



AI IN SRI LANKA

INSIGHTS FROM DIALOG
AXIATA'S CHIEF AI OFFICER
- DR. ROMESH RANAWANA



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Dialog Axiata's Chief AI Officer



Dr. Romesh Ranawana, Chief AI Officer — a true visionary who has witnessed AI grow from its academic roots into a transformative force across industries. Sitting across from us at Dialog Axiata, his passion for innovation was palpable as we dived into his journey and thoughts on where AI is headed in Sri Lanka and beyond.

About the Interviewee: Dr. Romesh Ranawana, currently serving as Group Chief Analytics & AI Officer at Dialog Axiata, helms one of the most ambitious AI transformations in Sri Lanka. With a DPhil in Artificial Intelligence from Oxford and a first-class CS degree from the University of Peradeniya, his career spans academia, entrepreneurship, and high-impact industry roles. He co-founded simulation startup SimCentric, led UAV innovations at Tengri, and provides national-level AI counsel—including advising the President's committee on Sri Lanka's AI. Now overseeing a 100+ strong AI team at Dialog, Dr. Ranawana is driving AI into every fibre of the telco giant.



Q1: Could you take us through your career journey, from your early days to your current role at Dialog?

I'm from Kandy and completed my undergraduate degree at the University of Peradeniya, where I was part of the third batch to do a special computer science degree. After teaching for a year, I pursued my PhD in AI at the University of Oxford. It was an exciting time because data was becoming abundant, and compute power was cheap enough to make AI practical. Post-PhD, I focused on research and then co-founded SimCentric Technologies. Our startup built affordable military simulators using PC games and eventually became the largest AR/VR company in Sri Lanka. However, as my interests pulled me back toward core AI, I decided to sell my shares. That's when Dialog approached me to set up their AI unit. Given the company's scale and data, I saw immense potential to drive real-world impact. No other Sri Lankan company was investing in AI at this level, and I felt this was the perfect challenge.

Q2: What inspired you to come back to Sri Lanka after studying and working abroad?

Mainly practicality. Starting a company in the UK would have been very expensive. Coming home was also about timing. The civil war was ending, and there was a sense of optimism. I liked my time overseas, especially at Oxford, but by my fifth year there, most friends had moved on. It felt transient. I also realized I preferred life here, the culture, community, even the pace. Returning made sense financially and personally.

Q3: Many professionals leave Sri Lanka hoping to make it big abroad. What advice would you give them?

Go with a plan. Too often, people leave without one and end up accepting jobs that don't align with their skills. Getting a senior role overseas can take time, often forcing talented people into junior positions. It's fine if that's part of your strategy, but my advice is to prepare thoroughly before going—have a role waiting for you. Otherwise, you might find your career stagnating.

Q4: What attracted you to AI at Dialog Axiata?

Dialog offered scale and ambition. Being Sri Lanka's largest telco means access to vast data across channels. AI thrives on data, and Dialog had it. More importantly, I sensed a genuine commitment to embedding AI into business processes. The plan was never to do small proofs-of-concept—it was to go into production. And I felt that as one of the few companies investing seriously in AI, Dialog had a responsibility to lead. It was time for a Sri Lankan company to do something big in AI.



Q5: How do you view AI adoption across Sri Lanka?

We're probably a decade behind Europe and the US. Many companies do some form of analytics, but few implement full-scale AI in production. John Keells and Dialog are the exceptions. Banks and corporates mostly work at a proof-of-concept stage. Even in education, most AI courses don't match what's needed in practice, so graduates often struggle to find AI-specific roles.

Q6: What's missing in terms of AI development in Sri Lanka?

Investment and leadership understanding. AI is not like typical IT projects where you see ROI quickly. AI systems require ongoing tuning, data monitoring, and long-term investment. Many boards want instant returns and shut down projects too early. That's why companies talk about AI but rarely see it succeed at scale.

Q7: What about ethics and AI?

That's vital. AI is powerful but can be dangerous without oversight. Fully autonomous AI—whether in decision-making or weaponry—is risky. Even advanced AI can produce harmful or biased results if unchecked. That's why humans must remain in the loop. Regulatory frameworks and responsible AI practices will matter more and more.

Q8: What trends in AI excite you most?

The biggest shift is generative AI—models that can process voice, image, video, and other unstructured data. Before, AI mostly worked with structured data like spreadsheets. Generative AI opens entirely new avenues, especially in healthcare, telcos, education, and entertainment. This is going to drive AI growth for years to come.



Q9: What skills do you look for when recruiting AI talent?

Qualifications matter, but I look more at practical skill. Do they have a GitHub account? Have they built something? Communication skills also matter—it's not enough to code; you must explain, collaborate, and continuously learn. That's what will help someone stand out.



Q10: Finally, any parting advice for aspiring professionals?

Focus on being a well-rounded individual. Prioritize your physical health, your mental resilience, your integrity, and your connection to society. AI is a tool; what really drives change is character. Strong values will help you navigate any career. When you take care of these four pillars, leadership will follow naturally.

Dr. Ranawana's trajectory demonstrates that Sri Lanka can lead in AI—if the country manages to balance ambition, talent, and ethical stewardship. Whether you're a student, developer, or executive, his message is clear: stay grounded, be persistent, and build with purpose.

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