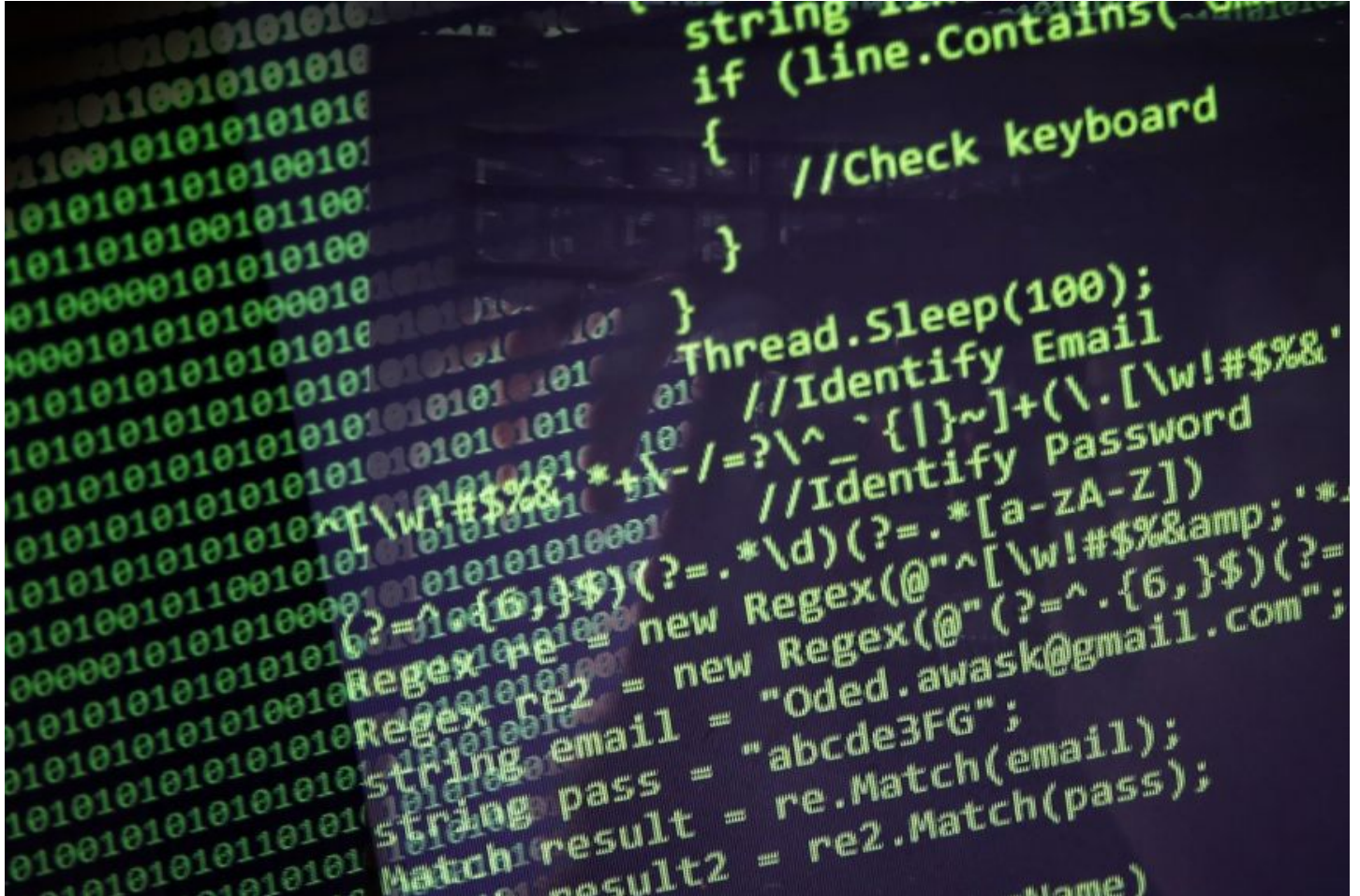


1 in 2 companies in Singapore has sped up AI roll-out in the wake of Covid-19: Study



Popular AI tools include virtual assistants or chatbots and data security threat detectors. PHOTO: ST FILE



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SINGAPORE - Almost half of IT professionals in Singapore said that their companies had quickened the roll-out of artificial intelligence (AI) tools following the Covid-19 pandemic, a recent survey has found.

Popular AI tools include virtual assistants or chatbots and data security threat detectors, as the pandemic forced more work to go remote and spurred more cyber crooks to go on their hunt.

The Global AI Adoption Index 2021, commissioned by technology giant IBM, surveyed about 500 technology decision-makers in small to large firms in Singapore in March. This is the second annual study.

When asked to describe their company's digital transformation after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, 43 per cent of the respondents indicated their companies had accelerated the roll-out of AI.

This is consistent with the global responses from 5,500 IT decision-makers in 15 nations - including the United States, the United Kingdom, China, France, Germany and India - which also saw 43 per cent saying their companies had accelerated the AI roll-out.

"Every organisation is thinking about resiliency, collaboration, remote work and productivity as the pandemic forced work to go remote," said Mr Martin Chee, general manager of IBM for Asean and Singapore.

AI seeks to simulate human abilities such as problem-solving, learning, planning and predicting. As the technology processes a vast amount of information to predict outcomes, and can do so faster and more accurately than humans, its use is increasingly being explored.

"Specifically, companies are asking these questions: How do I better improve the experience of my customers? How do I make my employees more productive? How do I reduce operational complexity and cost?" said Mr Chee.

About one-third of all companies surveyed here have implemented AI; 45 per cent have not but are looking to do so, the study shows.

AI front runners include firms in sectors such as banking, e-commerce and logistics. Some of the AI implementations rolled out after the pandemic hit include those relating to:

Employee productivity

- Conversational chatbots answer employee queries on medical claims or annual leave matters.

- Resume robots sort, screen and rank job applications, at least during the first round of the hiring process.
- Natural language processing capabilities in Web collaboration tools allow for automated note taking and summarisation.

Data security

- AI helps tech support staff spot problems before they happen, such as when employees have not applied security patches to their computers.
- AI allows for the quick detection and blocking of unknown malware and threats based on Web traffic patterns.

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Supply chain and logistics

- Recommendation engines advise on supply options that deliver the best margins.
- Optimised route planning based on distance and traffic conditions helps to minimise delivery costs.

Data processing

- Processing capabilities for unstructured data such as drawings, handwritten notes and images allow, say, financial planning agents to recommend the best insurance policies or savings plans to clients.
- These capabilities also allow the deluge of non-standardised data elements in paper-based trade documents issued by companies to be processed speedily.
- A not-for-profit business group called Emergent Alliance, led by dozens of global firms, including IBM, Rolls-Royce and IBM, is using AI and data models to help Europe analyse the spread of Covid-19 and mount responses to curb it.

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A majority of Singapore IT professionals said that AI tools are now more advanced and better fit the needs of businesses compared with two to three years ago, according to the survey conducted by the US-based market research firm Morning Consult.

The study also found that a lack of AI skills and increasing data complexity were the top challenges faced.

These challenges, exacerbated by financial constraints worsened by the pandemic, led to one in five IT professionals in Singapore saying that the AI projects in their company have either been halted or slowed down.

"Where businesses are really struggling with today is managing data," said Mr Chee. "Every company has different data sets in silos in various, disconnected systems, making it really hard to integrate and use the data."

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