Applied Intelligence

An Interview with Dr. Athina Kanioura,
Chief Analytics Officer and Global Lead, Accenture Applied Intelligence

EDITORS' NOTE *An accomplished innovator and data scientist, Dr. Athina Kanioura was a founding member of Accenture's analytics business where she ran sales and customer analytics globally and drove the company's offering development around customer relationship management and personalization. As Accenture's Global Data Science Lead, she grew Accenture's data science team to more than 3,000 strong. During her 14 years at Accenture, she's held a variety of roles and built up a portfolio of specialties. Kanioura holds a B.S. in maritime economics and a B.S. in applied economics from the University of Piraeus (Greece), and an M.A. in Economics and Finance and a Ph.D. in Macroeconomics and Econometrics from the University of Sheffield (U.K.).*

Athina Kanioura

COMPANY BRIEF *Accenture (accenture.com) is a leading global professional services company providing a broad range of services and solutions in strategy, consulting, digital, technology and operations. Combining experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries and all business functions, underpinned by the world's largest delivery network, Accenture works at the intersection of business and technology to help clients improve their performance and create sustainable value for their stakeholders. With 492,000 people serving clients in more than 120 countries, Accenture drives innovation to improve the way the world works and lives.*

Will you discuss the creation of Accenture's analytics business and how the analytics business has evolved?

I came to Accenture from academia. When I joined the organization, analytics was predominantly used across industry, more for microeconomic problems and solving financial problems, but not much in consulting. It was important internally and externally to think through how analytics could solve commercial problems, such as problems in supply chain, front office, marketing, HR and finance. As our analytics practice advanced, it was a natural evolution to layer on machine learning and applied intelligence to maximize the value of these technologies.

Are analytics, data science and AI interrelated?

They are interrelated and they have to go together. There is no way to succeed in driving transformation without having all of these components. As our business has scaled, we've seen the level of maturity for clients has also increased significantly – they have adopted the thinking, the organization, the talent and the technology to drive the transformation powered by analytics and AI.

Will you highlight Accenture's focus and commitment around responsible AI?

This is one of the key ways we help clients address and think through the unintended consequences that may come from implementing AI in their organizations and with their customers. By considering at the outset how these models are constructed, what data goes into training them, how and where they'll be deployed, and with which audiences, we help clients take a thoughtful approach to AI governance that incorporates transparency, explanability and bias mitigation which are essential components for engendering trust.

How critical has it been to attract the right talent for Applied Intelligence and what backgrounds and skill sets are you looking for?

I think I am the testament that we are attracting different talent. I don't think Accenture would have ever thought that they would have an academic running a business, and I have focused on maximizing the benefit we get from having people with both business and academic backgrounds collaborating and working through client problems.

Part of our strategy has been to create a network with all the leading universities around the world. We have Accenture employees who spend part of their time lecturing in academia and continuing to work on research that helps inform the innovations we bring to clients.

In addition, we also fund students to work on more applied problems, rather than theoretical problems. This helps ease them into the consulting workforce and motivates them to understand what consulting has to offer.

We have also established research programs, not just with universities, but also with clients, so many prospective candidates can see real business applications by using the latest technology and analysis and know-how of what they have started as a business case with a client.

Accenture is known as a people business and for its deep client relationships. With all of the focus in the industry on technology, do you worry that the personal relationship and the human side of this business may get lost?

I'm very passionate about our people. Our clients come to us because they want to embark on a transformation program. They want to transform their business model because they want to go into new markets or because they are getting disrupted by competitors. There is always an underlying issue that drives the change, and Accenture has the technology muscle to be able to tackle those concerns from a technology perspective, but also the business know-how to be able to drive the adoption and the change from within the enterprise in a way that doesn't disrupt the core of the operations of a company. This broad perspective, skillset and ability to deliver is why clients trust us to help them on their transformation journeys.

Do you miss being in academia?

I do, which is why I keep my ties with academia. I still teach whenever I have time during the summer. I am a guest lecturer at several universities, and I do a lot of research work with many of my ex-academic colleagues.

I am a big believer that people follow people more than they follow companies, so if my team felt that I wasn't up to date and that I didn't give it 100 percent in this job, they wouldn't stay at Accenture and they wouldn't stay in Applied Intelligence. I'm also very proud when I learn through my people. This culture at Applied Intelligence of sharing and being transparent creates a continuous learning process that encourages an equal community of innovation without having to worry about the hierarchy of the business. ●