

Personalising the unique traveller experience through AI

By  Adrian Roodt

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Data, as we currently know it, is a relatively new phenomenon. While it's always existed in some form or another - like the paper files of past years - the avalanche of digital data is unprecedented: 90% of data that has ever existed was generated in the [last two years and the volume of data being created only continues to grow](#). This has huge potential for all industries.



Image source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

The greater the pool of data, the more potential it has for valuable business insights, particularly in industries like travel where the spotlight is increasingly shining on personalisation.

This is where artificial intelligence (AI) technologies come in. AI can power through data quicker than a human ever can, all with added security. To maximise AI's potential, however, it needs to be used ethically for long-term, sustainable use.

Many travellers most common online activities are key in building AI capabilities, including search, booking and shopping. All of this provides valuable insight into the travellers' perspective – what they really want and what's shifting the dial for them.

The more data that is provided from search terms, the more specialised products can be developed that give travellers the personalised experience they're looking for – with added security. And our research has shown that personalised travel experiences are increasing what South African travellers are looking for: Travelport's 2019 Global Digital Traveller Research found that 36% of South African travellers rank personalised travel offers as 'very important' for their travel apps.

Taking the pain out of travel

It's hard to enjoy a fragmented booking experience.

AI and other emerging technologies are addressing the problems embedded in a fragmented booking experience across the various phases of the travel journey – inspiration, shopping, booking, pre-trip, in-trip and post-trip.

Travellers on average use 10-12 apps throughout the searching, booking and travelling parts of their trip. With mobiles having only a small screen display, the priority for airlines and travel agents is to show only the most essential information, harnessing AI technology for efficiency. This can make the process easier on both ends.



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The good news is that there's also significant enthusiasm for the benefits AI brings, with Microsoft and [EY's AI Maturity Report in the Middle East and Africa](#) showing that South African companies are among top three regional investors in AI, with 46% of companies piloting AI technologies. In fact, South Africa's overall investment in AI in the last 10 years was US\$1.6bn.

The top use cases for AI listed by companies surveyed included automation (83%) and prediction (70%). This has widespread implications for a number of industries, including travel, but to reap the reward of AI in travel, South African organisations must be prepared to invest in emerging technology, refine their AI capabilities and develop the data and algorithms necessary to gain insights into product recommendation, as well as the human expertise to ask the right questions.



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However, AI does not work in isolation. Other technologies like IoT, big data and cloud computing give businesses the chance to interact with a traveler throughout their journey, delivering relevant information such as real-time flight alerts. The quality of data is only limited to the ability to process it. This is where AI and cloud delivers.

The rise of personalisation

With the right tools in place, AI can empower travel companies' ability to collect data that will ultimately optimise business results. AI pricing tools can act autonomously, adjusting prices of flights or hotel rooms depending on demand, weather and other factors.



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When put into practice, this new technology has made significant progress in search technology. AI-driven platforms not

only power search results for Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), but also support multiple channels, from mobile devices to social platforms and messaging platforms. As such, the need to focus on speed, accuracy and relevance becomes more prominent as the number of searches for travel products grows.

Expanding the capabilities of the travel industry to service a more personalised booking experience for consumers will only be possible with the help of AI. As these technologies become more proficient and the industry more accepting, the entire outlook of travel will change.

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