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Headline: More, not fewer, regulations needed to spur AI developments: Microsoft exec

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SINGAPORE: There is a need to have more, not fewer, regulations that govern the development and use of artificial intelligence (AI) as this would help spur the maturing of the emerging tech, said Microsoft Research Asia managing director Hon Hsiao Wuen on Wednesday (Sep 26).

In an interview with Channel NewsAsia, Dr Hon said while tech companies usually call for fewer rules as they argue that these stifle innovation, Microsoft takes a contrarian stance.

“We think there needs to be open, fair, clear guidelines” around AI as this would encourage sustainable innovation, he explained.

The “move fast and break things” modus operandi of companies like Uber and Airbnb, having disrupted the transportation and home rental sectors respectively, may not be good for the wider society in the long run, he said.

“We want everyone to move fast (in the AI space) and not just some,” Dr Hon said.

He also pointed out that the US tech giant is actively engaged with governments around the world, particularly in Singapore, to share its point of view and expertise on the emerging technology.

The company’s worldwide national technology officer Andreas Ebert, for example, is on the Advisory Council on the Ethical Use of AI and Data, while two other executives are on the expert panel formed to provide international know-how to the Singapore Management University’s recently launched Centre for AI and Data Governance.

Even as AI grows in prominence and usefulness, governments around the world are grappling with the implications of the technology and how to create rules to govern it.

This was illustrated by Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy associate professor James Crabtree's opinion piece this February saying that even as China and the United States are investing billions in this emerging technology, AI is a cause for alarm given the threat automation poses to jobs and worries about people's privacy.

RE-SKILLING PMETS

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Dr Hon was in Singapore to oversee the signing of the collaboration with the National University of Singapore on Wednesday.

As part of the three-year Microsoft-AI Singapore (AISG) Joint Innovation Program, both parties introduced three initiatives under this: AI Immersion Program, AI for Real and AI for Research.

The AI Immersion Program specifically aims to equip professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs) with AI expertise. A spokesperson said 150 of these PMETs will be equipped, and these are those whose jobs or industries could potentially be disrupted by the technology.

They will pick up skills and certification via the Microsoft Professional Program curriculum, and put these to use when they are roped in to help implement 100 AI pilot projects as part of the AI for Real initiative, it said in a separate press release.

Dr Hon explained that such tie-ups with education providers like NUS is just the first step in terms of solving the industry skills gap right now.

In the longer term, Microsoft hopes to develop an AI curriculum that would include computational thinking and problem-solving skills – something it has already started with its Minecraft for education tool, he explained.

“How do we get people learning how to learn?” Dr Hon explained, saying lifelong learning will be a key mindset shift that workers today will have to accept and embrace.

This latest collaboration with NUS is an extension of a wider initiative Microsoft is participating in here. During AISG’s one-year anniversary event, it was revealed that the software stalwart is one of the content partners for AI for Industry – an initiative targeting about 2,000 engineers, software developers, as well as managers and executives who are technically inclined and are keen to learn or deepen their Python programming skills to build applications.

“AI has great potential to augment the workforce, particularly in areas where there is a skills deficit. The higher learning institutions will be called upon to prepare the workforce with skills to be successful in new AI-related roles that are still yet to be invented,” Dr Hon said.

“The collaboration is a step in equipping more individuals with the right skill sets so that they are able to participate meaningfully in the digital economy.”

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