Humanitarian Leadership Academy

AI & Humanitarians: what are the implications for learning & skills development in the sector?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has far-reaching implications for the nature of humanitarian crises and response, from the potential threats posed by new kinds of conflict and weaponry, to the opportunities offered by technologies which help predict disasters or gather data for more effective aid.

In this webinar, we considered at the implications for skills requirements in the sector, and how organisations can prepare their people for a future shaped by AI. We heard from experts from NetHope and Nesta as to the skills required by leadership to make effective decisions about use of AI in their organisations, and about the skills required at all levels of humanitarian organisations to effectively understand and embed AI tools. We also heard from learning design experts as to how they are using AI in the development of humanitarian training courses.

Our key take-aways:

Changing digital skills priorities

Humanitarians' digital skills needs are evolving fast. With potential to create efficiencies using AI across all areas of non-profit management (think programme design and delivery, fundraising, finance, HR, supply chain), it's no longer sufficient for digital skills to be held by a limited team of technology experts. Digital skills are required across organisations, and leaders in particular need skills to be able to make decisions regarding AI.

The benefits of co-design for building trust

Looking at an example where AI was used to predict non-food item (NFI) needs for flood-affected communities in Nepal, it was clear that a truly participatory approach to developing an AI tool can have huge benefits in terms of building communities' trust in systems designed to support them. In this case, the algorithm created was able to predict NFI needs with better accuracy, and was more trusted by the community than previous approaches. Building in time for a participatory approach, and establishing a shared understanding and language around the technology was key.

Use your existing data policies

Concerns around how to manage and protect data are a key barrier to adoption of new digital technologies including AI. We learnt that for most organisations, existing policies (eg GDPR-compliance) should amply cover AI use cases, and are therefore a good place to start. There is however a wider question of who owns the tech- are tech companies based largely in the Global North by their very nature extractive, perpetuating colonial power dynamics?

'Make sure the inputs don't skew the outputs'

The elimination of bias is a key consideration when designing a tool using AI. It's vital that the data used to train the AI is sufficiently representative. Further considerations when designing an AI tool using a participatory process are around access to technology – ownership of devices can be gendered and thereby skew both the information that feeds the algorithm, and who is able to access the services that have been designed.

Contact the organisations:

- Humanitarian Leadership Academy
- NetHope
- Nesta

Resources:

- Participatory AI for Humanitarian Innovation (Nesta)
- 2023 State of Nonprofit Digital Skills Training Needs (NetHope)

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