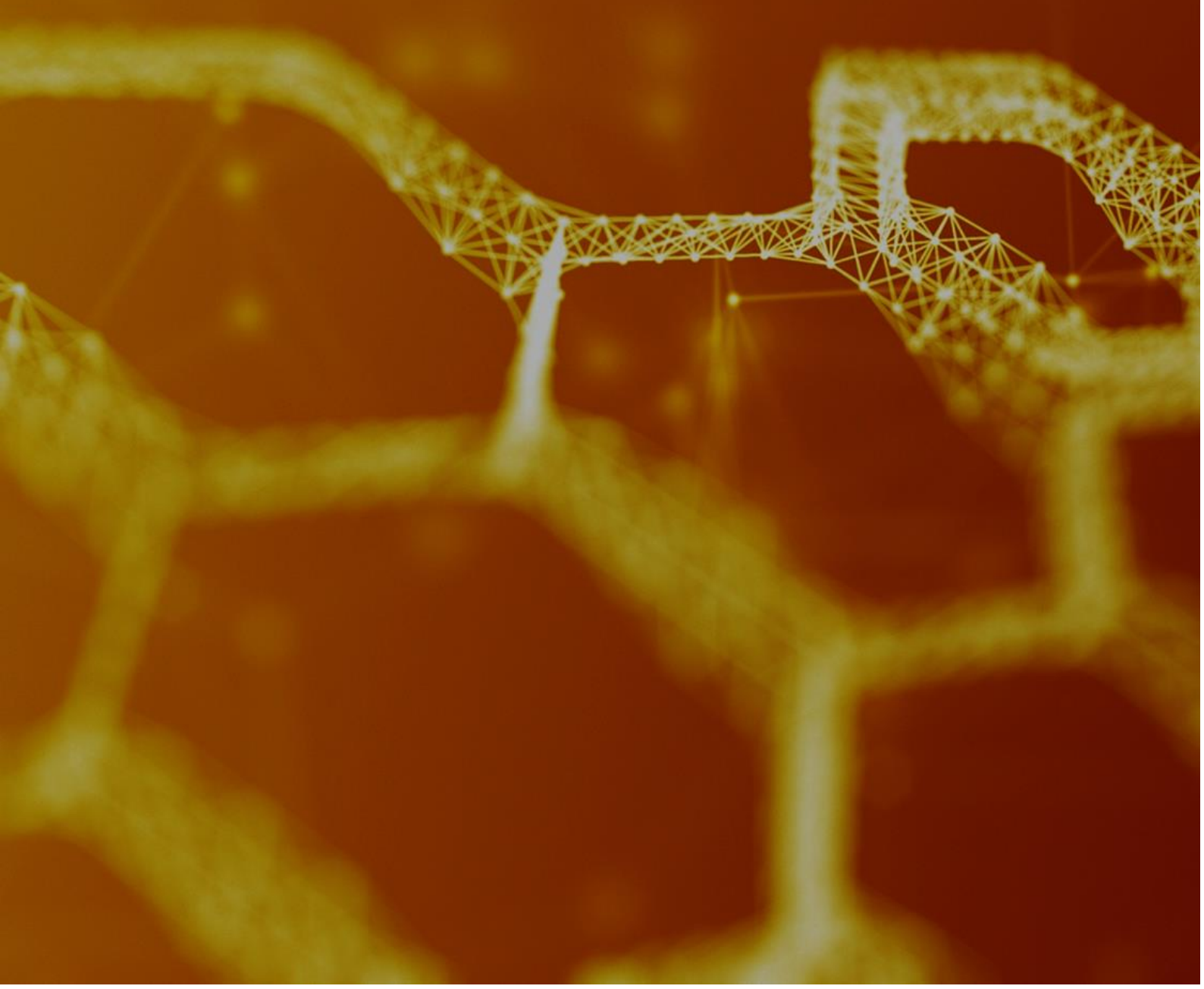


Brunel Hive Review

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Contributors



Tim Kourdi

Mr Kourdi is founder and owner of the St. Margarets Hotel, a boutique-style hotel in Oxford. Prior to that, he had a successful career in consumer electronics becoming factory manager and running a manufacturing company in China. In 2000, he set up and run a consulting business specialising in Anglo-Sino project. To further develop knowledge and experience, he started the St Margarets Hotel in Oxford in 2013. He graduated in electrical and electronic engineering from the University of Portsmouth.

Business adaptation during covid-19 crisis



Geraldine Cohen

Dr Cohen is Reader in Marketing at Brunel Business School, Brunel University London. She is Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and Member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. Prior to joining the academia, Dr Cohen had extensive executive experience in Marketing and International Business at several multinational. Then, she set up and run successful Marketing consulting company. Currently, she is director at Brunel Hive.

Interview with the experts: Brunel Hive.



Fabio Grassi

Dr Grassi is Data Scientist at Xriba, an AI-driven start-up based in London. He is a machine-learning enthusiast and currently developing Natural Language models. Dr Grassi has a PhD in Computational Chemistry and is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow. Prior to that, he has worked as Data Scientist for Aalto University, Adidas, and Runtastic.

Artificial Intelligence: Not Just Data Scientists.





HOW I DID IT

Founder and owner of The St Margarets Hotel describes how he adapted the business during the covid-19 pandemic

By Tim Kourdi

Business adaptation during covid-19 crisis

The pandemic's start was scary for me as a hotel owner because 40% of my revenue disappeared in the first two days of the lockdown. Amid the panic that set in, I realised that this situation was a significant shift in the business world and I needed help making sense of it. That is why I turned to Dr Ana Canhoto and Dr Leiyuan Wei of Brunel Business School for help, support and guidance. Their knowledge, expertise and practical advice are what saved my business, provided me with a way through the pandemic and enabled me to focus on the future.

As revenue was quickly disappearing, the first question they asked was, 'What do you sell?'.

New Knowledge and Emerging Insights About Your Business

I naively replied hotel rooms. They pointed out that I sell space configured as hotel rooms, so I need to focus on how to sell the space. This revelation was mind-blowing to me as I saw my business in a new light.

By selling 'space', I could offer people storage for their goods. I still consider that my business is selling space configured to optimise revenue. The next stage focused on devising a plan for re-opening.

For a plan to be effective, the information used must be relevant, accurate and informative. However, there are many sources of information, some of which are of better quality than others.

The Brunel Academics pointed me in the direction of reputable sources so that I could make informed decisions. For example, wearing face masks was an issue in Western countries at the start of the pandemic.

By directing me to the YouGov site, I could see a shift in attitudes by Europeans toward wearing face masks. This knowledge convinced me that supplying guests with free face masks would be a good decision and improve the hotel's reputation, meet our guests' expectations and improve the safety of my staff.



Another area in which the Brunel Academics helped was achieving the objective of re-opening in a safe manner. The pandemic had started in the Far East, which meant they had already solved many challenges that I was facing. So the Brunel Academics pointed me towards laws, regulations and rules related to the hospitality industry that Far Eastern countries had introduced.

This broadening of my horizon provided me with more significant insights regarding the nature of my problems. As a result, the solutions implemented were beneficial to the hotel, staff and guests.

For example, from my Far East research, I adopted the protocol of sealing the rooms once housekeeping had cleaned them. Informing guests why housekeeping had sealed the room after cleaning reassured them that they would have a safe stay. Some were so comforted that they praised the sealing of the rooms in their online reviews. These reviews, in turn, help establish the hotel as a safe place to stay during the pandemic. The Brunel Academics' actions of providing me with a broader range of information on room cleaning protocols resulted in guests' feeling safe, which enhanced my hotel's reputation.





“This revelation was mind-blowing to me as I saw my business in a new light.”

Another benefit of working with the Brunel Academics was the regular review meetings. As well as discussing progress with the plan, we would also examine the broader picture of events that were occurring.

During one of these discussions, I realised that my small 11 room boutique style hotel was on the same level as a five-star hotel. Because it did not matter how many facilities a hotel had or how many staff it could employ, just one bad review questioning the COVID safety of the hotel could ruin a business. In other words, my competition was no longer a specific market segment. It was every hotel in Oxford, from the smallest B&B to the grandest five-star establishment.

Working with the Brunel Academics saved my business and taught me three main lessons. Firstly, I learnt that the true nature of my business is that I sell space. I can configure any area, a room, the garden or the conservatory for any purpose that will generate income. The second lesson is that I can make informed, accurate, and valuable decisions by using reputable sources of information. Lastly, the big picture is essential as it provides an understanding of the business environment within which my hotel operates.



Some of my friends questioned why I turned to academics to help my business.

After all, what do they know of the real world? I reply that if you have an open mind, academics, especially those at Brunel Business School, have the answers to your problems. ■

Mr Kourdi founded the St Margaret's Hotel in 2013.

The St Margaret's Hotel is a boutique-style hotel offering high-quality accommodation in the heart of Oxford.

It has a unique atmosphere blending historic feature with modern comfort.

To learn more about the hotel please visit the company website.

To learn more about this experience, please connect with Tim via email.





Interview With The Expert

Brunel Hive is the business engagement platform of Brunel Business School. Started in 2019 with the aim of empowering business leaders to deliver sustainable growth in their organisations, it has rapidly grew expanding its team, network, and programmes. With activities organised around ten strategic areas, the Brunel Hive focuses on supporting SMEs and local economies across London.



Dr Geraldine Cohen

BRUNEL HIVE What is it?

As Director of Brunel Hive (Operations and Communications), Dr Geraldine Cohen leads a team of dedicated academics and industry experts to bring extensive experience across both the industry and the academia.

Started in 2019, Brunel Hive has rapidly grew expanding its team and network.

The Brunel Hive is chaired by Prof Jane Hendy, Dean of Brunel Business School,

Geraldine, what is the Brunel Hive? In a nutshell, Brunel Hive is the business engagement platform at Brunel University London. We help businesses to grow. We work with businesses worldwide. However, we concentrate our attention specifically on SMEs across London helping them to define and deliver their growth objectives.

Our mission is to enable and empower business leaders to deliver sustainable growth across their organisations. We achieve this through several activities and programmes.

What kind of activities are organised at Brunel Hive?

Businesses that collaborate with us can benefit from a wide range of programmes. Over the years, we have developed an ample portfolio of activities to support business growth.

Our programmes are now organised in ten strategic areas. For example, we regularly publish webinars and podcasts in which our experts address a wide range of business issues from brand-building to cyber security. Our team has organised more than twenty events this year. For those interested in a specific topic, the recordings can be accessed for free online.

In 2019 we had a very successful masterclass series. The masterclasses are great opportunities for SMEs across London to access high-impact and practical knowledge. Entrepreneurs and managers that wanted to get deeper on issues, such as leadership and digital transformation, attended our masterclasses.

However, the core activities are the Executives-in-Residence and Executive Learning. As we can see, there is a lot going on at Brunel Hive. I encourage entrepreneurs and managers to visit our website to learn more about all the programmes.



“We help ambitious businesses to define and deliver their growth objectives.”

What is the Executive-in-Residence? And what are the benefits for SMEs? The Executives-in-Residence, or EIR as we call it, is essentially a club of industry experts affiliated with Brunel Hive and Brunel Business School. Launched in 2019, the club is led by Dr Pavel Laczko and now have more than 20 members. They are managers from leading companies including Ford and Google and serial entrepreneurs with international experience in the tech and finance industry.

The Club is the foundation of industry engagement and knowledge exchange work at Brunel Hive. The expertise of EIRs is from several industries and they are committed in sharing their deep sector knowledge and real-life experiences. The EIRs contribute to our masterclasses, webinars, consulting, and student mentoring.

How has the Brunel Hive helped businesses during the pandemic? The pandemic has certainly affected the activities of the Brunel Hive. Most of our programmes were delivered in person.

However, acknowledging the critical period for SMEs, we have quickly adapted by launching the webinar and podcast series. Of course, entirely delivered online. This was a great effort to continue supporting businesses in this challenging year.



Can you tell us more about the webinars and podcasts?

Both webinars and podcasts are online events held regularly online.

We invite experts in various fields to discuss and explain ideas and issues related to the business context. For example, our speakers have covered topics such as: managing uncertainty and stress, cyber-security during covid-19, effective remote working, and the benefits of blockchain technology for small business.

Owners and managers of SMEs might be highly educated, but they may have left university long time ago. These events are great opportunities to get new knowledge on timely issues for their businesses.

We want companies to re-think their value-proposition, to re-structure their business plans and re-position themselves in new markets.

The activities are free to attend, and the recordings are available online for one to listen to past events.

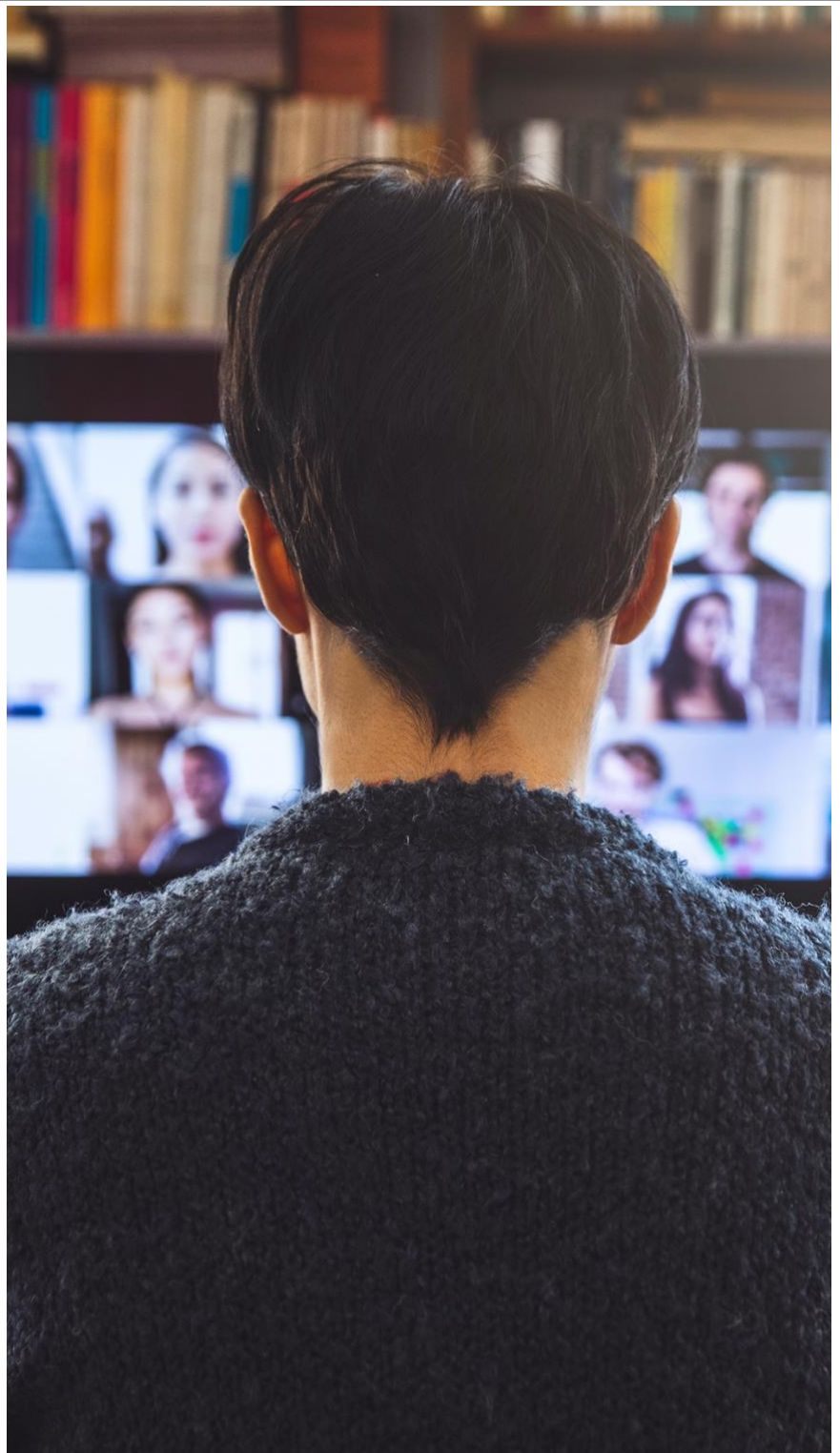
“We support senior leaders in effectively facing the challenges brought by COVID-19.”

What are the main achievements of Brunel Hive recently? The Brunel Hive is relatively young, as it started just three years ago. But, thanks to the dedication of the team we have made several remarkable achievements.

Particularly, in early 2020, thanks to the work of the team and particularly of Dr Ainurul Rosli, we received the Small Business Charter Award. It is a prestigious award and a mark of excellence for business schools that play an effective role in supporting small businesses, local economies, and student entrepreneurship.

What does it mean for the businesses in the Brunel Hive network? It is a nationally recognised award and it allowed us to deliver the Small Business Leadership Programme.

It is a 10-week programme with a curriculum designed to help SMEs developing their potential for growth and productivity. Thanks to the SBLP we support senior leaders in effectively facing the challenges brought by COVID-19 and make their businesses more resilient. ■







Artificial Intelligence: Not Just Data Scientists

Dr Grassi is an AI enthusiast with many years of industry experience in delivering data science projects to boost business growth.

He has experience in teaching and dealing with non-technical audiences.

[Connect with Dr Grassi on LinkedIn](#) to learn more about AI and data science and the implication for SMEs

AI FOR SMEs

Artificial Intelligence might sound like something from science fiction, but it's already helping thousands of organisations to grow, maximise profits and operate more efficiently.

Dr Fabio Grassi

As advances in artificial intelligence keep revealing novel opportunities for growth, businesses both small and large are scrambling to jump on the data bandwagon to sprint ahead of the competition, or merely to avoid getting left behind.

AI is an increasingly important element in many departments including e.g. Business Intelligence, CRM, Quality Control, Marketing, New Product Development, or Customer Acquisition.



“Boost sales by recommending the right products to the right customers, and more.”

Companies can now confidently predict which customers they are likely to lose and how best to retain them, extract valuable insights from customer feedback, detect faulty products using image recognition, scan resumes to shortlist candidates, boost sales by recommending the right products to the right customers, and more.

Recent market research from companies like IBM and McKinsey shows that businesses are increasingly investing in artificial intelligence. Driven by technological advancements and the recent covid-19 pandemic, more and more organisations are adopting AI tools to boost profitability and improve efficiency.

While big and tech-driven companies invest heavily in sophisticated solutions to become more and more efficient, small and medium enterprises operating in traditional industries are left behind.

Indeed, adoption of AI tools is much lower among SMEs. The excessive complexity of software, the prohibitive price for hardware and licenses, and the high-maintenance requirements of existing AI solutions can represent high entry barriers for traditional and local SMEs.

They are often unable to afford such technology and remain reluctant to invest in AI as it is not perceived as a real advantage for the business. Hence, SMEs are struggling against the march of new



AI solutions and are at risk of losing market shares gained by modern and larger companies.

Alongside the spectacular success stories, this data frenzy has produced scores of less publicized cases in which companies rushed to hire data scientists, only to discover that they were lacking the basic tools to perform anything but the simplest analyses: this is akin to placing an expensive chef in a room fitted with a plastic spoon, a Bunsen burner, and a camping fridge stocked with canned tuna, and expecting him to make foie gras, inevitably resulting in unfulfilled expectations on the part of both management and employees, and

ultimately in wasted resources. Though adoption of AI tools involves several issues to be taken into consideration, SMEs should initially evaluate two key aspects, namely: the composition of data team, and IT infrastructure.

A well-assorted data team includes at least one professional who knows how to reliably link together data sources, and who also understands the difference between a database, data cube, data mart, data warehouse, and data lake, and when to use them. In our kitchen analogy, these would be the fridge,



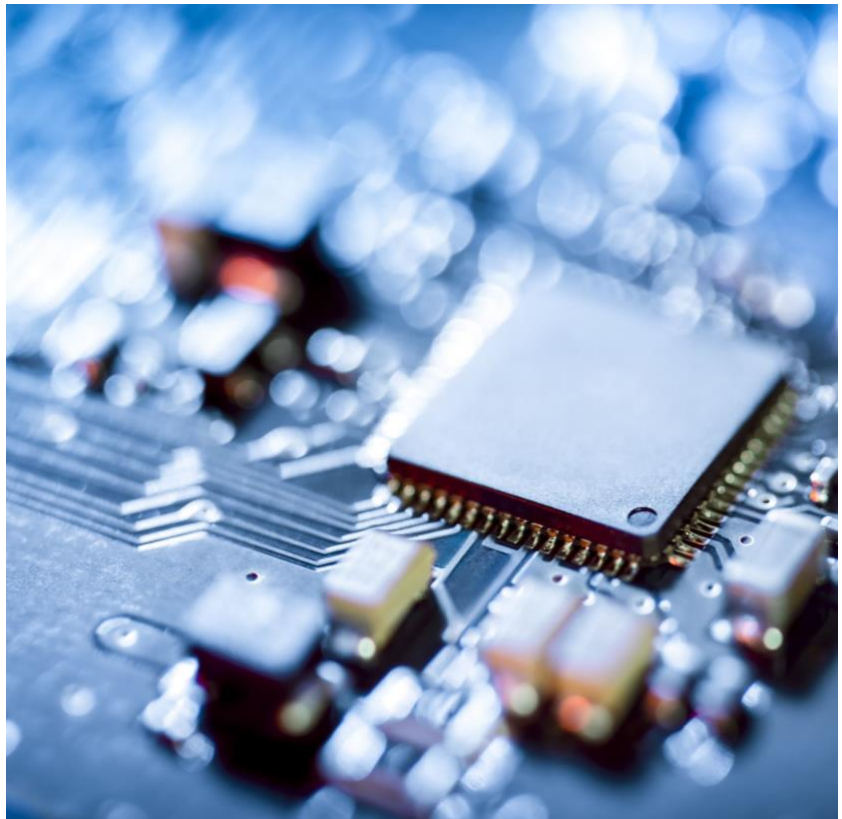
“The low upfront cost and ease of setup may make them an attractive alternative to smaller businesses.”

freezer, pantry, and shelves, and the person for this job is known as Data Architect.

Next, the well-assembled data team needs someone who ensures that incoming data is stored securely and reliably, and that it is made easily available for later processing: back to the kitchen, these are the people who peel the potatoes, slice the tomatoes, and verify that all the ingredients are neatly stored. This critical role is fulfilled by the unsung heroes of the data world: Data Engineers. The backbone of a data team, it is they who enable Data Scientists to extract the most value out of data.

Lastly, a data team will include the end users of the data itself: depending on the company’s core business, these may include generalist Data Scientists and Machine Learning Engineers, as well as more specific roles such as Natural Language Processing Engineers, or Computer Vision Engineers. Different schools of thought exist on the ideal Data Engineers-to-Data Scientists ratio, and in the author’s experience, Data Engineers should never be fewer in number than Data Scientists.

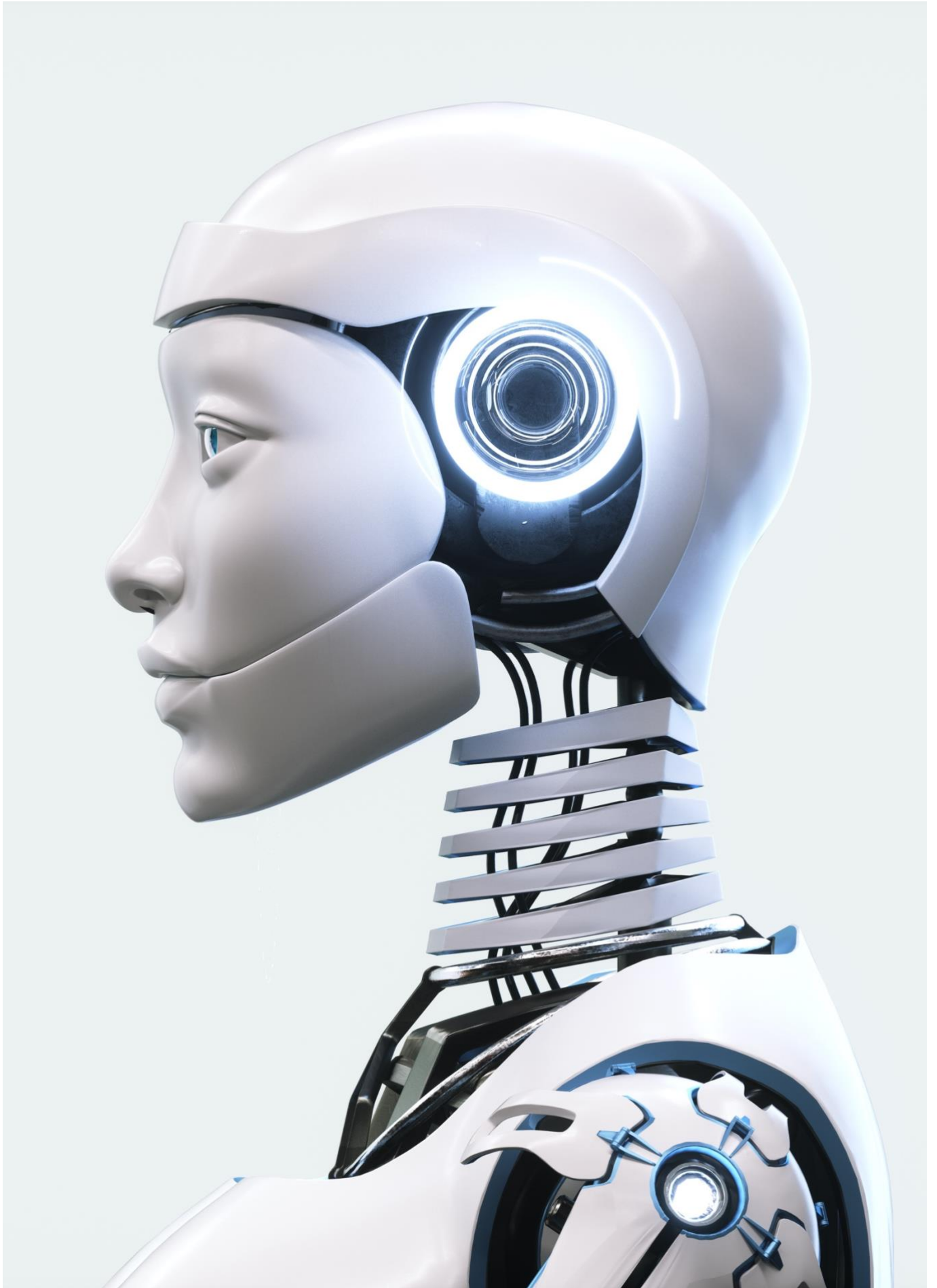
The second vital issue to consider is infrastructure: while prototyping an AI algorithm can often (but not always) be accomplished on any 1000 £ PC, deployment and maintenance strictly require a dedicated environment.



An in-house server offers maximum freedom and customizability, low running costs, and the peace of mind of having physical access to the data, but it also requires a greater initial investment, and skilled IT personnel, including at least one cybersecurity expert to ward it from attacks.

Platforms such as Microsoft Azure, Amazon Web Services, and Google Cloud are proprietary platforms that are constrained by the technology that they offer and by the limits imposed by its owners, their pricing plans can be difficult to

navigate and may inflate rapidly with increased usage, and they require staff trained in their use, but the low upfront cost and ease of setup may make them an attractive alternative to smaller businesses. ■





Brunel Hive

Brunel Hive is the growth and engagement platform at Brunel Business School. Our mission is to engineer the accelerated growth of West London businesses, and indeed businesses across London. As part of this mission, we facilitate the internationalisation of London's businesses in rapidly emerging economies across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Brunel is a university for a changing world.

With Engaged Scholarship at the core of our long-term strategy, our key objective is to be a leader in knowledge exchange in London. Brunel Hive has had an exciting year, and we look forward to working with both small and large businesses to explore new markets, technologies and opportunities globally. Engage with us. A world of opportunity awaits.

CHAIR Prof Jane Hendy

DIRECTOR Dr Geraldine Cohen
BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT Dr Ainurul Rosli
FINANCE Mr Dabir Ahmed
CONSULTING Ms Dani Saghafi
EIR LEAD Dr Pavel Laczko
EXECUTIVE EDUCATION Dr Bidit Dey
PODCASTS Dr Kiran Kandade
WEBINARS Ms Olayinka Uadiale

BRUNEL HIVE REVIEW Dr Riccardo Nucci



Brunel Hive Review

We make practical contributions on various business-related topics.

We welcome research shorts, case studies, interviews, information and opinion pieces.

Would you like your work and experience to be featured in the Review? Please submit your contribution at:

riccardo.nucci@brunel.ac.uk

Brunel Hive Review is the main communication channel of Brunel Hive. We aim to connect Brunel academic expertise with local and international businesses.

Our mission is to become a leading forum for university-industry-society discussion, addressing critical policy, strategic and operational issues. The Brunel Hive Review features in-depth interviews with leading global entrepreneurs, business leaders, academic experts, and policy-makers. The Review makes strong, practical contributions to ongoing debates and approaches in knowledge exchange, executive learning, student entrepreneurship and business practice and research.

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