The AI Frontier: Business Strategies and Beyond
with Art Robbins
Interview by Taran Agarwal, Co-Founder, Simplify Tech

Taran Agarwal - **00:08**

Hello. Welcome back to another episode of Simple Tech Talk, where we dive into the world of AI and its impact across different businesses and industries. I'm your host, Taran Agarwal. And today we are thrilled to have Art Robbins with us. Mr Art is the CEO of EMCEE LLC, an innovative firm that harnesses digital technologies to boost organizational performances. Art's career spans several leadership roles at major companies like Ernst & Young and Frost & Sullivan, giving him deep expertise in AI, sustainability, and business strategy. Art, welcome to the show.

Art Robbins - **00:43**

Thanks a lot, Taran. It's a pleasure to be here and looking forward to the conversation.

Taran Agarwal - **00:47**

It's a pleasure to have you here. Could you start by sharing a little about your journey and the amazing work that you're currently doing?

Art Robbins - **00:54**

Okay. Well, I've been in management consulting just about my entire career, and I started on the tech side of management consulting, developing and implementing large scale ERP systems for major corporations, and spent a lot of my time with the energy industry. But, over time, especially from my Ernst and Young and Frost & Sullivan experiences, I got a lot of exposure to all the major industries and a lot of different business models. Also worked with medium size and small entrepreneurial businesses. And the general theme of the work that I've done is really how to best leverage the leading edge transformational technologies to gain a competitive advantage and develop a unique value proposition and deliver that to your customers.

Art Robbins - **02:02**

So the past few years, I've been running my own consultancy, EMCEE, and that's really been my focus to help companies with their growth strategies and how to best leverage technology. And no surprise, the past couple of years, AI has been a big theme. I mean, at one level, we've been working with AI for decades, just hasn't been as sexy as it is now. But, we actually noticed the potential of generative AI a few years ago, even before the latest ChatGTP releases and started to explore how that could transform many of the services that businesses deliver to their customers. So I'm excited about the potential of AI also. I'm concerned about the potential of AI.

Art Robbins - **03:13**

I mean, just look, just like any technology, it could be used for the greater good, but it also can be abused. And that's a lot of conversations right now, for sure.

Taran Agarwal - **03:30**

I think AI definitely has its pros and cons and hopefully we can cover both sides of it today. Art, it's really impressive to hear about your journey, especially how you've moved from implementing large scale ERP systems to now harnessing the power of Gen AI. It's clear that you've always been at the cutting edge, adapting and evolving with the latest in tech. With that said, diving into your recent focus, how has your consultancy been using AI to enhance operations and operational effectiveness?

Art Robbins - **03:59**

Sure. Well, it's really interesting, the more things change, the more they stay the same. you might be using, talking about a different technology, or you might be using a fancy buzzword to describe the same thing that happened 20 or 30 years ago. I was just at a big AI conference. It was a wonderful conference. And the main theme was, don't have an AI strategy, have a business strategy. And you have to have a business strategy that makes sense. Now, if I tell you that we were taught this, when I got out of business school, way back when, you could believe it. That's a theme that hasn't changed.

Art Robbins - **05:05**

And a lot of people that just focus on the technology and they try to implement it on top of a bad business strategy, they're going to fail. That's like putting a fresh coat of paint on a house with wood rot. You need a fundamentally strong business strategy to start with. And then you can ask, how can I leverage AI or any new technology to make my business strategy even stronger? How can I enhance the value even further to get a sustainable competitive advantage? So it's really important to view it that way, that the strategy itself is the fundamental layer and the technology is the catalyst to make the strategy even better.

Taran Agarwal - **06:07**

That's a really sharp insight. I think it's great to hear how you emphasize that real success comes from a strong business strategy and not just the flashy new tech. It's like making sure the foundation is rock solid before building anything on top of it. Now, speaking of evolving tech and the rise of AI, issues like misinformation and deep fakes are becoming more and more prevalent. For instance, I recently saw a deep fake video of Obama giving a speech that was so shockingly realistic. Now, with that said, how can businesses and society ensure that they're using AI responsibly, especially when dealing with sensitive tasks like data analysis and decision making?

Art Robbins - **06:48**

Well, we're at a bit of a precarious time in the AI lifecycle because there are really no laws or regulations. Europe has started to come out with some of that. There's nothing in the US, so it's a bit of the wild west right now, and each company is kind of left to its own devices, to establish guidelines and guardrails of how to use AI. Again, this is a classic example. I always believe, you can learn from history. History does repeat itself. And if you look at every major technology innovation, it's kind of gone through this cycle where there's just been unbridled proliferation of the technology and then the abusers come out of the woodwork.

Art Robbins - **07:50**

I mean, we saw this with the Internet, and now we have a mega size cybersecurity industry as a result of it. And I imagine something like that's going to happen with AI. There will be standards established, there will be leaders in truth and trust and certification of AI tools and algorithms, and that will be a companion to any AI platform. Just like our security software is a mandatory companion to our Internet devices. I'm pretty confident that will happen. But in the meantime, as I mentioned, it's up to the individual companies to establish their own standards. And we've seen this. They've identified an AI Officer, or they've extended the function of the CIO or the Chief Security Officer, and they've developed internal controls to make sure that the systems are developed within these types of guidelines.

Taran Agarwal - **09:21**

Thanks for that, Art. Your insights really underscore the delicate balance we are facing with AI development and the urgent need for proactive internal governance. I think you've painted a very clear picture of the cyclical nature of tech adoption and the critical role of regulation, even with individual companies. Considering the patterns observed in past tech revolutions like the Internet, what lessons can we apply to today's AI expansion to ensure sustainable growth? Do you think we are nearing a bubble with AI like we did with the Internet? Or has the world become more pragmatic in its adoption?

Art Robbins - **09:57**

No, I'm confident it'll play out similar to that. There will be some sort of a bubble burst. I mean, right now there's a lot of players out there developing platforms, developing solutions. Again, just like any business model, you have to develop unique business value in order to gain a competitive advantage. A lot of the “me too” offerings won't be able to sustain themselves and they'll go away. Others might go that have very unique IP, but need access to customers distribution channels. They may get bought up by some of the larger players to expand their own portfolio. We've already seen a lot of this happen, and I think there will be a shakeup. There will be some companies whose names we don't know today that will become household names. There won't be that many of those, but there will be a handful.

Art Robbins - **11:17**

So I think we can learn from that. Well, one of the things that's interesting is I saw a statistic recently that, and I believe this is from Gartner, they said that 30% of AI projects that have started have been abandoned because they're nothing delivering the value. And there is this big cost, the cost of developing the data and the LLM and the inferences, that's a huge unknown cost that companies don't anticipate. And then they run into it, and a lot of the projects come to a screeching ball. So I think a lot of the winners here are going to be the companies that can really help their clients implement AI solutions successfully. It's not just enough to show them a bunch of benchmarks and say, well, I have the best technology.

Art Robbins - **12:31**

I have the biggest LLM or the fastest algorithms. how do you convert that to deliver real business value to your clients? I think the companies that are focused on that are going to be paving the way.

Taran Agarwal - **12:51**

They're going to be our leaders in the future, definitely. I wholeheartedly agree. Your perspective about the impending shake up when your companies might arise to become household names really shows the dynamism and the rapid evolution in this field. Also, your point about the high failure rate of AI projects kind of shows the challenges and high stakes in this relatively new AI space. It seems like it's all about delivering tangible business value to survive and thrive at the end of the day. Now, diverting from this a little bit, considering the significant job displacements AI might cause as it becomes more integral in automations, what are your thoughts on how the workforce should adapt? Like, what strategies would you recommend for companies and individuals to mitigate the impact on employment?

Art Robbins - **13:39**

Well, this is another area that hasn't quite shaken out yet, and there's a few different theories. One theory is that AI is going to be doing a lot of the grunt work. So the grunt workers will be without jobs, and, the jobs will basically rest with mid-level and senior people and above who are real knowledge workers. There's another theory which I'm actually inclined to believe, that AI is going to empower a lot of the lower level workers so they can actually be smarter and better at their job. You take call center representatives. I mean, I've worked on projects where the AI has made the call center rep far more effective in servicing the customers' incoming call because it presented the information to them faster in a way that they can never do manually.

Art Robbins - **15:10**

So their job didn't go away, their job got smarter. If you believe that theory, the extension of it is that there'd be less of a need for middle managers. Those workers being empowered won't need as much supervision. So middle managers have to start thinking about, well, how do I add value, not just managing and supervising, but how do I contribute to the value chain.

Taran Agarwal - **15:47**

Yeah.

Art Robbins - **15:48**

So which of those theories is exactly going to shake out? It might depend on the scenarios in the industries, but I think in general, a worker with ambition and a thirst for knowledge is going to be able to become a more effective knowledge worker as a result of this.

Taran Agarwal - **16:13**

Absolutely. Your view that AI can empower workers, especially at lower levels, is really inspiring. Just like how AI tools enhance the effectiveness of call center representatives. It's a compelling argument that AI doesn't just replace jobs, but can actually make them more impactful. Personally, I've seen similar benefits in my own work where like, for example, tasks that used to take a week for me can now be wrapped up in a day thanks to AI and ChatGPT. With that said, given your broad view across industries, as a management consultant, what sectors do you see being most impacted by AI right now and which ones do you think will see the most impact in the future, for better or worse?

Art Robbins - **16:55**

I think, so far, the majority of the use cases that I've seen have been more back office, focused on improving internal operations. whether it's, record keeping, document management, call centers that seems to be lower hanging fruit, and companies feel that's a little less risky. healthcare has a huge opportunity. We're actually seeing scientists see use cases where AI is really helping with the diagnostic process and identifying illnesses faster, looking at the medical records, analyzing that. There was a pharmaceutical company at one of the conferences I went to that said that they can actually manufacture vaccines and proteins at an exponential rate.

Art Robbins - **18:21**

Now because of AI, what would take them years to develop, can now be done in a matter of days, if not hours. I think there's this huge potential on the healthcare side. And then I think the professional services businesses are going to see major disruption. Law, research, consulting, there's just a lot of, pardon the expression, grunt work in those that's being done, by very senior people. And you take law, instead of taking days to research cases and citations, this could be done in minutes. And the law clerks can do a better job constructing the final arguments. I think one of the key lessons in all of this, and everything I said, is the best use cases so far is not an either / or use case.

Art Robbins - **19:43**

I think that's how the discussion started. What's AI going to do? What's a human going to do? I don't think that's where the success is moving. The success is moving into how can AI and a human work optimally together to deliver the most value and that's where the big returns are. In that call center example I gave earlier, that company actually had one of their guidelines that they would never have a customer talk directly with an AI chat bot. They would always have a human talking to the customer. The human was their called center rep, and it was their call center rep that was interacting with the AI. But they always felt that given the nascence of the technology and given how much they value human judgment, the best outcome is to always have a human connecting to the customer.

Art Robbins - **20:58**

And I think there's a good lesson in there for all of those industries.

Taran Agarwal - **21:04**

Definitely, it's really cool to hear how AI is not only streamlining back office operations, but also transforming fields like healthcare, pharmaceuticals. And even though I recently spoke with Mister Bill Wittmeyer, CEO of Pulmostics, on a podcast recently, and even he was emphasizing similar points about AI's role in improving diagnostic accuracy, like using breath analysis to detect diseases such as cancer. It was such a fascinating discussion, and it aligns really closely with the points that you mentioned. With that said, with AI evolving so quickly, what are the main challenges industries face as they integrate this tech? Like, could you share some advice for entrepreneurs entering the AI space or those that are hesitant about investing in it?

Art Robbins - **21:51**

Sure. Well, my advice is to get started and do something. There's far more companies doing something now than there was a year ago, and the companies that are committed to it actually have results to show for it, even if it is in a back office project, even if it is on a small scale project. The companies that have results, they've done it with pilots and now they're thinking about how do I scale it more broadly. The issue is there's still a lot of companies that are in the sidelines. They're nervous for all the reasons we previously discussed and the problem with them continuing to sit on the sidelines and wait is the gap is only going to get bigger.

Art Robbins - **22:51**

I mean, if you think of it as a race, the leaders in AI are building a stronger and insurmountable lead and the laggards will never be able to catch up. And there might be a few more Kodak moments or Blockbuster moments in some of these companies' futures if they don't do something. So that's my general advice. I think there's enough examples out there and there's enough support groups and conferences and trade associations where you don't have to do this alone. You can figure out, what does it mean for my company to get started, and how do I develop my own guidelines and guardrails? How can I establish some pilot project that makes sense for me and get going?

Taran Agarwal - **24:02**

Well, Art, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom today. Your advice to dive in and start experimenting with AI is truly essential for anyone on the fence, and I think people should get started ASAP. Today we've touched on some vital topics, from the importance of having a robust business strategy for AI implementation to how AI can actually empower the workforce and transform industries like healthcare, professional services, law and many others. Your emphasis on ethical practices and internal controls reminds us all of the thoughtful approach that is needed as we navigate this AI boom. With that said to all our listeners, thank you so much for joining us on this episode. Remember, as Mister Art highlighted today, the key to succeeding with AI lies in how well we can integrate human and machine intelligence together.

Taran Agarwal - **24:54**

With that said, stay curious, stay informed, and don't hesitate to take your first steps into the AI landscape. Until next time, keep tuning in for more insightful discussions. Art, thank you so much again.

Art Robbins - **25:05**

Thank you, Taran, it was a pleasure.