We Are Vodafone - Episode 13

Transcript

SUMMARY KEYWORDS
customer, ai, TOBi, technology, vodafone, experience, problem, call, data, jobs, understand, digital, robots, team, future, jenny, service, journeys, agent, tested

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Tim Samuels 00:05
This is We Are Vodafone, a podcast about technology and its power to change our world. From AI and the metaverse to flying cars and fruit-picking robots. In this series, we'll lift the lid on the cutting-edge innovations that are changing how we live and work both now and in the future.

In this episode of We Are Vodafone, we're getting up close and personal with Artificial Intelligence. It feels like only yesterday that ChatGPT first wowed the world and brought the concept of generative AI into the mainstream. Less than two years later, AI has arguably become the most significant advance in technology for decades. And the pace of its development is stunning. Photos and videos that are indistinguishable from real life, intelligent chatbots which talk and reason like people, or advanced scientific research. And these only scratch the surface. The possibilities of this technology seem endless.

Today we'll be talking about the rise of AI, how it's being used at Vodafone, its role in creating better customer experiences, and what the AI revolution means for us mere mortals. I'm Tim Samuels, bringing you this series about the power of technology to drive change around the world. I'm joined by Vodafone's, Ahmed El Sayed, UK IT and Digital Engineering Director and Beverley Bartlett, Head of Digital Care, to get under the skin of AI.

01:35
We're discussing artificial intelligence today and I wonder, if we're having this conversation in 10 to 15 years time, will this be, three robots talking?

Bev Bartlett 01:45

Ohh, straight into the jugular? No, I don't think so. I think, I think in the context, certainly of where we're looking at deployment of AI, I mean, there's an awful lot of applications, which are not robots walking around, you know, and serving our customers where we would today want to use people, those are not the scenarios that we're looking at. But, can we deploy it in a way that makes us as humans our life slightly easier, slightly better, or quite a lot better and a lot easier? Yeah, there's lots of ways to do it. But I'm not really buying, I have, I've seen some of these robots at various events, but I'm not really buying that they're going to be walking amongst us and recording podcasts. I don't know.

Tim Samuels 02:30

I think I think my job was probably gone. But the robot could do this. Ahmed, yours is probably a slightly harder to replace?

Ahmed El Sayed 02:37

I think we have a good decade of using AI as a co-pilot, where will help us grow to be more productive, to focus on things that matter more. But yes, on the long term, many things will be covered by robots, which means also it's a responsibility for all of us, especially the people that are active on that domain, to help humanity go through that transition much safer than today.

Tim Samuels 03:00

In lay terms. What's the difference between AI and Gen AI?

Ahmed El Sayed 03:04

AI basically, it's statistical models that you can run across big amounts of data. And then it can kind of help you to forecast, understand, categorize, future events that can happen. Gen AI, can create new things because it has access to a level of data that can combine new pieces together and come up with a new poem, a new ad, a new commercial out there. And I think that's the beauty of it, compared to any previous machine learning or deep learning models that are commonly used across different domains.

Tim Samuels 03:37

And this kind of curve of progression, where do you think that we are on the curve?

Ahmed El Sayed 03:42

It's a super good question. I mean, it's, it's hard to tell to be fair, right? I mean, definitely, the excitement has been huge now, in that the peak of it, or we're going into bigger things. I think that that's yet to be done. One probably big learning from what we have seen with this very high adoption, in that the fact that really, technology can be much, much faster than people's expectation. So definitely the technology will mature, some of them will fail, some of them will

be just the excitement at the beginning, and then people will stop using it. But I think it's really sort of a new era. I think this this is as big as when we say the internet era. And when people start to move to the internet, or the introduction of social media. I think that definitely is the next big thing that we're going through now. It's revolutionary by all that that means.

Bev Bartlett 04:30
One of the things we mustn't forget, as that's just been well explained is, it's applied to a set of data. And our need to make sure that the data is accurate and managed, organized in such a way that it gets the outcomes. That's almost an increasing, we need to put more focus into that, than perhaps we had even previously. So with a new technology that seems to do magic things, comes new tasks and new ways to consider business challenges, certainly. That doesn't get spoken about as much but there is some effort there to make this stuff do what you want it to do.

Tim Samuels 05:07
And in terms of effort Bev, how much of your headspace, your inbox, your to do list is taken up by thinking about AI and its applications?

Bev Bartlett 05:15
Mostly, all of it. I mean, the reality at the moment is because of the excitement, because of the progression of the technology and the speed at which we perceive we can bring value to our customers. It's right that our focus is, certainly in digital customer care, where and how do we apply it? And how do we organize the business in such a way that we're doing that efficiently, effectively, safely, responsibly, all of those things. So I would say the majority, outside of team management responsibilities, the majority of my work is, is in that space.

Tim Samuels 05:49
Ahmed, on a corporate level as a whole with your 1000s of engineers, who look up to your geekery, how much of the kind of company's bandwidth is now being dedicated to AI?

Ahmed El Sayed 06:01
It's definitely increasing day by day, I would say we're spending probably, I don't know maybe 15% to 20% of our time, in every single kind of product. Think of the thing where Gen AI, can add value. So starting from, like Bev's saying, whether improving our customer experience, to wherever we're building a new product, can Gen AI make that experience better? Improving our operations, can we deliver better service to our customers at the back end? Using Gen AI improving our even our developers productivity? I mean, again, being a passionate developer, can that free up time for our developers to actually build more value to our customers? So it will come with every single discussion going forward? So and even from today, and over time, this discussion will be bigger, we'll now move into the experimentation phase. So we're running multiple experiments across the board, they're going to get few of them right, then this

percentage will even be much, much higher. I mean, we're considering building full teams that have the right skill sets to actually develop end-to-end products using this technology. So that scale will keep on growing.

Tim Samuels 07:11
It's quite easy to sort of talk about AI and Gen AI in sort of nebulous terms. But let's look at the practicalities then, if you're a customer, at the moment, how AI is affecting your experience and how it's likely to change going forward. So at the moment, we have TOBi. Bev, tell us a little bit about what it stands for. Where did it begin? And what can it currently do?

Bev Bartlett 07:39
TOBi's been growing across our market footprint, the last six to seven years. And we have great success in a number of markets that in total, we have about 35 to 40 million conversations a month from customers interacting with TOBi across our across our footprint. And we have mixed reception to some of the experiences. So we have some really exceptional experiences, in some of the markets like Turkey, for example, they deploy certain games, so lots of our consumers choose to engage with TOBi to game each day, to get gifts. But, what it means is customers come to TOBi as a first point of contact. So they're very familiar with TOBi and obviously, in order to maintain that relationship with the customer, TOBi has to be credible and fulfill the experiences that our customers are engaging on.

But I think the topic here a little bit with Gen AI is chat bots, were a bit of a promise, about six or seven years ago, when TOBi was started, other domains, other businesses were also starting chat bots. And going back, that's where I was in banking. But there wasn't a lot of confidence around chat bots was really being a problem solver that was going to bring a lot of value to the business. So, we were dabbling in the Customer Service domain not really getting into Sales environments, or it was a little bit side of desk back in those days because I think the confidence wasn't there in the technology from a business perspective. And in some cases, that's been fair because we've all had an experience with a chatbot and quite often, you get the "I don't understand" or, "could you please repeat", or those various tactics for us to try to understand what it is you're saying, because if a consumer asks a question with any degree of length, it's quite hard in the current technologies to really understand. That's where Gen AI, in this world of, kind of service and chatbots, and digital experiences, that are more conversational, is just going to play a huge part, because that starting part of an experience, which is "understand what I'm asking from you", we can absolutely resolve, because the one thing generative does brilliantly is understand what people say, the way they're saying it the context that should be taken from that and then leading into the journeys and the experiences that some of which we already have built. But others that we'll also optimize for.

Tim Samuels 09:40

They're obviously, you know, clear limitations at the moment to TOBi not to besmirch him or her. But it's limited, you know, the short questions help, but it can be frustrating for customers. So what's being tested now, using Gen AI, which could transform that experience, that customer service experience.

Bev Bartlett 10:01
We've started looking at the highest volume journeys, I mean, we get a lot of billing inquiries, of course, and our customers may be asking any number of variations of a query relating to a certain amount, taken at any given day. So you can imagine that question can come in many different formats. And we've tested in in Italy, a completely end-to-end generative version of that journey, so allowing generative to understand what the customer is saying, to comprehend, then to make the decisions about which data points it goes to, to try to answer the question, and then respond back. And we saw incredible results from the first set of crowd testing and we're taking that to production across all of our markets in the next six to nine months. So we saw an uplift in and what we would call resolution so, or exhaustive, the customer didn't need to ask any more questions, because we were able to answer all of the questions that they were looking to resolve.

Tim Samuels 10:52
Can you give me an example of the sorts of more complex questions that the Italian version was able to answer?

Bev Bartlett 10:38
In terms of complexity, it's the amount of information that might exist in any individual's billing, and being able to return that to the customer to the specificity of what they're trying to find out. Often customers will ask us, you know, my bill was £10 higher than I was expecting? Well, there's a lot of background information to try to then determine why was it £10 more, and obviously a human agent, if you get directly through to an agent, they can look at that and quite quickly disseminate the information and respond and that's what we want to be able to do with TOBi. It's not to have to take you through a journey that says, here is an example of your bill, and then show it, and there's an example of your previous bill and show it, and expect the customer to work it out for themselves. We want TOBi to be able to recognize the context of the question, understand there was two bills, or it was more than the last one, go look for both of them, all of those background aggregation of data type challenges. And when I say we want to, that that is exactly what we've done in Italy, and what we will look to be doing across all of the markets.

And then there's just some really simple ways we can improve experiences for customers. And when this is what we did in Portugal, is scheduling an appointment to have a box fitted or TV service fitted. In a chat bot, that's a very linear experience. It's step by step, what day, what time, which takes a bit of time for the customer, it's not particularly enjoyable. We don't have

any challenges with that experience, but, we know it could feel better for the customer. We know we could make it more engaging, and much more human like, which is all of the language that you hear bandied around with Gen AI. And again, the Portugal team launched that journey in digital, saw an increase in our experience metric again.

I think that the less obvious ways, though, that this can help us is with the amount of data that we have through these dialogues that TOBi's having, we're able to mine that information to understand are there other problems we should be solving? Because ultimately, we don't want to have problems that our customers need to call us up for we'd rather be solving them upfront. So again, there's the application of generative AI and other forms of AI across that vast amount of script dialogue, which can tell us what we should be solving and for which populations of customers, that's the most important.

Tim Samuels 13:05
And it's interesting Ahmed to talk about what customers want and that kind of sense of being listened to, almost a kind of human like experience. And I believe in Germany, there have been tests around having a much more human presenting version of TOBi as well, almost like an avatar?

Ahmed El Sayed 13:23
Yes, so exactly. So the team there are also trying this one out, and how to get really this kind of human experience. And then our customers wants one they call, they want to get the convenience of actually that the other side is understanding what I'm saying, I'm not wasting my time trying to get them the right information. I personally struggle with few chatbots trying to get my question through and then you end up just asking the famous question of can you please transfer me to a human.

So again, that's usually the debate is where we test on. If you get the avatar experience, if you get behind it the right understanding and the right quality of conversation, then it becomes a totally different perspective. And so far we're discussing like when we're caring for some customer ask, but you can take this to the next step where you can start upselling solutions on top as well. So based on the conversation, actually, maybe this is the right device for you, would you like to consider upgrading for these kinds of products? Then the level of this conversational commerce pops in which is again can help our company grow their business with a totally new channel.

Tim Samuels 14:33
So Bev, if you were a German customer, and you went on the My Vodafone app, what would the experience be like?

Bev Bartlett 14:48

There's two versions, right? So it depends which version that you're on. But if you're talking about the augmented reality, TOBi. You have the opportunity to hover your phone over and visualize a floating TOBi, sitting on your desk and interacting with you and able to show you certain information in a more visual way in the app. And I think it's important that these are still valid tests, but we need to understand what value does it bring to the customer experience, in what particular journeys does this really bring value? Because there's a, I would say, a predominant set of journeys for which consumers quite like the privacy of being able to engage through messaging or in digital and not in a way that they would either have to be heard, so, and I think, you know, I see still everyone on their phones on tubes and trains. And I'm not imagining that they're going to be hovering a virtual TOBi, onto the to the chair next to them. But in the privacy of your own home, if you want to understand how to set up your TV box, and having a visual representation that can point and tell you how to go through the process, or in our stores, there's absolutely an opportunity for where that representation of a chatbot starts to starts to become really interesting.

Tim Samuels 15:50
So from a customer's point of view, there are some interesting things being tested around how you interact with TOBi, and what form TOBi takes, but how else is that service being improved by AI?

Ahmed El Sayed 16:02
So I mean, that there's there is a couple of other use cases as well, where we're experimenting with. So as you know, we still have quite a big call center. And many of our customers would love to talk to our agents, and get that thing sorted through actually this interaction. But sometimes it becomes a bit hard for our agents actually, to solve the customer problem on the same call, they have to reach out to other teams go through lots of different systems, and they may have even to call the customer back to get the problem sorted, which is not the best convenience experience you want to give to our customers. And that's why we're testing also Gen AI now to help us with a use case, what we call super-agent.

So basically, how can we ensure that all the data required for our agent to solve our customer problems are at the tip of their hands. So the moment a customer calls, you can get a summary of all the previous interactions that the customer had with us, it can grasp the needed data from the different systems and make it easily accessible to the agent. So basically, it gives you everything you need to solve the problem at the same time while the customer is with you. And hopefully, at the near future as well even when the customer calls, you're kind of getting to know with the high confidence, what's the reason of the call, and then you're well prepared to what kind of tone you should use in that call. How can you ensure that this will get you the maximum, the best experience from our customer point of view. So that's another very exciting use case that we think can really benefit our customers.

Tim Samuels 17:32

Sounds like the days of people generally hanging on the phone for hours and customer care or having chats going back and forwards, those days are numbered. And the agents, whether robots, human or hybrid are going to have a lot more information and be able to cut through all that and deal with, these are going to be very short conversations one day.

Ahmed El Sayed 17:53

Yeah, it would be more valuable conversations, let me put it that that way. So rather than just trying for the customer to wait on the IVR for long waiting for some information to come, it can be a really rich conversation with our agents about how to add value to the customer, how to ensure that they are getting even more services that can be beneficial to them.

So we envision a step by step that will become more of, really what we call a digital partner, that when you call the call center, actually they're providing you with all the possible digital support required to make your life much more convenient. So by the time you finish the call, you're kind of feel that actually, I can be more productive in in my day, thanks to the service that were offered to me by Vodafone. And that's a totally different viewpoint of waiting there for a problem to get sorted.

Bev Bartlett 18:42

Yeah absolutely. I think we recognize there are a number of experiences that our customers are calling us up for that, really, they shouldn't need to call us up for going back to my earlier point. And I think that we can serve a lot of those queries through digital much faster than if they were to call and speak, speak to a human agent. And when we've augmented what our agents can do with the super-agent. Again, whilst of course, we're building better experiences for customers, we're also building better experiences for our customer agents so that trying to get through X number of calls in any given hour, and know, that you know, 10 of them will be the same but they're going to have the same degree of frustration within them because the data is hard to reach. That happens and we don't want that. So I think the future is bright for sure in terms of how we can apply it in Customer Care.

Ahmed El Sayed 19:26

And Tim, I think so far we have been focusing on kind of the direct use cases for our customers. But actually when you think about it as well, we have we have our employees that are also very important customers for us and we are here to serve our end customer at the end. So there is lots of use cases that can help there.

I can start with something like our legal teams they have to go through multiple very long legal documents to ensure that we were having the right conditions there. With Gen AI this can save them lots of time summarizing many of these documents, getting them to really the points that they should spend their time on. Our Vodafone Business team are responsible basically to

respond to any requests for proposals from our enterprise customers. Today they have to write the whole response from scratch. But since we have very rich responses from previous RFPs that we were part of, using Gen AI, it can actually recommend a first draft. Again, like a copilot recommend for you the first draft of responses. And then you'll focus on enriching the data by what needs to be there. So again, that increase the quality of our responses to our customers.

And then the one that's very close to my heart that actually we're currently experimenting with 300 of our software developers, where part of the programming as well, it's quite repetitive. So it's not that every time you're writing a fully new piece of code, but there is parts of it that it's kind of repetitive one, one time over the other. And with the use of a technology called GitHub copilot, which is again, based on Gen AI technology. It can help writes part of this code. And we expect that this can increase our developers productivity by 20% plus. And just imagine, if you free up 20% plus of 2,000 – 3,000, software developers, this is awesome time that they can spend building even more customer features, and then deliver more value to our customers. And that's the beauty of the technology itself. It's making you efficient everywhere. And all this time that you save you invest it back for the sake of the customer.

Tim Samuels 21:35
And I think you sort of alluded to before as well, it that kind of co-piloting also applies to being able to predict problems with a network and on the engineering side, and how can that pre-empt, prevents problems?

Ahmed El Sayed 21:48
It's, it's the whole part of exactly how can we do what we call predictive maintenance. So we don't have to wait for a problem to happen and then sort it. But the technology can help us through the learnings to predict where a problem can happen, and also recommend the solutions. So the good thing is that whenever we face a problem today at the end, and it gets solved, our engineers actually do a great job of documenting what was the root cause? What was the problem, and what was the root cause?

But over the years, that becomes a super long version of documents stored somewhere that's very hard for someone to get to read it today. But the reality is that you can understand that this symptom happened before, so I can proactively try to answer and based on GenAi, summarizing what's the right solution, then it can also recommend the solution for a problem before it happens. And then you get your customer availability of your network, or all your IT services to the best possible shape, and then deliver the maximum value to the customer.

It can help you also predict where to roll out the network next, since second, based on the customer dynamics, understanding on the social media analytics, you can really know wherever the spotlights that your customer really cared about better than today. And then you have even smarter investments on your network assets.

Tim Samuels 23:06

I guess the other thing which people are concerned about with AI is the replacement of jobs. And as much as we do talk about co-piloting, inevitably, there are going to be jobs which are just better and more cheaply done by robots and software, how do you address people in the company who might be worried that their job will be made obsolete?

Ahmed El Sayed 23:29

It falls back again to our responsibility and how to be a responsible business in case of using such a technology. Yes, the technology will add at the beginning again as a copilot it will it will let people evolve in their jobs. But over time, it will replace some of the jobs, that's the reality you will have to face into it at some point in time. So it gets back to us, are we really preparing our people to be ready for that, can they evolve quicker or at the same pace, if possible, as the technology so that by time some jobs are obsolete and back to what Bev is saying new jobs will be created. And then our teams will be ready for that one. And also it goes beyond the company. So we shouldn't only focus on our own employees. But we should work very closely with the public sector to see how and the rest of the private sector as well, how to drive this agenda in the future.

I mean, we started find lots of jobs now around the AI safety itself. So how to define the policies around it, how to ensure that we're doing the right things, how to implement the technology required behind that. So as you go, new things will pop up. But it's our responsibility to ensure that we're preparing everyone basically for such a transition.

Tim Samuels 24:39

So some of the old jobs will go but there are going to be jobs created that we'd haven't imagined at the moment. So there'll be kind of strange jobs where you're sort of training AI or involved in the ethics or anything.

Ahmed El Sayed 24:50

The future of humanity is all about social interaction and innovation. So again, that probably the extreme version of it, but then what does that mean for the people again? How can we prepare for this in the future?

Bev Bartlett 25:02

I mean, I have three children one at uni, one about to go and the other one will follow in a couple of years. And I would say my middle child, a maths geek and he will go and do, you know maths or engineering. Questionable there'll be some elements of maths and engineering, will be done by AI. There's no there's no set path I think anymore that's super clear. Whereas, some of his friends are very interested in psychology degrees and yeah, that starts to look a little bit more interesting in the future landscape. But there's some unknowns out there for us all.

Tim Samuels 25:32

It will be interesting won't it, to see what happens in the future, but for the time being, it's fascinating. And we're at this kind of pivotal point, I think, as Ahmed was saying, we're on the curve where we don't know where we're going. But this is going to change all our lives. So sit back and let's see what happens

Bev Bartlett 25:48

Or take some control.

Ahmed El Sayed 25:50

Exactly. Yeah, exactly. I love that word Bev. Let's not wait and see rather, be at the heart of it and drive it to the to the best possible shape for humanity. And I think that should be what we should be aspiring for.

Tim Samuels 26:05

Okay, Bev Bartlett, Ahmed El Sayed, thank you very much indeed for joining me today.

26:11

Thanks again to Ahmed El Sayed and Beverley Bartlett for their insights into AI and where these innovations are heading.

Join me – unless I've been replaced by a robot – for the next episode of We are Vodafone for more insider insights on the next big thing in tech. Until next time!