Can AI & chatbots play doctor?

Concerns of bias and discrimination need redressal

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THE WELL-BEING AND mental health of both employees and employers are critical. Significant economic disruptions, employment insecurity, and resource shortages resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic, intensified work, and increased work pressure. All of these contributed to the occurrence of mental illness among workers. Feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression all constituted psychological distress. Significantly, these may present themselves in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Employee mental health concerns have detrimental consequences for organisations. Mental health concerns are particularly evident in increased turnover intent, decreased productivity, and absenteeism; the associated costs are projected to reach $16 trillion by 2030. HR initiatives such as employee assistance programmes (EAP) and mental health training are inadequate to address these problems. Therefore, the HR function must adopt a proactive approach; there is a potential of technology to assist HR practices in mitigating staff's mental health concerns.

AI and chatbots are already in use to enable dynamic employee engagement, sentiment analysis, and proactive intervention by HR leaders to address concerns of disengaged employees. Hyper-personalised and individualised HRM is possible due to AI applications' interactional and communicative capabilities. Sentiment determination and thematic analysis are capabilities of AI-powered programs that operate via text mining and natural language processing.

However, whether these algorithms can evaluate employees' mental health and general well-being and surpass the current threshold of use for employee engagement is unknown. Firms like Infeedo and LeenaAI are examples of chatbot-enabled employee engagement, institutionalising a culture of engaging with chatbots to raise concerns about workplace practices.

In our study, we first examined the feasibility of technology in determining aspects of mental well-being through chatbots. We next examined the willingness of organisations to institutionalise this as a practice. We found that chatbots have the potential to probe and gauge mental health issues, which may often extend the boundaries of organisation-created stress.

While the technology can warn organisations and HR leaders about overall mental health and well-being issues, these insights present additional challenges. The potential employee risks that emerge with the insight generation are operationalising bias, discrimination, and psychological or social profiling. Determining who has access to the employee data is also challenging.

Even as organisations offer programmes that promote employee well-being, information about their whereabouts, activities and social affairs becomes accessible at all times. That raises questions about the obtrusive nature of technology-driven HR policies. Therefore, the use of data for the purpose of people analytics must be balanced with their privacy rights.

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