
Intelligent Machines

IBM's Watson Is Everywhere—But What Is it?

Ignore the hype and marketing—Watson may be a potent way for businesses to tap into advances in machine learning and AI.

by Will Knight October 27, 2016

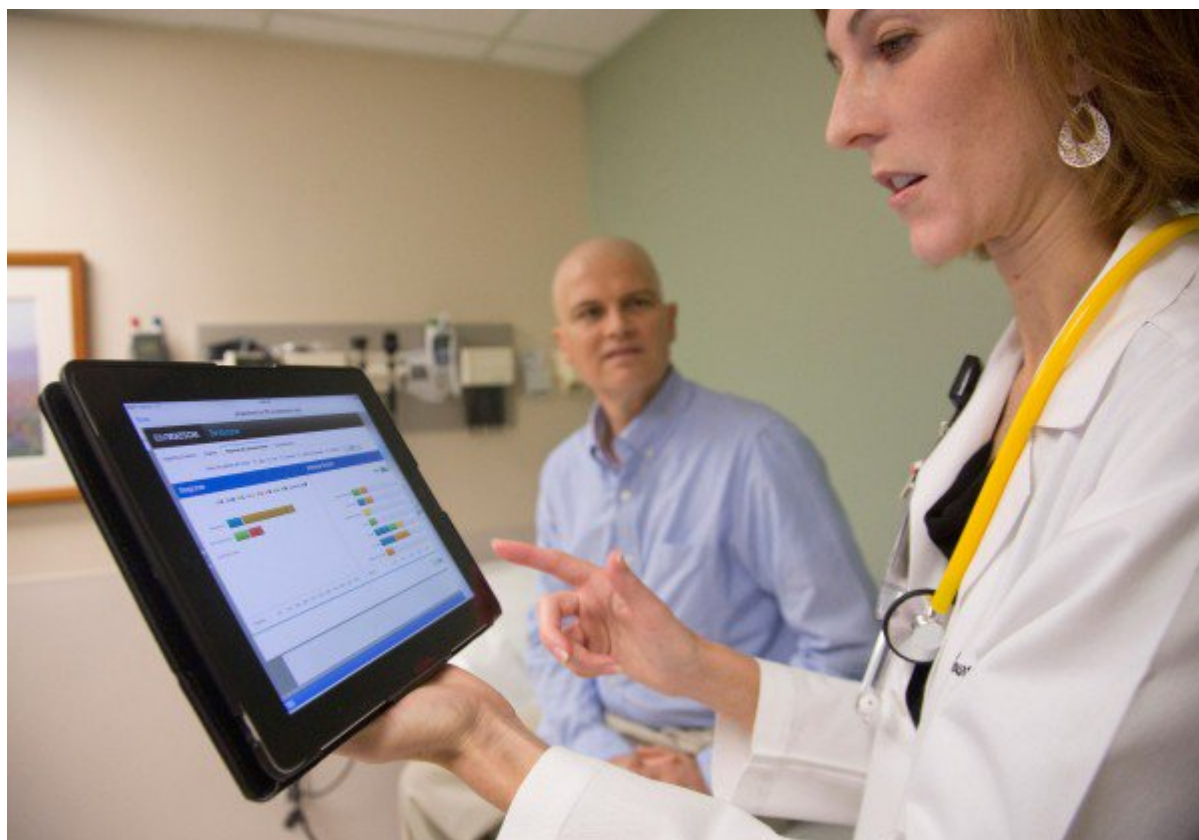


Since winning *Jeopardy!* in 2011, IBM's Watson has apparently found employment as a **dress designer**, a **chef**, and a **movie director**. The latest news is that IBM is doing deals with **GM**, **Slack**, and **Pearson** that will see Watson helping, respectively, with roadside assistance, business messaging, and education.

Even if you follow developments in AI closely, though, it can be hard to keep track of all the things Watson can do. It raises a question: what is it, exactly?

TV ads that portray Watson as some sort of super-smart Siri don't exactly help. In truth, very little of the **technology used to win *Jeopardy!*** remains in Watson. The name has simply been coöpted for a wide range of AI techniques and related applications—everything from natural language processing to medicine, voice recognition, sentiment analysis, business analytics, and more. In most cases, the roles Watson is supposedly taking on involve applying some version of machine learning in a novel area. For example, IBM has bought up medical image

databases and is using deep learning to try to help doctors spot diseases more rapidly.



Beyond the marketing hype, Watson is an interesting and potentially important AI effort. That's because, for all the excitement over the ways in which companies like Google and Facebook are harnessing AI, no one has yet worked out how AI is going to fit into many workplaces. IBM is trying to make it easier for companies to apply these techniques, and to tap into the expertise required to do so.

A recent *New York Times* article gives some sense of how big an undertaking this is at IBM, and where it is starting to pay off. The piece talks about how IBM is trying to combine the AI capabilities that fall under the Watson brand with the work of conventional consultants. That might be an important twist on consulting and business analytics—or at least that's what IBM hopes. As we've reported previously, betting on Watson **isn't likely to make up for IBM's larger problems**, but

given the rapid rise of AI in recent years, the timing couldn't be much better.

(Read more: *Wired*, *Bon Appetit*, *Adweek*, i-Spot TV, Tech Crunch, *Fortune*, *Bloomberg*, *AI Magazine*, *New York Times*, “Don't Blame Watson for IBM's Slide”)

Keep up with the latest in machine learning at EmTech MIT.
Discover where tech, business, and culture converge.

September 11-14, 2018
MIT Media Lab
Register now

Related Video

More videos



Intelligent Machines

**Next-Generation Robots
Need Your Help** 27:36



Intelligent Machines

AI's Economic Impact
35:20



Intelligent Machines

**Autonomous Vehicles and
Urban Transportation**
28:38

More from Intelligent Machines

Artificial intelligence and robots are transforming how we work and live.

01

Future elections may be swayed by intelligent, weaponized chatbots

The AI advances that brought you Alexa are teaching propaganda how to talk.

by Lisa-Maria Neudert

02

How to tell if you're arguing with a bot

MIT Technology Review helps you figure out who is on the other side of your debate.

by Sarah Cooper

03

The four ways that ex-internet idealists explain where it all went wrong

21st-century digital evangelists had a lot in common with early Christians and Russian revolutionaries.

by Tim Hwang

More from Intelligent Machines

Want more award-winning journalism? Subscribe to
Insider Plus.

Insider Plus

See details+

[See international prices](#)