

How AI is affecting the travel industry

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

How did you make your last holiday or travel booking?

Why did you choose this method?

Do you think you will make your next booking in the same way?

2 Key words

Find key words in the article that match the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. a computer program designed to simulate conversation with human users, especially over the internet
_____ (para 1)
2. promise seriously and publicly _____ (para 6)
3. add to and improve something _____ (para 6)
4. a team that does a particular job _____ (para 7)
5. making people interested in something by talking about it in an enthusiastic way
_____ (para 11)
6. no longer used because of being replaced by something newer and more effective
_____ (para 12)
7. do something better than someone or something else _____ (para 12)
8. a health club, usually in a luxury hotel, that provides therapeutic treatments _____
(para 13)
9. the time when something stops existing _____ (para 14)
10. breaking a law, rule or agreement _____ (para 16)
11. people or an organization whose job is to be certain that companies, systems etc act fairly and follow rules
_____ (para 17)
12. damage and other things that are done to stop someone from achieving something or to prevent a plan or
process from being successful _____ (para 19)

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Automated holidays: how AI is affecting the travel industry

Travel companies are investing in artificial intelligence but that doesn't mean fewer jobs for humans

Senay Boztas

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- 1 First, you could book a flight online. Then, came online travel agents. And now, you might check in for your hotel via a mobile, a computer could set the price, while a chatbot answers your queries.
- 2 Some travel experts expect the first autonomous cargo flights to start within several years, while big-data analysis is on the rise at internet-based firms like Expedia, lastminute.com and Skyscanner.
- 3 “We have to reinvent the place of the human in the system,” says Fabrice Otaño, chief data officer at AccorHotels group.
- 4 “Artificial intelligence can replace some existing jobs and managers have to take care of what the next step for people is, that is relevant in the data world. We have to evolve our revenue managers into more data jobs, balancing old jobs with new-school jobs in business analytics.”
- 5 So far, at least, that has not meant a decline in jobs. According to the most recent EU statistics, although overall employment declined from 2008 to 2014, it rose in tourist accommodation and selected tourism industries. Now, tourism employs just over 12 million people within the EU.
- 6 Companies like IBM, whose Watson tool is helping the travel company Thomson trial a smart chatbot for its customers' holiday searches, pledge to “augment, not replace, human intelligence”.
- 7 This is also the view at Skyscanner. The airfare comparison site, acquired by Chinese firm Ctrip International for £1.4bn, may have a dedicated “Bots” squad but it doesn't believe computing power will replace human roles or travel reviews.
- 8 “We see AI as an evolutionary part of travel,” says a Skyscanner spokeswoman. “We've always believed that people would go from click-type-tap style searching to a conversational format. Interestingly, those using our bots treat them in a very 'human' way – ask for the bot's name, send an emoji or sticker of appreciation.”
- 9 More investment in AI is a business necessity for hotels, according to Tim Gunstone, managing director of EyeforTravel, who recently spoke on the issue at an industry conference. “The cost of search marketing paid by hotels to online travel agents for sales made has gone up,” he says. “This is what is driving hoteliers. The industry needs to cut costs and focus on loyalty.”
- 10 Gunstone believes AI can boost loyalty by helping hoteliers know more about their customers, in order to better meet their needs and win repeat business.
- 11 We will see “technological unemployment”, says Professor Ryan Abbott, professor of law and health sciences at the University of Surrey, but if a chatbot gives hotel recommendations based on reviews and your preferences, rather than plugging a relative's place, maybe that's for the best.
- 12 “People who have been rendered obsolete by technology have always gone on to find new and better jobs,” he adds. “When machines outperform people in every way, that's another problem – but that's a long way in the future.”
- 13 At the bottom of the travel market, computing is about automation and saving money but at the top end, AI is being used to personalize experiences – delivered by people. A waiter at a luxury hotel, for instance, could use information on you to predict what kind of drinks you like and recommend something from the menu. Or reception staff, with data on your spa use, might propose a particular service.
- 14 But not everyone is predicting the demise of travel agents. A spokesperson for ABTA, which represents UK travel agents and tour operators, says almost a fifth of Brits still booked a holiday in a travel agency in 2016 and that although artificial intelligence can help with targeted marketing, “it can be hard to beat the human touch”.
- 15 People quickly get frustrated if a chatbot isn't responding accurately, for a start. “Many roles in the travel industry remain unaffected by technological advances,” adds a spokesperson. “Cooks are needed to cook, beds need to be made and the personal experience of a destination expert is hard to beat.”
- 16 ABTA warns, too, that travel companies need to avoid breaching customers' privacy when they gather data on them: this is something that

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AccorHotels makes specific pledges to respect, beyond European legislation, which states that personal data can only be gathered legally under strict conditions and must be protected against misuse.

- 17 Gunstone also cautions that regulators could be catching up with computer-based intelligence. "US antitrust laws are on the lookout for AI-created price-fixing," he warns.
- 18 Meanwhile, automation won't work everywhere. Ian Yeoman, visiting professor at the European Tourism Futures Institute, says we won't see automated hotels until closer to the end of this century but, even then, it won't be worldwide.

- 19 "In many third-world destinations, the cost of labour is quite cheap so there's no incentive for owners and operators to invest," he says. "You would probably have sabotage and riots. These countries also don't have a strong technological infrastructure as back up – where you have failure, you could have catastrophic failure."

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3 Expressions and summarizing

- a. Find these expressions in the article and discuss what they mean.

1. on the rise
2. treat something in a human way
3. for the best
4. rendered obsolete
5. hard to beat the human touch
6. on the lookout for

- b. Use the expressions to summarize the article.

4 Quotes and discussion

- a. The quotes below are from the article. Find who said them.
- b. Discuss what the people meant when they said them.
- c. Discuss whether you agree with the sentiments in the quotes or not.
1. We have to reinvent the place of the human in the system.
 2. We see AI as an evolutionary part of travel.
 3. The industry needs to cut costs and focus on loyalty.
 4. People who have been rendered obsolete by technology have always gone on to find new and better jobs.
 5. The personal experience of a destination expert is hard to beat.

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5 Business English

Match the business expressions from the article with their meanings.

1. set the price
 2. big-data analysis
 3. acquired by
 4. search marketing
 5. boost loyalty
 6. meet customers' needs
 7. win repeat business
 8. price-fixing
- a. bought by
 - b. decide how much people have to pay for something
 - c. succeed in getting your customers to come back and use your services or buy your products again
 - d. when companies make an illegal agreement to charge the same price for a particular product or service, in order to keep the price high
 - e. the process of looking at large amounts of information and trying to understand or explain it
 - f. increase the number of instances a customer prefers and pays for one company's products over another company's
 - g. the process of gaining traffic and visibility from search engines
 - h. provide the service, products or information that customers want

6 Survey

a. Complete these survey questions with an appropriate Business English expression from task 5.

1. Should computers be able to _____ of holidays?
2. What can hotels do to improve how they _____?
3. Why is it important to make sure travel companies do not secretly agree on _____?

b. Write three further survey questions using some of the other expressions.

- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

c. Add a final question about chatbots and the human touch.

- 7.

d. Use your survey questions to interview other students.

7 Discussion

a. Discuss the results of your survey.

b. Can you identify any holiday-booking behaviour trends or attitudes within your group?

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KEY

2 Key words

1. chatbot
2. pledge
3. augment
4. squad
5. plugging
6. obsolete
7. outperform
8. spa
9. demise
10. breaching
11. regulators
12. sabotage

3 Expressions and summarizing

1. increasing in number or amount
2. deal with and interact with something as though it were a person
3. with an ultimately positive outcome
4. caused to be no longer needed because of being replaced by something newer and more effective
5. difficult to do something better than how a person would do it, due to the particular qualities of people (as compared to machines)
6. searching for

4 Quotes and discussion

1. Fabrice Otaño, chief data officer at AccorHotels group
2. Skyscanner spokeswoman
3. Tim Gunstone, managing director of EyeforTravel
4. Professor Ryan Abbott, professor of law and health sciences at the University of Surrey
5. ABTA spokesperson

5 Business English

1. b
2. e
3. a
4. g
5. f
6. h
7. c
8. d

6 Survey

1. set the price
2. meet customers' needs (or win repeat business or boost loyalty)
3. price-fixing