Public service Guidelines on the use of AI focus on innovation and trust

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New Government Guidelines on the use of AI should support public service bodies in "undertaking responsible innovation in a way that is practical, helpful and easy to follow", according to Jack Chambers, the Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform.

Speaking at the launch of 'for the Responsible use of Artificial Intelligence in the Public Service', the Minister said that artificial intelligence is "already shaping our lives, our economy and crucially how governments serve their people".

In a statement, the Department said the Guidelines complement and inform strategies regarding the adoption of innovative technology and ways of working "already underway in the public service" and seek to set a high standard for public service transformation and innovation, "while prioritising public trust and people's rights".

"By firmly placing the human in the process, these Guidelines aim to enhance public trust in how Government uses AI", the statement said.

KEY SUPPORTS

A range of resources have been designed to support the adoption of AI, including clear information on 'Government's Principles for Responsible AI', a 'Decision Framework 'for evaluating the potential use of AI, a 'Responsible AI Canvas Tool' to be used at planning stage, and the 'AI Lifecycle Guidance tool'.

Other government supports available to public service organisations include learning and development materials and courses for public servants at no cost.

In this regard, and in addition to its existing offering on AI, the Department says the Institute for Public Administration will provide a tutorial and in-person training dedicated to the AI Guidelines to further assist participants in applying the Guidelines in their own workplaces.

Minister Chambers said that AI "offers immense possibilities to improve the provision of public services". The Guidelines support public service bodies in "undertaking responsible innovation in a way that is practical, helpful and easy to follow", he said.

EXAMPLES

The Guidelines contain examples of how AI is already being used across public services, including:

- St. Vincent's University Hospital exploring the potential for AI to assist with performing heart ultrasound scans, in order to help reduce waiting times for patients.
- The Revenue Commissioners using Large Language Models to route taxpayer queries more efficiently, ensuring faster and more accurate responses.
- The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine developing an AI-supported solution to detect errors in grant applications and reduce processing times for applications.

COST REDUCTION

Minister of State for Public Procurement, Digitalisation and eGovernment, Emer Higgins said the Guidelines will support "thoughtful integration of AI into our public systems, enhance efficiency, and reduce administrative burdens and financial cost".

Importantly, she said this will be done with "strong ethical and human oversight, ensuring fairness, transparency, accountability, and the protection of rights and personal data at every step."

Minister of State for Trade Promotion, Artificial Intelligence and Digital Transformation, Niamh Smyth said the Guidelines are an important step in meeting government's objective of better outcomes through AI adoption by the public service, outlined in the National AI Strategy – 'Here for Good'.

She said the Guidelines will be central to creating the "framework conditions for successful AI adoption" and equipping public servants with the tools they need to use AI.

ACCEPTABLE & UNACCEPTABLE

The Guidelines cover AI's positive impact on public services, which can be categorised into three core areas: productivity, responsiveness, and accountability. These categories "reflect the ways in which AI can streamline operations, better meet public needs, and maintain trust".

Also addressed are potential serious downsides, classified as 'high risk' and 'unacceptable risk' (i.e. prohibited systems) - as well as 'limited risk' use (which can involve transparency issues) or 'no risk' uses.

THE 7 PRINCIPLES

The seven key principals in the use of AI (summarised) below are:

(i) Where a Public Service Body is looking to implement an AI system to help process applications faster by screening for basic eligibility criteria, the system will create efficiencies in the Public Service Body. But someone in the organisation "must remain accountable for each component of the AI lifecycle", the Guidelines say.

(ii) 'Technical robustness' is crucial where a public service body is looking to implement a new AI system. It must ensure best-in-class security, otherwise the system could be attacked, "leading it to make different decisions or causing it to shut down altogether".

(iii) Personal data must be properly protected. A public service body will need to engage with the Data Protection Officer and complete a Data Protection Impact Assessment. "Should the new AI system not perform as expected, they will need to ensure that there is a contingency plan in place that can be activated at short notice".

(iv) On transparency, if an AI chatbot is being implemented to help answer queries, the organisation concerned must ensure that people are notified that they are interacting with an AI system when using the chatbot.

(v) 'Fairness and equality' must be observed when introducing a new AI system. For example, a government department must assess if there is "unfair bias in the dataset" used. Issues such as this must be resolved and "mitigated as much as possible".

(vi) The societal impact of a new AI system must be considered, such as the environmental impact or anything that could negatively affect people's physical or mental wellbeing.

(vii) Accountability is essential so that the public can be assured that there is a human accountable for an AI solution. Clear accountability structures promote better governance of AI systems to ensure they are developed and used responsibly.

'DO NOTHING OPTION'

Public Service Bodies should evaluate whether to build, buy, or avail of 'free-of-charge' solutions. Factors such as implementation, speed, and compatibility need to be considered.

"As with any business case", the Guidelines say, "the starting option should be do nothing". This option, as well as the timing of adopting AI, needs to be carefully considered given that AI solutions, "as with any new or emerging technology, tend to be expensive for early adopters, with price declining over time as new providers enter market".

Regarding the evaluation of AI use in public services, there is a need to understand the impact of AI systems "compared to the status quo, improve current interventions, inform future adoption, deployment and development, and ensure accountability for public spending".

UNION MOTIONS

Meanwhile, the recent conference of the Association of Higher Civil & Public Servants (AHCPS) considered a number of motions, all of which noted the potential benefits of AI but expressed concerns, such as the potential impact on jobs, the availability of retraining and the need to ensure current positions are not compromised, nor replaced by AI.

The Fórsa Health & Welfare biennial conference this week will consider a detailed motion which addresses concerns around the automation of tasks traditionally performed by humans, noting "there is a growing fear that jobs across various health sectors may be displaced, leading to economic instability and social inequality".

The motion says the union should ensure the establishment of a comprehensive consultative structure "which encompasses all members across the Health Service including sections 38, 39 and other health sector employers".

They should also build consensus with the other Health Unions around these priorities, the motion says.