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Artificial Intelligence Is Solving African Healthcare Challenges

Artificial intelligence (AI) could revolutionise healthcare supply chains in Africa, according to supply chain specialist Deborah Dull, representing the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Speaking at the recent SAPICS Conference in Cape Town, Dull revealed how AI in the form of IBM Watson is being used to aid decision making in public health supply chains in developing countries and improve patients' access to life-saving medicines. She contends that the big challenges in these markets are using data to make better decisions and influencing skills.

"Today's AI technology offers the solution, allowing us to leverage cognitive capabilities to create a transparent, intelligent and predictive supply chain. We asked ourselves what could be achieved if we could get IBM Watson to place chatbots on the platforms available to health workers in African supply chains, so that people can improve their learning." An AI powered chatbot can deliver personalised learning on mobile devices to enhance the supply chain skills of the health workers that staff most African healthcare supply chains.

"What if, through the AI, health workers could know where specific products are in the country? If there is a stock out at their facility, they could ask Watson where stock is available. It almost always comes down to where the shipment is, despite all the advances in supply chain," Dull stressed.

She said that AI would enable patients, too, to know when and where to go to get their ARVs or TB medication.

“Areas where people are experiencing problems would be highlighted. Data collected would be used to train and maintain the Watson cognitive engine so that it continually generates the best responses to users’ questions.”

In Kenya, AI’s potential to transform healthcare supply chains has become a reality in a pilot project with the Kenya Medical Supplies Agency (KEMSA), Dull revealed. Watson is being rolled out to 7 000 facilities countrywide. Users can interact with the AI through various platforms, including SMS, computer and voice over mobile data.

Dull said that, according to IBM’s global chief supply chain officer, a study of 400 supply chain leaders revealed that the greatest hurdle in achieving supply chain objectives is a lack of visibility and transparency. AI can provide this, by accessing more information than is humanly possible, she said. *“It can minimise expiries; will enable the implementation of best practices and standards in supply chain management, and the achievement of supply chain objectives.”*

The Kenya Medical Supplies Agency’s vision in its IBM Watson roll out is to *“have an AI trusted advisor to share insights on the causes of stock-outs, preventative measures and the identification of relevant resources to improve the availability of product by 50%”*.

Hosted by SAPICS, The Professional Body for Supply Chain Management, the annual SAPICS Conference is Africa’s leading event for supply chain professionals. This year’s 40th annual conference in Cape Town was a milestone event that saw more than 800 delegates converge to share knowledge and network.

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