Leapfrog or fall behind: Sri Lanka's moment to embrace Artificial Intelligence (AI)

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I have been fortunate to witness every major wave of the digital revolution. I watched as Windows brought personal computing to ordinary people. I saw Google changed how the world finds information. The Facebook connected billions of strangers. Smartphone puts a computer in every pocket. Through all these developments, I built and launched my website, *www.studentlanka.com* , a resource for Sri Lankan students, even before Google became a household name.

Each of these moments was significant. But when I first used ChatGPT in late 2022, I felt something different. This was not another useful tool. This was a fundamental shift in what technology could do. For the first time, a machine could understand what you meant, write like a human, explain a complex idea simply, and respond in your own language. I immediately began creating content about Artificial Intelligence (AI) on social media. The response was overwhelming while the relevant posts went viral. Thereafter, I found myself performing a new role as an AI educator.

This instinct of mine has proven right. The AI growth since 2022 has been near-vertical. And in 2026, we have moved beyond AI as a conversation partner. Today, AI acts as an agent. It can browse the Web, write codes, manage files, send emails, and complete multi-step tasks on your behalf. The revolution is no longer coming. It is already here.

What is generative AI?

The generative AI refers to a category of artificial intelligence systems that produce new content such as texts, images, audio, and many more, in direct response to what you ask them. You do not need to write codes or have a technical background. You simply type what you want to know in plain language, and the system responds.

The most widely used software tools today are ChatGPT, Claude, Google Gemini, Perplexity, and NotebookLM. Each has distinct strengths, and choosing the right tool for the right purpose makes a real difference.

ChatGPT (*www.chatgpt.com*), developed by OpenAI, was the tool that introduced the world to generative AI in 2022. It remains the most recognized name globally, and is widely used for writing, summarizing, coding, and answering questions. It is highly capable, though its responses can occasionally feel mechanical.

Claude (*www.claude.ai*), developed by Anthropic, has grown rapidly in global popularity for its more natural, thoughtful writing style, and its ability to handle long, complex documents with care. It is particularly strong for professional analysis, research support, and nuanced writing tasks.

Google Gemini (*gemini.google.com*) is backed by Google's vast data resources. For Sri Lankan users, this software matters very much. Gemini has a stronger understanding of South Asian languages, including Sinhala and Tamil, and is more likely to have relevant local knowledge compared to other models. For Sri Lankans working in their mother tongue, Gemini is often the better starting point.

Perplexity (*www.perplexity.ai*) is a powerful, but underappreciated software tool. Unlike Google, which belongs to the old retrieval era of search, it returns links to web pages. Perplexity reads those pages and gives you a direct, synthesized answer with source references. For research, fact-checking, and staying current on any topic, Perplexity is the generative AI answer to Google Search.

NotebookLM (*notebooklm.google.com*), also from Google, is perhaps the most overlooked tool available today, and it is completely free. You can upload your own documents such as research papers, reports, textbooks, or meeting notes. NotebookLM becomes an AI assistant that knows your material, answers your questions about it, generates summaries, and can even produce audio discussions of the content.

For educators, researchers, and business professionals, it is a remarkable resource that a very few people in Sri Lanka have yet discovered.

Sri Lanka's AI adoption: where we stand?

According to the Microsoft AI Economy Institute's 2025 report, Sri Lanka's AI adoption rate stands at approximately 6.6 percent, compared to a global average of 16 percent, India's 15.7 percent, and Singapore's extraordinary 52 percent. We are not just behind, but we are at risk of being left behind permanently.

Sri Lanka is a country with very high literacy rates. Yet digital literacy viz., the ability to use digital tools critically, safely, and productively remains low, even among young people. This gap shows up in troubling ways. Sri Lankan Internet users are disproportionately vulnerable to WhatsApp fraud, sharing one-time passwords (OTPs) with unknown callers, clicking on phishing links, and spreading misinformation. Simply having Internet access is not enough, without the skills to use it wisely. The reason being, the people become more exposed to harm, but not less.

The same gap appears with AI. In the training sessions I have conducted with professionals across banking, finance, education, healthcare, and government in Sri Lanka, a consistent picture emerged. Most participants use the free version of ChatGPT. The vast majority use it the same way that they use a search engine viz., typing short questions and expecting quick answers. Some use it for drafting a letter, composing an email, preparing a PowerPoint outline, or producing meeting minutes.

This in fact, is not wrong. Even the basic AI use saves time. But it represents perhaps five percent of what these tools can actually do. A small number of Sri Lankan companies have begun genuine AI transformation, slowly rebuilding their systems and workflows around AI capability. This group could be the exception. For many organizations, AI adoption is still at the surface.

The skill that changes everything: how to prompt?

Here is the single most important insight from years of AI training. The quality of what AI produces depends almost entirely on the quality of what you ask for.

Many people approach AI assuming it a search engine. They type a short phrase viz., "write a letter to my client" or "explain climate change", and accept what comes back. The results are generic, vague, and rarely what was actually needed.

Effective AI use is different. For the first time in history, people with no technology background can talk directly to a powerful AI system and get results of the highest quality. That is, only if they know how to communicate clearly. This skill is called prompting, and anyone can learn it.



Nevertheless, a simple four-step approach makes an immediate and dramatic difference:

- Role -"Act as a senior environmental scientist writing for a general audience." This immediately shapes the tone, vocabulary, and depth of the response.
- Context -"I am preparing a report for a government committee. The audience is non-technical. The topic is soil degradation in the Dry Zone." Without context, the AI makes assumptions, usually the wrong ones.
- Task -"Write a two-page summary with three key recommendations, in plain language, using short paragraphs." State exactly what you want, and in what format.
- Questions -"Ask me any clarifying questions you need before you start." This single instruction transforms the output. Instead of guessing, the AI checks what it does not know and the final result is far more specific, relevant, and useful.

This approach requires no technical training. It requires clearer thinking about what you actually want. Professionals who apply it consistently report that the quality of their AI output improves dramatically, and the time spent on correcting and revising drops significantly.

Importantly, this is not a skill reserved for computer scientists. For the first time, the subject experts such as bankers, lawyers, doctors, environmental scientists, educators, accountants etc., can use AI powerfully within their own fields, simply by communicating with clarity and precision. Unlike coding, which takes years of dedicated study, prompting can be learned in a few hours and significantly improved with practice. The expert who combines deep domain (subject) knowledge with strong prompting skills will consistently outperform those who rely on AI alone or avoid it entirely.

AI for safety and resilience: Sri Lanka's real opportunities

Beyond productivity, AI is already being deployed around the world to address exactly the kinds of challenges Sri Lanka faces every day.

Flood prediction systems give communities hours of advance warning. AI tools help doctors analyze medical scans more quickly and catch what might otherwise be missed. Farmers receive real-time, location-specific advice on pests and weather. Students learn at their own pace through tutoring systems that adapt to each individual.

Further, Sri Lanka is a country that is regularly affected by floods, with a stretched public health system, a large agricultural sector, and a young population entering into a rapidly changing job market. It has direct need for all aforementioned applications. But these tools only deliver their potential when the

people using them have the skills and confidence to do so. A flood monitoring officer unfamiliar with AI cannot benefit from AI-based flood prediction. A teacher who has never used these tools cannot guide students to use them responsibly. Therefore, the technology and the people using it must grow together.

What is holding Sri Lanka back?

There are three specific barriers that constrain AI adoption in Sri Lanka, and all three can be addressed.

The first is language. AI systems currently perform far better in English than in Sinhala or Tamil. The global training data for these tools is overwhelmingly in English. Sri Lankan users working in their mother tongue receive lower-quality, less reliable outputs as a result. While Google Gemini currently performs best in Sinhala and Tamil among mainstream tools, even it has significant gaps. Universities and government institutions are uniquely placed to generate, curate, and contribute high-quality Sinhala and Tamil datasets to improve AI performance in our languages. This should be a national priority.

The second barrier is the cost. The most capable AI tools require paid subscriptions priced in US dollars, which is significantly high relative to Sri Lankan incomes. Most users are limited to free versions with reduced capability. The institutional access arrangements through universities, professional bodies, and government departments could bring better tools to far more people.

The third barrier is the scarcity of Sri Lankan content on the Internet. The information that trains AI models comes largely from sources like Wikipedia, Reddit, and academic databases where content about Sri Lanka written in Sinhala and Tamil, is relatively sparse. This means AI tools often know less information about Sri Lanka than they know about other countries. Addressing this issue requires a deliberate effort to digitize, publish, and contribute Sri Lankan knowledge in the form of all three languages to the global digital commons.

The fears are valid; but staying out has a cost

Sri Lankans have historically been cautious adopters of new technology. This is not a weakness, but it reflects a society that thinks carefully before it leaps. Such caution has real value when it comes to AI.

The concerns being raised are legitimate. There is a genuine fear that AI will reduce the need for human thinking. The young people, in particular, will rely on AI rather than developing their own knowledge, writing ability, and critical reasoning. This concern should be taken seriously by the educators and parents alike.

AI tools also have a well-documented limitation. They can "hallucinate" by producing information that sounds confident and credible, but is factually wrong. A researcher who accepts AI output without checking, it may base decisions on invented figures or misrepresented facts. Therefore, verifying what AI produces is not optional, but is essential.

Privacy is another important concern. AI tools are cloud-based services. Sensitive personal data, confidential business information, patient records, and private communications should never be entered into public AI systems.

These are genuine risks. They must be taught, understood, and managed. But the answer is not avoidance. The countries now building competitive advantage in medicine, agriculture, education, finance, and governance are doing so with AI. Sri Lanka cannot afford to opt out of a technology already reshaping the world, for fear of risks that can be understood and managed through proper education. The goal is not uncritical adoption. It is informed, responsible, and effective use.

Enable AI: do not repeat the biotech mistake

Sri Lanka has a cautionary lesson from its own recent past. In biotechnology, the country chose restriction over engagement. The bio-safety concerns and the early prohibition of genetically

modified organisms (GMOs) meant that Sri Lanka never built the expertise or capacity to evaluate and apply these technologies on its own terms. Other countries moved forward, gained knowledge, and built lasting advantage in food production and medicine. Sri Lanka is still catching up.

The AI moment demands a different response. The answer to uncertainty is not restriction, but it is informed, responsible engagement. This means nurturing AI champions such as individuals within organizations, universities, schools, and government departments who genuinely understand these tools and build capability around them. It means embedding AI literacy across every level of education. Not as a specialist module for technology students, but as a universal competency, as fundamental as reading and numeracy.

The leapfrog moment

Sri Lanka has demonstrated before that it can move quickly when it chooses to. The country leapfrogged fixed-line telecommunications infrastructure entirely, going directly to mobile phones, and transforming how citizens communicate, bank, and access the services. The AI moment presents a comparable opportunity.

The infrastructure of generative AI is global and already accessible. The knowledge required to use it well, is learnable by anyone. Sri Lanka does not need to build AI from scratch. It needs to build the human capacity to use it effectively, before the window closes.

Sri Lanka's 6.6 percent AI adoption rate is not a verdict on what is possible. It is simply the status where we are today. The gap between us and regional leaders like Singapore and India is real, but it is not permanent. This gap can be reduced or changed easily, with a clear decision made by institutions, educators, professionals, and individuals to actively engage in this technology at least now, with both confidence and care.

The technology is ready. The question is whether we are.



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