to ensure you and your assessment team are adequately informed when raising questions regarding AI and listening to statements made.



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AI uses in care

At its core AI involves machines that can learn, reason and adapt and is primarily utilised to increase speed and accuracy. In healthcare some of the current uses of AI include diagnosing patients and analysis of medical imaging data, such as X-rays, MRIs and CT scans. This assists healthcare professionals in accurate and swift diagnosis.

In the care sectors some key areas where AI can assist with are:

- optimising staff schedules
- monitoring residents' health in real time
- predictive and preventative falls management by identifying patterns and triggers.

Machine learning may be deployed to analyse clinical data to discover gaps in a patient's healthcare treatment. Additionally, camera and visual monitoring streams may also be used to gauge pain levels based on facial expressions. This is particularly beneficial for people living with dementia and other conditions where they are not able to communicate when they feel pain and their pain level.

This proactive approach helps alleviate staff strain and ensures a safer environment for residents.

In truth, while we have some machine-learning tools, for example Siri and Alexa, and generative AI, such as ChatGPT and Gemini, we are still a long way away from artificial general intelligence. AGI is where computers are as smart as humans across the board while machine intelligence and artificial super intelligence – ASI – refer to the hypothetical possibilities where computers are much smarter than humans and have machine consciousness. For now, understanding the basics is a good start.

What you can do

A significant first step is to gain a foundational understanding of AI concepts. This includes differentiating between AI, machine learning, deep learning and generative AI.

Numerous free online courses are available to help you deepen your understanding of these technologies offered by platforms like Coursera, Google, edX, and Khan Academy.

Any browser search of words such as “free AI course”, or more specifically “free generative AI training” will point you to a wide range of options. These courses range from a few minutes through to a few months, and a variety of topics.

AI won't take your job but those who know about or use AI will

This will help you develop a more nuanced understanding of AI enabling you to identify genuine AI capabilities versus mere marketing hype. This knowledge should help you foster better decision-making. It could also enhance your ability to participate meaningfully in conversations by delving deeper and looking for mentions of specific models, technologies, or algorithms that are used, such as natural language processing, neural networks, or deep learning.

Just like those software features mentioned previously, insights from social media platforms are valuable tools, but labelling them as AI-generated may be stretching the truth. And while these functionalities are useful, they do not qualify as true AI.

Here are three ways to avoid succumbing to over-enthusiastic statements or AI washing when looking for an AI product:

1. Request evidence

When considering AI tools, ask for hard evidence of the way AI is used in product offerings. Watch out for vague answers.

2. Involve IT in purchasing

Establish a collaborative culture that involves the information technology department in the buying process and keeps the buying team from falling for marketing hype.

3. Look at the product holistically

Buyers shouldn't pursue a product solely because it incorporates AI. Buying teams should look at the whole product and consider all the potential benefits and challenges associated.

Get started today

AI washing is like sticking go-faster stripes on a vehicle without upgrading the engine, allowing marketers to capitalise on the excitement around AI while not offering anything that's genuinely revolutionary.

Save yourself from those inflated expectations and setting unrealistic goals and targets by informing yourself in advance.

There is a new saying: AI won't take your job but those who know about or use AI will. Be the organisation and person who knows about AI and begin your AI awareness and upskilling today.

Sonja Bernhardt is the chief executive officer of ThoughtWare – the company behind the ionMy governance, risk, compliance software platform – and a regular public speaker, who aims to de-geekify technology in a realistic and meaningful way