

## How AI is affecting the travel industry

### Level 2 • Upper intermediate

#### 1 Warmer

How did you make your last holiday or travel booking?

Why did you choose this method?

Do you think you will make your next booking in the same way?

#### 2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then, find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

augment      big data      business analytics      chatbot      driving      evolutionary

1. a computer program designed to talk with human users, especially over the internet \_\_\_\_\_ (para 1)
2. very large amounts of information generated by online activity \_\_\_\_\_ (para 2)
3. the use of analysis of relevant facts to help a business to make decisions \_\_\_\_\_ (para 4)
4. add to and improve something \_\_\_\_\_ (para 6)
5. connected with a gradual process of change and development \_\_\_\_\_ (para 8)
6. making someone determined to do something \_\_\_\_\_ (para 9)

demise      frustrated      labour      loyalty      outperform      spa

7. continued use of the products or services of a particular business \_\_\_\_\_ (para 9)
8. do something better than someone or something else \_\_\_\_\_ (para 12)
9. a health club, usually in a luxury hotel, that provides treatments such as massage and a steam room \_\_\_\_\_ (para 13)
10. the time when something stops existing \_\_\_\_\_ (para 14)
11. feeling annoyed and impatient because you are prevented from achieving something \_\_\_\_\_ (para 15)
12. the workers in a particular country or industry \_\_\_\_\_ (para 18)

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#### Automated holidays: how AI is affecting the travel industry

Senay Boztas

17 February, 2017

- 1 First, you could book a flight online. Then, came online travel agents. And now, you might check in for your hotel via a mobile phone, a computer could set the price, while a chatbot answers your queries.
- 2 Big-data analysis is on the rise at internet-based companies like Expedia, lastminute.com and Skyscanner.
- 3 “We have to reinvent the place of the human in the system,” says Fabrice Otaño, chief data officer at AccorHotels group.
- 4 “Artificial intelligence can replace some existing jobs and managers have to look at what the next step is for people – one that is relevant in the data world. We have to balance old jobs with new jobs in business analytics.”
- 5 So far, at least, that has not led to a decline in jobs. According to the most recent EU statistics, employment rose in tourist accommodation and other tourism industries. Now, tourism employs just over 12 million people in the EU.
- 6 Companies like IBM, who are helping the travel company Thomson test a smart chatbot for its customers’ holiday searches, promise to “augment, not replace, human intelligence”.
- 7 This is also the view at Skyscanner. The airfare comparison site, bought by Chinese company Ctrip International for £1.4bn, uses chatbots but it doesn’t believe computing power will replace human roles or travel reviews.
- 8 “We see AI [artificial intelligence] as an evolutionary part of travel,” says a Skyscanner spokeswoman. “We’ve always believed that people would go from click-type-tap style searching to a conversational format. Interestingly, people who use our bots treat them in a very ‘human’ way – they ask for the bot’s name and send emojis.”
- 9 Hotels must invest more money in AI, according to Tim Gunstone, managing director of EyeforTravel. “The cost of search marketing paid by hotels to online travel agents has gone up,” he says. “This is what is driving hoteliers. The industry needs to cut costs and focus on loyalty.”
- 10 Gunstone believes AI can boost loyalty by helping hoteliers know more about their customers, in order to better meet their needs and win repeat business.
- 11 We will see “technological unemployment”, says Professor Ryan Abbott, professor of law and health sciences at the University of Surrey, but if a chatbot gives hotel recommendations based on reviews and your preferences, instead of suggesting that you go to somewhere owned by a relative, maybe that’s for the best.
- 12 “People who have been made obsolete by technology have always found new and better jobs,” he adds. “When machines outperform people in every way, that’s another problem – but that’s a long way in the future.”
- 13 At the bottom of the travel market, computing is about automation and saving money but at the top end, AI is used to personalize experiences – delivered by people. A waiter at a luxury hotel, for instance, could use information on you to predict what kind of drinks you like and recommend something from the menu. Or reception staff, who have data on your spa use, might suggest a particular service.
- 14 But not everyone is predicting the demise of travel agents. A spokesperson for ABTA, which represents UK travel agents and tour operators, says almost a fifth of British people still booked a holiday in a travel agency in 2016 and that although artificial intelligence can help with targeted marketing, “it can be hard to beat the human touch”.
- 15 People quickly get frustrated if a chatbot isn’t responding accurately. “Many roles in the travel industry remain unaffected by technological advances,” adds a spokesperson. “Cooks are needed to cook, beds need to be made and the personal experience of a travel expert is hard to beat.”
- 16 ABTA warns, too, that travel companies need to be careful about customers’ privacy when they collect data on them. European legislation says that personal data can only be collected legally under strict conditions and must be protected against misuse.
- 17 And automation won’t work everywhere. Ian Yeoman, visiting professor at the European Tourism Futures Institute, says we won’t see automated hotels until closer to the end of this century and, even then, it won’t be worldwide.

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18 "In many third-world destinations, the cost of labour is quite cheap so there's no reason for owners and operators to invest money in AI," he says. "These countries don't have strong technology systems either so if something goes wrong, there could be catastrophic failure."

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### 3 Expressions

Find expressions in the article with the following meanings.

1. decide how much something should cost (three words, para 1)
2. increasing steadily (three words, para 2)
3. when customers buy products or services from a particular business more than once (two words, para 10)
4. difficult to find anything better than (three words, para 14)
5. the particular positive quality of people (compared to machines) (three words, para 14)

### 4 Understanding the article

a. Use key words from task 2 and expressions from task 3 to complete these statements.

b. Then, decide if the statements are true (T) or false (F). Correct any that are false.

1. The article is about the \_\_\_\_\_ of travel agents.
2. Internet-based travel companies are using \_\_\_\_\_ analysis to find out what customers want.
3. AI can help hotels to win \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Chatbots \_\_\_\_\_ travel agents in every way.
5. Chatbots get \_\_\_\_\_ by customers who do not know what they want.
6. Many customers prefer to talk to travel agents because chatbots do not have \_\_\_\_\_.
7. The personal experience of a chatbot is \_\_\_\_\_.

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#### 5 Travel survey

Place a cross somewhere on each line that shows how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

	agree	disagree
I prefer to book my holidays at an actual travel agency in town.	_____	_____
A travel agent can give me advice and tips that I can't get online.	_____	_____
I'd be happy to book a holiday via a tour operator's website with the help of a chatbot.	_____	_____
I read online reviews before I book holiday accommodation.	_____	_____
I phone the hotel when I make a booking.	_____	_____
I use internet-based companies (e.g. booking.com) to book hotels.	_____	_____
I'm happy to provide feedback by completing online surveys after I have returned from my holiday.	_____	_____

#### 6 Discussion

- Draw a line from the top to the bottom of your survey that connects your crosses. This will help you to compare your answers more easily.
- Compare your answers with those of other students.
- Can you identify any holiday-booking behaviour trends or attitudes within your group?

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#### KEY

#### 2 Key words

1. chatbot
2. big data
3. business analytics
4. augment
5. evolutionary
6. driving
7. loyalty
8. outperform
9. spa
10. demise
11. frustrated
12. labour

#### 3 Expressions

1. set the price
2. on the rise
3. repeat business
4. hard to beat
5. the human touch

#### 4 Understanding the article

##### a.

1. demise
2. big-data
3. repeat business
4. outperform
5. frustrated
6. the human touch
7. hard to beat

##### b.

1. F – The article is not about their demise.
2. T
3. T
4. F – Chatbots do not outperform travel agents in every way.
5. F – Customers get frustrated by chatbots who do not know what they want.
6. T
7. F – The personal experience of a travel expert is hard to beat.

#### 5 Travel survey

**Teacher's tip:** Make this task more communicative by getting the students to complete the survey for their partner.