The Implications of AI
Set forth guidelines to ensure ethical, responsible use

by: Greg Goldberg, incoming BTA General Counsel

Stramaglio Consulting's 2024 Executive Connection Summit (ECS2024) took place Jan. 14-17 in Scottsdale, Arizona. The four-day conference featured prominent voices from inside and outside the channel, and grappled with key issues affecting the future of the office technology industry. One topic in particular took up a significant portion of the ECS2024 agenda: artificial intelligence (AI).

For those who did not attend last year's event, ECS2023 was ahead of the curve, introducing generative AI technology to attendees a full two weeks prior to the debut of ChatGPT. For anyone just waking up from a yearlong nap, ChatGPT is the AI tool that can compose anything from a textbook chapter to a heavy metal ballad based on input from a user's prompt.

One year later, the big questions surrounding AI have largely shifted from what AI can say to what AI can do — more specifically, how it can drive increased profitability. ECS2024 tackled this question, bringing together top industry leaders, including OEMs, MSPs, financial services providers and next-generation leaders, offering a wide range of presentations and panel discussions sharing a multitude of insights and perspectives.

There is broad consensus across the channel that AI represents a tectonic shift at least as disruptive as the evolution from analog to digital printing. In fact, according to statistics cited at ECS2024, as many as 83% of businesses surveyed agree that AI is an immediate priority. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that AI may affect as much as 40% of all employment. The use cases for dealers implementing AI technology are vast — targeted marketing and sales, precision inventory management and optimal fleet deployment, just to name a few. The predictive abilities of AI are particularly powerful, offering dealers the ability to forecast the equipment needs of current and prospective customers; to detect specific parts or equipment with increasing market demand; and to schedule and route technicians for maximum efficiency and profitability.

Nonetheless, as with any new technology, especially one boasting such enormous potential, AI poses a multitude of legal questions and ethical concerns. Will AI technology render certain roles within an organization obsolete? What happens if AI discloses proprietary information, such as customer lists or trade secrets? Who is liable if an AI chatbot attempts to enter into a contract or defames a customer? What happens if an organization forbids the use of AI, but employees ignore the prohibition? I could fill an entire column with novel hypothetical scenarios involving AI, but the point is clear: the intended and unintended consequences of implementing AI technology will be considerable.

Looking ahead toward the new AI frontier, pioneering dealers should assess the danger of implementing AI technology in their businesses and consider how to protect against it. For the time being, the most basic solution is to enact a comprehensive AI policy. In general, an effective AI policy should set forth guidelines to ensure AI is used ethically and responsibly, including complying with legal and regulatory standards, as well as protecting data privacy. A gold standard policy (or policies) should inform both employees and customers of how AI is utilized in a business and provide a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities.

For instance, employees of any organization should know, at a minimum, what internal decisions are made using assistance from AI, as well as what measures are in place to eliminate bias and encourage fairness. Moreover, both an organization's employees and customers should be informed whether and how AI collects, stores and uses their data, and what protection protocols are used to safeguard the information. It is important for any effective AI policy to clearly identify what controls an organization has adopted to monitor AI's output, including quality assurance, human oversight, legal oversight, continuous improvement and liability mitigation.

The applications and implications of AI technology are certain to be centerpieces of office technology conferences for the foreseeable future and beyond. ECS2024 served an important purpose, presenting an early glimpse into putting AI to work and providing a framework for weighing the costs and benefits of implementing AI technology. Watch this space in the coming months for further information about how to stay ahead of the AI boom and how to protect your business from the downside risks. BTA has a sample AI Policy available at www.bta.org/LegalDocuments. ∎

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