Trust, ethics crucial to companies in advancing AI

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TRUST is the most important value in the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), said companies – as the Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore (IMDA) on Tuesday unveiled a series of AI initiatives to grow the country's digital economy, including an advisory council on the ethical use of AI and data.

Richard Socher, chief scientist at Salesforce, told *The Business Times*: "Trust is our No 1 value. As more companies and people start to embrace and use AI, we believe the question of regulation will be answered through a dialogue between citizens, the private sector and governments."

Abraham Thomas, managing director of IBM Singapore, said while AI remains a young technology that is still learning to understand tasks and achieve optimum decision-making, it is constantly improving.

"Businesses will absolutely need to ensure they balance the benefits of lower costs and increased efficiencies and innovation, with the ethical responsibilities around liability and re-skilling of employees to manage the impact of job disruptions."

Minister for Communications and Information S Iswaran, who announced the advisory council at tech conference Innovfest unbound on Tuesday, said innovative technologies bring economic and societal benefits as well as attendant ethical issues. "Good regulation is needed to enable innovation by building public trust."

The development and adoption of AI solutions is also a "journey that private enterprises and consumers must walk together with the government", he said.

Former attorney-general and Senior Counsel V K Rajah has been appointed as the inaugural chairman of the council, which will also include representatives from technology companies, users of AI, and those who can "provide consumers' and societal perspectives", said Mr Iswaran.

The council will assist the government to develop ethics standards and reference governance frameworks, as well as issue advisory guidelines, practical guidance and codes of practice for voluntary adoption by businesses.

To support the work of the council, Singapore will set up a five-year research programme on the governance of AI and data use. Singapore Management University will helm the programme, for which it has been awarded a research grant of S$4.5 million from National Research Foundation and IMDA.

Mr Iswaran noted that the Personal Data Protection Act is being reviewed to see how the framework can be enhanced for enterprises to collect and use personal data.

"There must be a balance by ensuring that robust accountability measures are put in place to safeguard the interests of individuals where collection, use and disclosure of personal data are allowed," he said.

He also declared Singapore's commitment to host global conferences such as Innovfest unbound. The conference, jointly organised by Unbound and NUS Enterprise (the entrepreneurial arm of the National University of Singapore), is set to see more than 12,000 participants from more than 100 countries, with more than 350 innovation and startup exhibits.

On the Singapore government's efforts to govern the use of AI and data, Mr Thomas said: "A top-down or enforced ethics approach will be successful only to an extent. Organisations will need to look within and begin framing their own ethics policies.

"We believe the purpose of AI is to augment – not replace – human intelligence. We support transparency and data governance policies that will ensure people understand how an AI system came to a given conclusion or recommendation. And we commit to helping people become equipped with the skills to partner successfully with the technology."