AI and Myths: Principles for Business

What do Frankenstein and Icarus have in common with Artificial Intelligence? What can the stories of Cassandra and Prometheus tell us about how businesses use the technology? Lee Francis looks at the links between myth, science fiction, and AI.

There has been some polarising talk about AI in the news, online, in classrooms, even in staff meetings. For every positive gain in efficiencies, such as summarising documents and masses of data, generating fantastic imagery and slide decks, there seem to be troubling downsides with inaccuracies, hallucinations and environmental costs.

I also saw in the news the growing number of hearings at the Unites States House Oversight Committee regarding irrefutable evidence of aviation technology not originating from earth. AI and aliens – what a time to be alive!

This led me to think deeply on the times we live in, technological change, fact and science fiction, myths and reality, and the future of humanity. My mind soon wandered back to the timeless stories of Prometheus, Frankenstein, Icarus, Cassandra and Pandora.

Stories such as these can act as mirrors or lenses for reflection. By applying these myths to our current AI developments, I discovered some surprising insights and thoughtful takeaways for businesses. Each of these five figures can represent a facet of AI's development and impact.

Prometheus: The Gift of Artificial Intelligence

Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from the gods to give to humanity, symbolises the origin of generative AI. The bold act of creating something powerful and transformative. Arguably, just as fire revolutionised early civilization, AI has the potential to reshape industries, economies, societies and the role of work in human existence as we know it.

For businesses, Prometheus could represent innovation and empowerment. AI can illuminate new paths in customer experience, logistics, and decision-making. But like fire, it must be handled with care, or its users will get burnt.

Business Principle 1: Innovate boldly, but temper with responsibility from knowledgeable stewards.

Frankenstein: The Ethics of Creation

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is a timeless modern myth. In the well-known story, Dr Frankenstein creates life assembled from multiple body parts, but fails to take responsibility for his creation, leading to tragedy. His monster is not inherently evil; it is abandoned and misunderstood.

In the AI context, much of the data it uses is a blending of multiple different sources to create a derivative whole. It is often misunderstood as to how it works.

Frankenstein also warns of unintended consequences. Algorithms trained on biased data, autonomous systems without oversight, and opaque decision-making processes can all lead to reputational, even physical harm. We have already seen unfortunate cases of users being misled by online AI chatbots leading to some tragic deaths.

Ethical AI is not just a regulatory concern; it is also a brand and trust issue relevant to any company. AI's creators and implementors must ask: Are we building systems we fully understand? Are we accountable for their actions? Companies that ignore these questions risk reputational damage and public backlash.

Business Principle 2: Build ethically, create and enforce policies, understand how your systems really work.

Icarus: The Perils of Overambition

Icarus, who flew too close to the sun with his self-made wax wings, is a classic symbol of hubris, or those who are dangerously overconfident in their abilities.

In the race to develop ever more powerful AI, some companies have been ignoring the limits – technical, ethical, and societal – leading to disastrous hallucinated data or tragic losses of life due to AI's instructions.

In practical terms, this means resisting the temptation to quickly automate everything without full understanding, and instead focusing on augmenting human intelligence, not replacing it. Businesses should avoid chasing AI capabilities without understanding their wider implications. Responsible scaling, transparency, and human oversight are critical.

Business Principle 3: Scale wisely and avoid reckless ambition in achieving short-term goals.

Cassandra: Ignored Warnings

Cassandra was gifted with accurate prophecies but cursed to never be believed by others. In the AI world, she represents the many voices of caution: policy-makers, educators, and whistleblowers who warn of risks like bias, misinformation, intellectual property violations, lack of accountability and erosion of human critical thinking.

Too often, these warnings are dismissed in the name of progress or profit. But ignoring Cassandra can be costly, as we are already starting to see with AI providing confidently wrong answers.

Listening to dissenting voices is not a weakness; it is strategic foresight. Smart businesses should build multidisciplinary teams that include voices of dissent and complementary areas of expertise.

Business Principle 4: Listen to critics and anticipate risks, especially to personal and business data.

Pandora: Unleashing the Unknown

Pandora opened a jar – later mistranslated as a box – that released all the evils of humanity into the world, but also hope. She represents the irreversible impact of releasing powerful technologies into society that will cause many unforeseen consequences. Similar metaphors would be 'letting the genie out of the bottle' or 'opening a can of worms.'

As we have already seen, AI, once deployed, is hard to recall. Deepfakes, algorithmic manipulation, and data breaches are examples of Pandora's box in action. But the myth also reminds us that hope always remains, if we act wisely. Businesses should always prepare for unintended consequences and build systems that can adapt and recover.

Business Principle 5: Prepare for consequences by investing in testing, governance, transparency, and resilience.

Myth as a Reality Check

Artificial Intelligence is not just a technical challenge; it is also a human one. Technology is never neutral, and myths can sometimes help us reflect on our human values, ambitions, and fears.

Business leadership requires more than just a vision, it requires wisdom too: knowing when to hold back, what to prioritise, how to avoid disasters, understanding the team. Leaders may proclaim their company does not use AI, but is the same true of all their employees?

Prometheus, Frankenstein, Icarus, Cassandra and Pandora form cautionary and inspiring principles for understanding the ambitions, risks, and responsibilities of using artificial intelligence today.

As AI continues to evolve, business leaders must ask not just what can we automate with AI? But also, what *should* we automate? And perhaps most importantly: what should we not?

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