

Start Tinkering, Before Building – Early Lessons from Ashoka's AI Lab

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents enormous opportunities for social innovators to create impact. The AI Lab is a team that explores these opportunities at Ashoka, the world's largest network of social entrepreneurs. The team was founded three months ago. In this article, we share our thoughts, our first steps, and some lessons learned along the way.



“The AI Lab is sending a gift to another Ashoka team.”
The image was generated by Adobe Firefly.
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Ashoka's AI Adventure: How to Prototype Your Way to Impact

Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents enormous opportunities for social innovators to create impact. MapBiomass, co-founded by Ashoka Fellow Tasso Azevedo, leverages AI and open data to identify illegal logging in the Brazilian rainforest based on satellite images and notify authorities. OpenNyAI's open-source Jugalbandi stack combines the power of ChatGPT with voice-to-voice Indian language translation to provide every Indian access to 200+ government welfare schemes in 10 Indian languages without literacy requirements. And if reports by consultancy firms are to be believed, AI applications can make processes within social ventures

20 to 40% more efficient across the board. We believe that the opportunities are so large and growing so quickly that social innovators simply cannot afford to ignore them.

The AI Lab is a team that explores these opportunities at Ashoka, the world's largest network of social entrepreneurs. The team was founded three months ago. In this article, we share our thoughts, our first steps, and some lessons learned along the way.

Start Small

When considering how to leverage technology for social impact, there can be a temptation to start with a grand vision: identify an amazing use case that would help millions or transform an entire field. The instinct is then to spend months acquiring the significant resources needed to build the complex applications required for this grand vision. Next comes managing a large IT project with external partners for a long time. And finally, launching the revolutionary service to great fanfare and acclaim.

Too many times, the end of this story is a platform or a service that consumes a lot of time and investment and then ends up not fulfilling the many promises and expectations that it created. Several organizations in the social sector might feel burnt out from these experiences. One critical reason to go with an MVP approach is also to quickly understand user behaviour and user demands when you test out the prototype. Empowered with that information, you are then better equipped to iterate and build at scale.

There's a second reason why we took a different approach: Ashoka is not a cutting-edge institution when it comes to digital technologies, and we don't have a track record of developing software in-house. So, we started small - with one employee ignoring his formal job description and becoming an unofficial, part-time developer of AI applications. The prototypes he produced were extremely modest in scope: a semantic search to uncover relevant social entrepreneurs based on the needs of different programs and journalists, a tool to benchmark candidates' proposals against past efforts to gauge novelty, a bot generating ideas for impact strategies based on patterns in existing Ashoka Fellows' approaches. Each of these initial prototypes required only 20 to 100 lines of code and was built during small slices of personal time over a few weeks. While modest in nature, these prototypes drove real value for different teams at Ashoka. For instance, the benchmark analysis tool is easy to implement but saves about 4 hours of work each time it is used. Having tangible examples enabled us to concretely demonstrate AI's promise when discussing opportunities with colleagues and seeded support from users who benefited personally. Thanks to the momentum these small steps generated, we secured leadership buy-in and resources to constitute a dedicated team.

Build towards AI Readiness and Maturity

We think about our AI Readiness in terms of five pillars: Governance, Data Management, AI Literacy, IT Infrastructure, and Development Capacity. In each pillar, we want to evolve through stages of maturity: from infancy to adolescence to adulthood. For example, for the Information Technology (IT) Infrastructure pillar, in the infant stage, a safe space exists to prototype AI

applications, which provides basic password protection and adequate data management and privacy. In the adolescence stage, a robust environment enables developing, testing, and deploying applications internally. In the adult stage, a safe and robust environment allows deploying applications externally. Similarly, for the Governance pillar, in the infant stage, generic ethical rules around AI usage exist. For example, no decision should be made or content published without critical revision by staff with a deep contextual understanding of the matter at hand. This will not only help you build internal buy-in but also create the proper foundations to get your organization ready for more complex and external applications faster. In the adolescence stage, two people oversee AI builders to prevent harm. In the adult stage, guidelines, risk levels, and a committee oversee AI developments.

We believe that we should only build and deploy AI applications that we are ready for. Within a closed “sandbox,” all kinds of prototypes can be created (though some guardrails do, of course, apply even there). Since our IT Infrastructure is still in its infancy, though, we cannot yet make prototypes widely available across the global organization (we collaborate closely with our IT team to reach the adolescence stage and provide new tools to colleagues).

Similarly, our Development Capacity allows us to create two simple prototypes per month and fully develop applications with outside help. However, we are not yet ready to build complex applications that would profoundly reshape how we organize our global network. We respect these current limitations and invest in expanding our capabilities before taking on challenges that would still be too difficult for us today.

Start with Guidelines and Safe Spaces

We aim to experiment freely and learn rapidly. At the same time, we want to avoid major missteps and prevent harm. With this in mind, we initially focused on two pillars: instituting ethical guidelines (Governance) and constructing safe spaces for tinkering (IT Infrastructure). In both cases, we were able to tap helpful expertise from colleagues: one team had been exploring risks and opportunities around Generative AI with leading social entrepreneurs worldwide. Their insights informed our initial guidelines. Our IT department manages our Microsoft Azure accounts. On this platform, they provisioned a protected environment for prototyping. As a global NGO, we were fortunate this expertise was readily available. However, dedicated specialists are not required to complete the initial stages of AI Readiness. Templates for guidelines are available online, and many development environments do not need corporate cloud accounts. Pro-bono support is also available from organizations such as Tech to the Rescue (founded by Ashoka Fellow Jacek Siadkowski).

Make it Fun

Discussions about Generative AI can often become gloomy and tense, dominated by risks like biases, job losses, and concerns for privacy. While these absolutely deserve attention via Governance and AI Literacy efforts, they should not eclipse the exciting opportunities AI provides. We discovered adding an element of fun and whimsy helped nurture a spirit of exploration and learning.

Here are a few small steps we are taking: we use AI-generated images of futuristic workshops as video call backgrounds. Our emails include pictures of digital tinkerers. Agreements with partner teams employ fairy tale language. And our “Roadshow Extravaganza” introducing the AI Lab to colleagues took the form of an interactive circus.

Conclusion

While the possibilities with AI are vast, Ashoka decided to start modestly, be practical, and make it fun. We focused first on AI ethics and safe prototyping to encourage experimentation. We respect our current limitations in skills and systems while investing to expand them. We believe that organizations that take these steps can start benefiting from AI today while avoiding major risks.

We hope these lessons from our first three months help you on your own AI journey. Happy tinkering!

*This article was, of course, written with the help of AI.

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