



Lessons in AI

**Benedetto Conversano, Strategic Business Technology Advisor
(Former CIO, Diageo/Avon/Jeronimo Martins)**

As part of KPMG's Lessons in AI webinar series, Linda Ellett, Partner and Head of Consumer, Leisure and Retail at KPMG UK, sat down with Benedetto Conversano, former CIO at Diageo/Avon/Jeronimo Martins, to discuss how AI is reshaping consumer industries and what is required to scale AI and create value. Conversano shared insights on governance, effectiveness, agentic technology, and the cultural mindset required to realise AI's full value.

Governance: Aligning experimentation with strategy

Conversano stressed the importance of coordination, clarity, and alignment in AI efforts. "In this stage of learning about the technology, having a governance body that is dedicated to AI, on why we should use it and where we should use it is very helpful."

"Establishing an AI board comprising multifunctional teams of senior decision makers and frontline experimenters can help ensure clarity on direction, harmonisation between business strategy and technology enablement, and avoid fragmented efforts."

Importantly, Conversano dislikes the notion of a standalone "AI strategy." Instead, the focus was on competitiveness: "The question to ask is not what is our AI strategy? but how are we going to be more competitive by leveraging technology?"

"I am a big believer in governed innovation; we cannot have 1000 things going around and no control"

Value beyond efficiency: effectiveness is the true prize

Conversano cautioned against a narrow focus on return on investment and efficiency. "Too much linking of AI to efficiency creates a fear of losing jobs, and that fear creates a state of mind that is not productive," he said.

For him, AI's real value lies not in efficiency but in effectiveness, improving decision quality, accelerating innovation, and solving problems previously beyond reach.

"We have created a technology that thinks differently and can tackle difficult problems in new ways."

Agentic AI: democratising innovation

Conversano was an early advocate for agentic AI, for example overseeing implementation of an agent that allowed employees outside IT to build their own AI tools. "We saw rapid growth in new and exciting applications when we democratised agentic technology."

Agentic AI, he argued, will also address the persistent challenge of data. By improving extract, transform and load (ETL) processes, agentic AI can pull data from multiple sources, restructure it, and ensure higher data quality. Conversano believes this will transform business intelligence: "Instead of dashboards, we'll simply ask questions, 'please compare this month's sales with the same month in 2024 and 2023' and the system will provide the answer."

Process mining and the future of ERP

Conversano is a strong believer in the potential of AI to reimagine how businesses run. He highlighted process mining, using AI to create an "X-ray" of how work is performed, as a particularly powerful tool. With AI embedded, process mining not only reveals inefficiencies but also suggests improvements.

Looking further ahead, Conversano foresees agents eventually replacing large-scale ERP systems. "In future years we may even see ERP systems replaced by agents."

Educating leaders: the board's AI journey

Perhaps the most fundamental lesson, according to Conversano, is leadership education. He attended an intensive week-long AI course at INSEAD and returned convinced of AI's transformative potential. "I insisted that my team went on the same course, and they came back equally as excited," he said.

For boards and executives, the imperative is clear: AI is not a passing trend but a journey that must start now.



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