

COURSE5 INTELLIGENCE HELPS CORPORATES NAVIGATE THE POST-PANDEMIC DIGITAL WORLD WITH AI AND ANALYTICS



Ashwin Mittal, CEO

The year gone by has been unprecedented in many ways for enterprises due to the pandemic and its myriad fallouts. It has changed priorities and perspectives and highlighted the role of digital technology in business continuity. Consequently, the pace of digital transformations has accelerated, across industries.

Course5 Intelligence, a frontrunner in analytics, insights and Artificial Intelligence (AI), has been enabling its clients to derive significant and long-term value through digital transformations. The company's CEO, Ashwin Mittal, shares his experiences and insights on the transformation journeys they have enabled and offers his views on the future of AI and analytics, in a virtual tête-à-tête on technology in the time of Coronavirus.

Excerpts...

Tell us about some of your pandemic experiences with clients – the issues they faced and how Course5 Intelligence was able to provide pertinent solutions.

We work with some of the leading Fortune 500 corporates across the world.

A prominent trend that emerged across our client base was digital transformation. A lot of enterprises began subscribing to the motto, 'let's not waste a good crisis' and began looking for ways to do things differently.

While many companies already had ongoing digital transformation programs prior to the pandemic, some of them were scheduled to be executed over 3-to-5-year horizons. But necessity being the mother of invention, they turned these around in just 2-3 months during the pandemic. Course5 Intelligence came in on a number of these transformations and helped companies leverage analytics and AI during their transformation journeys.

At a broader level, how are corporates viewing and leveraging AI and analytics in the wake of the pandemic?

Interestingly, with social distancing mandates and remote working, business models also went through a transformation. Everything from marketing and customer acquisition to engagement, servicing and other aspects of commerce had to move to digital channels. Some corporates were ahead of the curve but others had not yet got their systems in place and had to figure out how to navigate in a digital world.

The interesting thing about the digital world, as opposed to the physical world, is that everything is recorded. Every engagement, every click, every interaction can be recorded. At the same time, experiences can be personalised in real time; this is not possible in the physical world. All this opens up huge opportunities for the application of data analytics and AI. By analysing this data, experiences can be personalised more effectively. It can be leveraged for customised marketing campaigns, optimising supply chains, dynamic pricing, proactive service and support, etc.

Another interesting area of application has been around supply chain. In the early period of the pandemic, there was a huge supply side crisis. Global manufacturing and supply chains were disrupted. Analytics and AI played a significant role in optimising global supply chains and reconfiguring them, in some cases. These technologies helped to deliver visibility across the supply chain and optimise the movement of goods to customers, at the right time, at an optimised cost.

What was the biggest challenge for you while helping your clients apply AI and analytics?

While analytics uses past data to predict the future, the Covid crisis completely altered customer behaviour.

As a result, past data, in a lot of cases, was not relevant and had to be married with the new trends in consumer behaviour. So we had to leverage applications of AI to build new and real-time models with evolving scenarios to enable our customers to optimize strategies across – Sales, Marketing, Customer, Digital and Supply Chain.

Being a technology solutions provider, was the transition to remote working, client and employee engagement and other aspects of business relatively seamless?

We have been in 100% work-from-home mode since March 2020 and we transitioned very seamlessly. Work was not affected and productivity remained the same or even improved. We are fortunate to have digitally transformed ourselves prior to the pandemic. There were various systems and platforms for ERM, management of HR, salesforce and finance and online collaboration & video platforms. We had adopted all of this ahead of the curve. That really helped us be effective.

The challenge we faced was more an emotional one for employees. While enabling employees to work from home and effectiveness were never issues, some of our people went through a lot of anxiety around being at home, wondering about the health situation and the impact of the pandemic on their families, etc. So, we rolled out an employee assistance program to provide counselling to those who were facing such issues. We provided online fitness training and nutritional counselling sessions. We also used this time to ramp up skill development and training. We ran a 60-day challenge, where every employee was challenged to learn a completely new skill in 60 days, and I led the way by learning how to program in a new language. We also held digital talent shows and ensured regular communications through town halls and virtual coffee sessions to keep updating employees on what was happening at the firm.

Have you made any strategic changes in the Covid environment?

The pandemic has unearthed some fresh learnings. We have seen that it is truly possible to work from anywhere. We also have access to talent from cities and towns where we don't have offices. Although our people are working from far-flung locations, there is no compromise on efficiency and data security, which is possible thanks to technology. All this has made us review our physical work-place models.

Where clients are concerned, it was a challenge initially but they have adapted very quickly and become very comfortable with meeting us virtually. I would fly halfway around the world in pre-Covid times and coordinate schedules with busy senior executives in 10 different cities. Now, we can do those meetings virtually. When the pandemic is behind us, we will resume some travel, of course, since nothing beats personal connect in relationship building.

Another issue we faced was around new customers. So, we adopted a different approach and had a digital conference, which was attended by around 600 people including clients and

prospective clients. It was around the whole theme of emerging digital business models and had a great panel of speakers comprising global thought leaders. We need new engagement techniques like this to connect with customers and prospective customers.

Are there threats of knowledge workers getting replaced by AI? If so, what can they do to protect and develop their careers in this scenario?

AI is very effective in automating tasks; it mostly does not automate an entire job profile. Doing any individual job comprises numerous different tasks; some of these will get automated and the individual will be able to spend more time on the tasks that humans are more effective at, including complex, unstructured problem-solving, creativity, etc.

In the new world, we'll all have to spend more time on upskilling and training, at regular intervals. Companies and individuals will have to set aside say 15-20% of their time for just learning, unlearning and relearning. We have to be nimble and embrace change.

In the near term, do you see the role of technology providers, like yourself, changing? Where would you like to see it headed?

There has been a change in client expectations. In the past, clients used to consider resourcing from tech companies; now their asks are outcome-based. They don't care what resources are used and where they are based as long as outcomes are achieved. We invested in our AI labs in Bangalore and Toronto 4 years ago – the innovations coming out of this lab are now helping us deliver outcome-

based solutions to clients. Over the last 20 years, we have had a lot of adoption of technology in the business world that was mostly around systems and process efficiency. Now process efficiency is table stakes. Technology is moving to the next stage where analytics and AI impact the top line and bottom line. In some cases, AI and analytics disrupts business models of companies and also entire industries. In such cases, technology is moving from being an enabler to being a driving function at the core of strategy.

In the new normal, what technology evolution do you envisage to facilitate various industries that Course5 Intelligence caters to? What is the future of AI adoption post-Covid?

AI adoption came of age around 2016 and technology-savvy corporates were the early adopters. Any new technology faces what we typically call a chasm between the early adopters and the majority. It's always a challenge for technology to cross that chasm and go from just the few who are more tech-savvy to the majority on the other side of the divide. But due to the pandemic, AI technology has flown over the chasm and the majority of industry and the corporate world have started adopting it. We really see it coming to the forefront of business, corporates and even personal lives in the next 2-3 years.

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