

Episode 05: The Rise of Virtual Personal Assistants in the Workplace with Sayantan Saha

This is the HCL Podcast Network and you are listening to the HCL Digital Workplace Services podcast. The place where industry experts help us identify, understand and prepare for future technology trends.

TJ: Hi, I am TJ and in this episode we are going to talk about the evolution of enterprise chatbots into virtual personal assistants and how we can all, one day, hope to have several personal assistants of our own. VIRTUAL personal assistants, of course.

To help us understand and decipher the world of possibilities around this very interesting topic, our guest is Sayantan Saha. A product manager for the Digital Workplace Services at HCL Technologies, specializing in AI powered virtual service desk agents.

Sayantan has spent more than 5 years working very closely with some of the best chatbots available as enterprise solutions and has witnessed firsthand the advancements around Artificial Intelligence, Natural Language Processing, Machine learning and other technologies that are helping chatbots evolve into much more than just virtual helpdesk agents.

TJ: Welcome, Sayantan.

Sayantan: Hi, [TJ].

TJ: Thank you, for joining us today. We really appreciate you taking out time to talk to us.

Sayantan: Thank you very much for having me.

TJ: So, Sayantan, let us start with your views on the underlying trend. Do you feel organizations have finally recognized the importance of Artificial Intelligence and for the early movers, have they started seeing results from AI powered automations?

Sayantan: Sure!

Artificial Intelligence (AI) based automation is constantly happening across the board in a wide range of industries ranging from Healthcare to Oil & Gas and it is expected to bring substantial benefits to enterprises and the global economy, but it won't happen in a day. For AI to reach its potential and bring about real and discernable value, its imperative enterprises start with the low hanging fruits first and build from there.

TJ: Interesting.

So, are today's bots capable of handling tasks that few years ago seemed too complex for a Artificial Intelligence?

Sayantan: Developments in robotics, AI, and machine learning have put us on the cusp of a new automation age. Bots can not only perform a range of routine physical work activities better and more efficiently than humans, but they are also increasingly capable of accomplishing activities that include cognitive capabilities once considered too difficult to automate successfully, such as mimicking human language, sensing emotion and following orders to accomplish both simple and relatively complex tasks. These new capabilities and advancements in the cognitive technologies have led to the development and acceptance of several chatbots in the market among enterprises from nearly all verticals.

TJ: For an office worker, the chatbots are generally the first exposure to Artificial Intelligence. Are these interactions helping employees increase their productivity?

Sayantana: A lot of organizations have already started this journey and have implemented chatbots in their environments over the last couple of years as most of the CIOs wanted their organizations to gain the first mover advantage and not miss the bus. However, in a high percentage of these organizations the experience of these chatbots have not been as per expectation. I have been discussing this with a number of CIOs on their experience of these chatbots and the majority of them have not been able to drive enough value both from a cost perspective for the IT department and also from an experience standpoint for their end users.

One of the major reasons for this is the fact that most of them have tried to boil the ocean instead of starting small. The initial expectation from this have been sky high and a lot of enterprises have tried to incorporate several use cases into their bots and that has resulted in issues pertaining to training, natural language understanding and integrations.

TJ: You have implemented these kinds of solutions for numerous enterprises with some ranging more than 100,000 users. How do you recommend overcoming the challenges that you mentioned?

Sayantana: One of the ways to mitigate these challenges to set the expectations right from the beginning itself. The best way is to pick up a selected number of use cases and go from there. If we consider an example of implementing a chatbot in a Service Desk scenario, it should be clear that the chatbot is not here to replace the subject matter expert (SME). It should be aimed to tackle the basic level 1 issues which are generally tactical, repetitive and has a standard operating procedure to resolve. One good example is to start with a standard “**Password Reset**” use case. Although this might seem too simplistic at the first glance, around 20% to 25% of the calls that come at the desk pertains to this specific use case and if enterprises can move this percentage from humans to bots there is a chance of significant cost reductions.

TJ: If done properly, do chatbots actually have the potential of helping users do more than just resolve IT issues?

Sayantana: The final aim of a chatbot should be to evolve into a personal virtual assistant and drive better end user experience and that's only possible if a chatbot can help end users with their daily tasks ranging from applying for a leave to booking a ticket. To accomplish this the bot should be able to integrate with multiple enterprise systems and that can be done using Application Programming Interface (APIs). HCL's own bot Lucy is quite advanced in this journey and is well on its way to be a full-fledged Enterprise Virtual Personal Assistant which end users can use to perform multiple tasks much more efficiently and accurately.

For an enterprise virtual assistant to be successful, the final catch is the adoption, however good might be the product, if organizations can't get people to use it, they won't be able to drive noticeable value.

TJ: We hear many stories where customers spend a lot of money in introducing this technology, which is meant to help their employees, but it rarely gets used. What are the steps that an enterprise can take to increase the adoption?

Sayantana: According to my experiences,

1. Firstly, deliver what you promise. The chatbot must be able to deliver what is guaranteed. If the chatbot is promised to be AI-based, it needs to utilize underlying Artificial intelligence, for instance permitting a free-streaming discussion. Declaring that the chatbot based on certain coded dialog flows doesn't make it deficient however actually, shows the genuineness and straightforwardness regarding the organization's methodology. The chatbot must deliver what is promised.
2. Selection of proper pilot groups is essential for testing before full scale deployment.
3. Finally, there must be a willingness from the top to invest in things like gamification to make this successful.

TJ: Thank you very much, Sayantan, for sharing your views and enlightening our listeners. And when we come back after a short break, we will ask Sayantan for his takes on some trending consumer tech. Stay tuned.

TJ: Welcome back. In this segment, we ask our guests to summarize their opinion about some exciting consumer tech. So, are you ready Sayantan?

Sayantan: Sure.

TJ: IoT based asset monitoring

Sayantan: This will be mainstream if it isn't already. The newer devices come laden with the sensors that allow remote monitoring. Capturing dark legacy devices and IoTizing them is a huge opportunity.

TJ: 5G

Sayantan: I have seen some videos showing mobile devices downloading information at insane speeds. There are limitations like the proximity from the 5G tower and obstructions but these will get ironed out soon.

TJ: Translating Earbuds

Sayantan: I don't know. The use cases are numerous, but it is hard to get the technology just right. The lag, the accuracy of translation and many other things need a lot of work.

TJ: Folding Phones

Sayantan: Samsung has come out with a competitor to the Motorola Razr flip phone. It seems to be much better. It will take 2-3 years of development to get the design just right. Plus, they are very expensive right now.

TJ: Android or iOS?

Sayantan: I prefer android. The customizability and the ticket price are factors that push me that direction.

TJ: It was an absolute pleasure having you on this episode. There was so much we did not know about chatbots and it is always nice to have an expert to clear up the air. Thank you again for your time and we hope for an opportunity to TJ you again.

Sayantan: Thank you. The pleasure is all mine. It was wonderful talking to you.

TJ: I thank our listeners for joining in. We want to hear from you. We need your feedback and suggestions for future topics. The contact information is available in the description. Comment, share, recommend and subscribe. See you all in the next one.