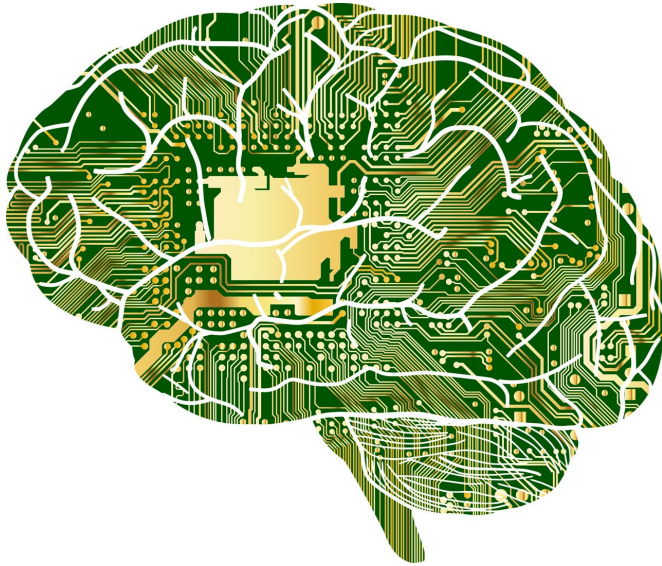


Startup Diveplane wants to make AI ethical: CEO explains what that means

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In today's world, artificial intelligence is used to make some big decisions. Colleges rely on it to admit students. Parole boards use it to approve or deny inmate releases.

One startup in North Carolina's Research Triangle is striving to make AI systems more ethical, and the company has secured significant funding to do so. On Monday, Diveplane announced it had raised \$25 million in Series A funding, major money for early-round investing. The Raleigh company prides itself on creating ethical [artificial intelligence](#), the responsible use of machines through identifying and correcting for unintended bias.

Diveplane was co-founded in 2018 by Michael Capps, former president of the Cary, North Carolina-based Epic Games. In the past four years, Diveplane has attracted a number of notable clients and investors, including several

American soccer stars.

Now backed with additional millions from [venture capital](#) and defense firms, Diveplane looks to scale up, with the ultimate goal of reshaping the AI systems that have come to dictate much of daily life.

So, what makes Diveplane's approach to AI unique? And how big does it hope to get? On Sept. 15, Capps spoke with The News & Observer to discuss. Here are five big takeaways:

Explainable AI vs. black box

Diveplane provides what's known as explainable artificial intelligence, systems that allow humans to better understand how the machines' results came to be. With this clarity, Capps said organizations can better identify flaws that may produce biased results.

"For that (to happen), it requires a human touch," Capps said. "That evaluation of being able to go back and say, 'That's not how we wanted to hire people at our company. This A.I. did something wrong. Let's go fix it.'"

Explainable AI stands in contrast to the type of AI most commonly used today, neural network systems, modeled off the biological functions of human brains. Most neural network systems, Capps said, are known as "black box AI," meaning no one—not the organizations using the technology nor the people being affected by it—can see exactly how they operate.

"It might work great, but it might not," he said. "And the fact that we don't know, but it's being used to make such critical decision feels inappropriate. More than inappropriate, it pisses me off."

Scaling up

Diveplane counts Duke Health and the auto racing team Roush Fenway Keselowski Racing among its North Carolina customers. Capps said Diveplane aims to use its recent funding to attract more clients in defense, insurance and finance.

"This is a true, real business," he said. "Now, let's figure out how to start scaling it."

Capps hopes Diveplane can one day help displace [black box](#) technologies, and he said investors have begun to see explainable AI has a market. As consumers grow more conscious of AI ethics, he said businesses and organizations have felt pressure to ensure their systems are transparent.

In a sign of this growing awareness, Capps serves on the leadership council of the Data and Trust Alliance, a group of executives from major companies like Walmart, Starbucks, Nike and CVS who have committed to promoting more responsible artificial intelligence and machine learning systems.

New office, double staff

With its latest funding, Diveplane looks to double its workforce from around 20 to 40 employees. Capps noted he hopes this is just the first of many job expansions.

His company is also opening a new office in the Smoky Hollow development in Downtown Raleigh. Despite the incoming headquarters, Capps said many Diveplane workers may be based outside the city or state.

"I wanted to build a Raleigh-based tech company with the talents here, but the world changed so much with remote work," he said. "So, it's silly for us to not cast a very wide net. Plus, the people out there who care about what we're doing, the way we're doing it, they're everywhere. We're looking for true believers in the mission."

Investors with a kick

Some of Diveplane's earliest investors were high-profile athletes like American soccer players Becky Sauerbrunn, Megan Rapinoe and UNC alum Mia

Hamm. Retired basketball player Sue Bird (Rapinoe's fiancé) and former baseball player Nomar Garciaparra (Hamm's husband) also invested.

Capps first connected with many of the players through their involvement with a 3D printing startup called Carbon. Capps and Hamm were advisers, while others invested. Carbon turned out to be a success, and Rapinoe, Hamm and others were open to investing when Capps mentioned his idea for a new ethical AI company.

Lessons from Epic

From 2004 to 2013, Capps was president of Epic Games, the Cary-based creator of video game titles like Fortnite, Rocket League and Gears of War. While Capps wasn't with the company for its largest success —Fortnite—he said there was an ambition at Epic he believes has translated to Diveplane.

"Here, it's such a totally different business (from Epic), but I think we have this core expectation of excellence," he said. "There was never any question (at Epic) that it wasn't going to be huge, and I think that very much applies to this."

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