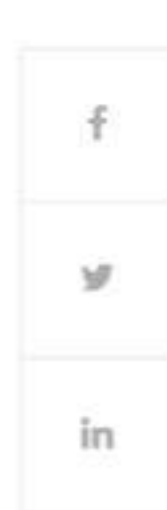


FEATURED

In Conversation With Course5's Ashwin Mittal On Why An AI-Led Approach Will Drive The Next Phase Of Growth

RICHA BHATIA - 10 HOURS AGO



Over the last decade, the IT industry has undergone massive digital transformation. And no one had a better perch to watch these transformational changes which are impacting industries across sectors than **Ashwin Mittal, CEO of Course5** – a leading analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) solutions provider. With the demand for data, analytics and vertical-focused AI solutions increasing, Mittal sensed a gap wherein companies lacked the digital competencies required to tackle disruption and achieve both top and bottom line growth. Unlike most solutions providers that are only infusing AI into existing services, **Course5** also doubled down on AI and invested heavily in advanced in-house proprietary AI technologies and build vertical-focused business use cases that were not possible before.

In an interview with Analytics India Magazine, Mittal talks about the major restructuring with Blueocean Market Intelligence and Cross-Tab joining forces to form a new entity **Course5**, broadening its portfolio with industry-focused AI solutions and how an AI led approach will drive the next phase of growth.

Read the interview to find out how the AI firm is driving a digital transformation for leading companies like Microsoft, Lenovo, Colgate Palmolive, WPP Group, and Adelpi through Analytics, Insights, and AI.

Analytics India Magazine: What are some of the strategic bets Course5 has made in the last few years in terms of restructuring?

Ashwin Mittal: The world of analytics, insights, digital technology and AI are fast converging. Business users want ways to make sense of this new convergence and expertly navigate it to grow their business. We want to be the enablers for our clients and so we decided to consolidate all our analytics, insights and AI-led businesses into one entity called Course5 Intelligence. Our solutions now provide fully-integrated Analytics and Insights capabilities, so business users can actively use data to improve their strategic and tactical business outcomes on an anytime, anywhere basis. Leveraging AI technology is a large part of our strategic focus. While on the one hand we are leveraging machine learning technologies in the delivery of our core work, we are also investing heavily in advanced and specialized AI technologies to create completely new business use cases that were not possible before.

Our company name aptly describes our mission. Businesses are swimming in data lakes with multiple technologies and methodologies. We make sense of it all by leveraging a combination of human and machine intelligence to chart a course for our customers beyond the four points of the compass, North, South, East, and West, to the fifth direction, which is the future.

AIM: Course 5 has consolidated its place in the retail, FSI, CPG, and many other sectors. What is your growth plan?

AM: We are focused on the horizontal domains of sales, marketing and customer. In today's world the biggest disruption is the movement of customer preferences towards digital channels. All major corporations want to move substantial parts of their business to digital channels to engage directly with their customers, provide them with customized experiences and improve profitability. We have built a leadership position in digital analytics. Every engagement on digital channels can be recorded and this leads to massive amounts of big data that is structured and unstructured. There are very interesting applications of AI-led analytics as every engagement can be customized to the customer in real time.

AIM: How are you trying to simplify solutions for your customers, the real business users?

AM: We realised that business users were tired of seeing dashboards and presentations and wanted insights to be conveyed to them in a natural manner. Often these insights are needed in real time and even when people are not in their office environment. So we developed a product called 'Discovery'. Course5 Discovery is an insights assistant that provides cognitive insights in natural language. Business Executives can ask questions using text, voice or chat, and the system accesses the data, carries out the computation and modelling at the back end, and provides a response back in natural language. This has provided a very powerful medium for executives to take critical decisions in real time.

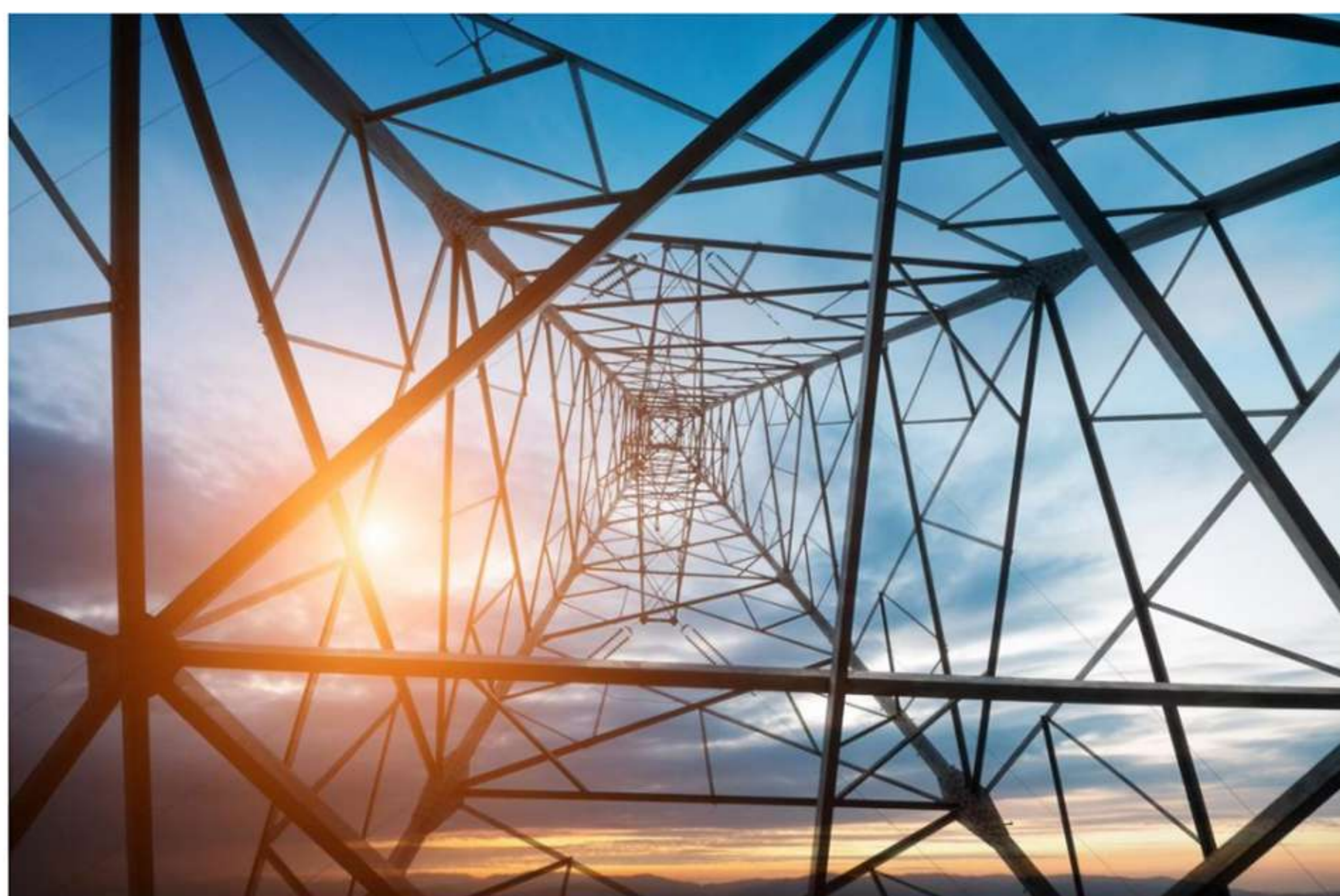


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AIM: You are placing big bets on building an infrastructure to deliver the best solutions to Fortune 500 clients. Can you tell us about the recently set up AI lab? What are some of the areas the team is working on?

AM: We do believe that AI is going to have a transformational impact across all types of business and industry. This is going to be even more profound in the analytics and insights industry as data science is at the very core of AI. While our existing teams leverage machine learning technologies in analytics applications, we wanted to have a separate entity with an R&D mindset to build specific technologies. We have built capabilities across various AI disciplines including Deep learning, Natural Language Processing, Computer Vision, Cognitive Automation and others, and our lab has several patents in process.

This work has led to four path-breaking products that are each disrupting a massive industry –

- Adomate – using computer vision to optimize advertising creatives
- Discovery – natural language-based cognitive insights assistant
- Compete – real time competitive intelligence and analytics for ecommerce
- Research OS – automation of market research processes using AI

AIM: Course5 has considerable leadership in analytics and has now doubled down on AI-led innovation. Tell us about the shift towards AI and how Course5 simplifies AI adoption with its proprietary tech platform?

AM: This takes us to the underpinnings of our Discovery platform that I mentioned earlier. While on the user end, Discovery presents conversational answers, at the backend it is using AI-powered analytics to synthesize all organizational data repositories, with current data, in real time, to generate highly contextual and actionable insights and recommendations. We're driving an end-to-end AI adoption with advanced digital and data engineering at the back end, machine learning algorithms and natural user interfaces at the front end.

AIM: The next big phase in AI is human-machine cooperation. Can AI enhance human endeavour outside regular business areas in areas like creativity?

AM: AI can enhance almost every arena of human endeavour today. AI technologies like Natural Language Processing and Natural Language Generation are already changing how content is generated and analyzed. AI technologies like Computer Vision and Computer Audition are today being used to improve audio and video content. This is very interesting as creativity has always been a domain owned by humans. Our platform do not replace human creativity but augment it with useful inputs and guide it towards content that will achieve the desired business impact.

Our product – Adomate, is an ad optimization solution that uses computer vision to draw on past advertising creatives by converting creative content into structured data and running analytics against campaign results, audience feedback and reading of emotions of viewers. It is then able to prescribe key inputs for the advertising campaign depending on the objective and the category.

AIM: Attrition is a big problem the analytics industry faces. How's Course5 scaling up talent and aligning it as per their business goals

AM: The war for analytics, AI and technology talent continues in organisations that breed top talent and possess niche skills. Course5 is proud of its human capital which is driven by a clear sense of purpose in terms of driving digital transformation for our customers through analytics, insights and AI. Our approach to talent retention spans a cycle in which we help develop critical capabilities, align people with company strategy and culture, and reward for results and innovation.

Our Learning & Development initiative – Course5 University, is specifically focused on the first two areas – training and alignment. In addition, we actively encourage horizontal and vertical growth roles for people that help them flourish and also bring broader perspective to key roles in the organisation.



Building a roadmap to give people the right digital skills

AIM: What are the career tracks you offer at Course5 and how are they mentored to do their best?

AM: We offer several career tracks including Data Scientist, AI Scientist, Data Engineer, Business Analyst and Digital Scientist at a macro level. Across these roles, we have a well-developed development strategy for all employees, with special emphasis on fresher training. Programmes like the Buddy Program, Hackathons, knowledge-sharing around Client Case Studies, etc. help in honing hard skills across the board. Online training programs and certifications are available to all, while more experienced employees are given exposure to special programs and business use cases. There is a continuous emphasis on building soft skills for all employees through a mix of external and internal programmes.

Our people particularly look forward to the Technical Boot Camps that keep them aligned with new technologies and collaborative training on critical technical skills held by senior analysts and subject matter experts.

AIM: What would be your recommendation to people who are trying to switch to analytics as a career?

AM: This is a great time to be entering the analytics industry. The opportunities are massive and today more than ever before there are plenty of publicly available knowledge sources.

- 1 If you are starting afresh, then try to build your capabilities around using AI technologies and AI-led approaches. This is going to leapfrog a lot of work that is being done using traditional data science.
- 2 Have a learning mindset, this space is evolving rapidly and a lot of the changes that will come are unforeseen. To be successful, one has to keep evolving one's skillset. While learning on the job is important, keep aside some time every week to self-learn.

AIM: In closing, can you share what's the growth plan for the coming year and what are some of the big areas you wish to address?

AM: Looking ahead to 2020, our key focus areas are:

- Double down on our AI initiatives and scale our AI labs and four AI-led products. We believe that in the next four to five years, our entire business will transform to become AI-led.
- Continue to focus on our core domain of sales, marketing, and customer
- Build upon our leadership position in digital analytics.