The Rise of AI
Dealers increasingly focused on this game changer

by: Brent Hoskins, Office Technology Magazine

Are you focused on the rise of artificial intelligence (AI)? If not, many would say you should be at this point. Following are profiles of three BTA member dealerships focused on their strides with AI. Perhaps the insight and details they share will provide you with some welcome guidance.

Automated Business Technologies

While only a few AI-driven tasks are now underway at Centennial, Colorado-based Automated Business Technologies (ABT), it is seen as a tool that will ultimately be a game changer for the Canon, HP, Kyocera and Xerox dealership. "It is going to impact everything; it's difficult for me to imagine that it will not," says CEO Mike Piche. "I think it is as big of a transformation as the internet, if not bigger."

The day will come that the use of AI will be embraced throughout ABT, Piche says. "I think everyone will use it daily in one way, shape or form," he says. "That will include 'hiring AI' and not a person the next time you think you need to hire somebody. I think managers will be asking themselves, 'I have this requirement. Do we hire somebody or do we deploy some sort of AI tool to do whatever needs to be done?'"

Referring to AI as essentially "the next industrial evolution," it was about two years ago that "we started looking at AI throughout the company, even if it was just noticing it was coming," says Wendy Campbell, director of marketing. "With the introduction of ChatGPT, it was a matter of, 'OK, this is going to start evolving. Where do we want to step into this and how can we one day use this throughout the organization?'"

Today, Campbell relies on AI in her role using HubSpot, (providing such AI tools as ChapSpot.ai), ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot. In addition, she says, increasingly, ABT's sales team members are using Einstein GPT, the generative AI tool for the Salesforce CRM solution. "It is just me in marketing here at ABT, so AI gives me an extra set of hands to help come up with different ideas," she says. "Typically, I tap into AI about once a day. Maybe I've written something and I want to see if there is a better way to say it. Or, am I forgetting something? Is there more information that I may want to add?"

AI has evolved enough "where I can now take an old marketing campaign and say to AI, 'This is my old campaign. I want to rework this to really look toward the future,'" Campbell says. "I also use it to evaluate different pieces of content and to create blog images that directly speak to our content. AI is not brilliant, however, when it comes to image creation. Sometimes, you may see something like a third foot. Plus, hands are really difficult for AI."

With AI solidly in use for marketing tasks at ABT, leadership is investigating other areas where it can be implemented. "We're currently looking at it for some administrative processes that we think would not be that difficult to automate through AI," Piche says. He notes that research is also now underway to automate the process of uploading price books into Salesforce. "Can we just train AI to log in to Salesforce, plug in price books and know where everything is like a human would? Can we do that? We don't know yet, so we are trying to figure out if that is possible. Wendy is the person who has been primarily responsible for that task. Automating it with AI would save her hours and hours."

Piche says ABT is also looking at AI as a source of new revenues. "Can we resell some AI products to our customer base?" he asks. "We have a task force looking at that, seeing where there are revenue opportunities ... Because of the nature of the industry, we're losing a percent or so a year in aftermarket clicks. The task force is looking to find other sources of recurring revenue and, so, is looking at AI to see if there is a way to monetize that."

While Piche says AI will remove the burden of performing certain tasks, he does not see AI technology as a means to reduce an employee's workload. Consider the technology of the cell phone and how it "just made you more accessible every day, resulting in more work, right?" he explains. "Once AI is doing something, you're just going to end up doing more of the things AI can't do. Everyone will be like, 'Oh, now I have more time. I'm going to use that time to work on

my competitive advantage in the marketplace.' If everyone is doing that, no one will ever decrease the amount of work they are doing."

Connected Office Technologies

For Tom Mitchell, president of Connected Office Technologies, a Brother and Sharp dealership based in Portland, Maine, the AI journey began in earnest the day he joined his service manager in the field on several service calls. That day, he witnessed the difficulty the manager had setting up scanning capabilities to an accounting firm's new software program via the control panel of a Sharp MFP. "I would put him up against any technician in the country," he says, emphasizing the skill set of the manager. "But trying to get the software logo on the MFP control panel was difficult. We had to call Sharp to get that done."

That experience was Mitchell's "starting point" with AI, he says. "I thought, maybe we could compile all of the service help information we have into one place, making it easily accessible to our techs by way of their iPads," he says. "Tom [the service manager] was really struggling trying to get the information. How can we use AI to help him?"

While it is a work in progress, Mitchell is using middleware and ChatGPT to build the new AI resource. "We're just building the prompts now," he says. In addition to service information from Brother and Sharp, the new resource is accessing information contained in Microsoft folders at Connected Office. "We have [service] videos that we've done for years. If someone was learning something new, Tom would film himself doing it. 'Oh, if you don't know how to do that, you can find it by searching the folders' ... Now, with AI, the tech in the field can say, 'Show me the video on how to put a fuser together for a BP-70C31' or whatever — poof, there it is."

For accessing the middleware, "we can program ChatGPT for permissions, prompts and frequently asked questions," Mitchell says. "Plus, we are asking our techs: 'If you are looking for information [on something in particular], how would you phrase the question?' ChatGPT is then taught the phrasing and tested to confirm the common phrasing of the question leads to the right information."

Mitchell shares another benefit of the tech's instant access to service information that AI provides. "If you have that AI humming, you can onboard a technician so quickly versus the standard practice of having the tech taking courses, etc." he says. "This will also provide stress relief. Think

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about sending the tech on his first call [without the AI resource] and he finds that he doesn't have the information he needs. What does he do? What does that do to him? He's thinking, 'This job stinks. I have to drive all the way back, find that folder they told me about and flip through a manual and read 10 pages.'"

The use of AI will not be limited to the service team at Connected Office. "The next step [for AI] is install," Mitchell says. "How can we make MFP installation smoother across the board when interfacing with customers? The print drivers can be placed in that AI middleware and, so, accessed and loaded lightning fast. The installer doesn't have to dig around in an Excel file or some Microsoft folder."

Meanwhile, Connected Office is using Microsoft Copilot to provide sales reps with AI-generated data. "Say you work hard to get an appointment with ABC Company in Augusta, Maine, and it's an hour and half from your house," Mitchell explains. "You want to know what else is going to be nearby, because you want to make the trip efficient, right? So, you use AI and simply say: 'Show me 10 of the largest companies around the area where I am right now.' It will geolocate you. You can pull the locations up in Google Maps and actually download them into your CRM ... So, you have an efficient trip. After you're done with your appointment, you can call on 10 other places in the same area."

As the examples of the usage of AI at Connected Office illustrate, "AI does not replace a human being," Mitchell says. "It's not meant to. It's just a way to eliminate some of the knowledge deficit, and it puts us all on an equal playing field, which I love."

Fraser Advanced Information Systems

In the early 2000s, Justin Drabouski worked for a value-added reseller (VAR) focused on project engineering work for the enterprise market, selling hardware but primarily implementing solutions. "I was part of the original group that began to transition that market to managed services," he says. Ultimately, the focus became: "Businesses can access software from a remote data center. They don't have to install software in their office locations. That was the beginning of the cloud model."
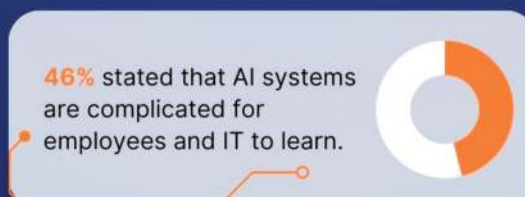
What does this have to do with AI? "That experience for the VAR community was transformative, right?" Drabouski asks, given that cloud-based computing is now the standard.

AI Implementation: Trends & Takeaways

Users

61% of organizations have achieved increased efficiency and productivity from implementing generative AI initiatives.

38% support and manage AI tools in-house, while **37%** have some internal AI platform management as well as external support.

Dealerships

63% are considering adopting an AI solution within their customer service departments.

46% stated that AI systems are complicated for employees and IT to learn.

AI offers significant benefits — but addressing security, management and usability is essential.

Source: Keypoint Intelligence 2024 U.S. End User Study & 2024 Channel Survey

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"This is the same impact AI will have on the dealer community and the rest of the services industry. It will be transformative. In 10 years, we'll be looking back saying: 'I don't even remember how we did it before.' That's how I view AI's overall impact on the industry — equally as transformative as the transformation of the entire IT support industry of the early 2000s."

Today, Drabouski serves as vice president of technology and security at Fraser Advanced Information Systems, a Sharp, Canon, Lexmark and HP dealership based in Reading, Pennsylvania. He is a part of a team at Fraser focused on AI. Early on, he says, it became apparent that it would be necessary to address the culture challenge ("getting department managers to think in terms of ... use cases for AI" outside of the traditional industry model) and the systems challenge (given that the commonly used software-based systems in the industry are "very proprietary, not easy to work with, and the data can be siloed and contained.")

To help address the two challenges, "we decided to invest in the learning side," Drabouski says. "About three years ago, during an executive leadership meeting, it was decided to allocate a certain amount of money into [AI] education and exploration. There were no defined outcomes. We weren't putting KPIs in place. We were not saying that at the end of six months we want to have a product that we can take to the market and sell ... We just said that we know AI will be important and when the OEMs and the software gets to the right point, we want to make sure we have the right skill sets on staff."

The result was the establishment of Fraser's AI Lab, "an investment in curiosity and exploration," Drabouski says. The team includes key technical people, the dealership's marketing person, an employee from HR and two new hires. "We brought on a Python developer," he says (Python is a programming language commonly used in AI). "We also brought on a data analyst."

Fraser's primary vendor partner, Sharp, will soon be announcing new AI-driven capabilities and "we want to

be ready when these technologies hit the market," Drabouski says. That, along with the understanding that AI will be integrated into Fraser's different business units "in snippets of AI capability," led to the mission in 2025 "to circle the wagons around a core platform for the company. We wanted to select something that is low-hanging fruit in terms of customization, but easy to implement and manage, and for our team members to understand."

The wagons are now circled around Microsoft's Copilot and the use of Azure AI Studio. "The nice thing is that Microsoft has been working over the past few years to integrate Copilot into just about all of its products," Drabouski says. "It's really just a matter of licensing it and turning it on."

The AI Lab at Fraser has come far, Drabouski says. "Today,

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we are implementing Copilot across the organization," he says. "We are customizing it for different business units for specific requirements. Plus, we have an adoption measure plan in place, and we are now looking at KPIs."

Drabouski advises other dealers to likewise establish a focus on AI with a mindset of being prepared for what's next. "You need to incorporate this into your hiring process," he says. "You need to bring people into your organization ... who have behavioral characteristics that would support using AI technology." ■

Brent Hoskins, executive director of the Business Technology Association, is editor of Office Technology magazine. He can be reached at (816) 303-4040 or brent@bta.org.