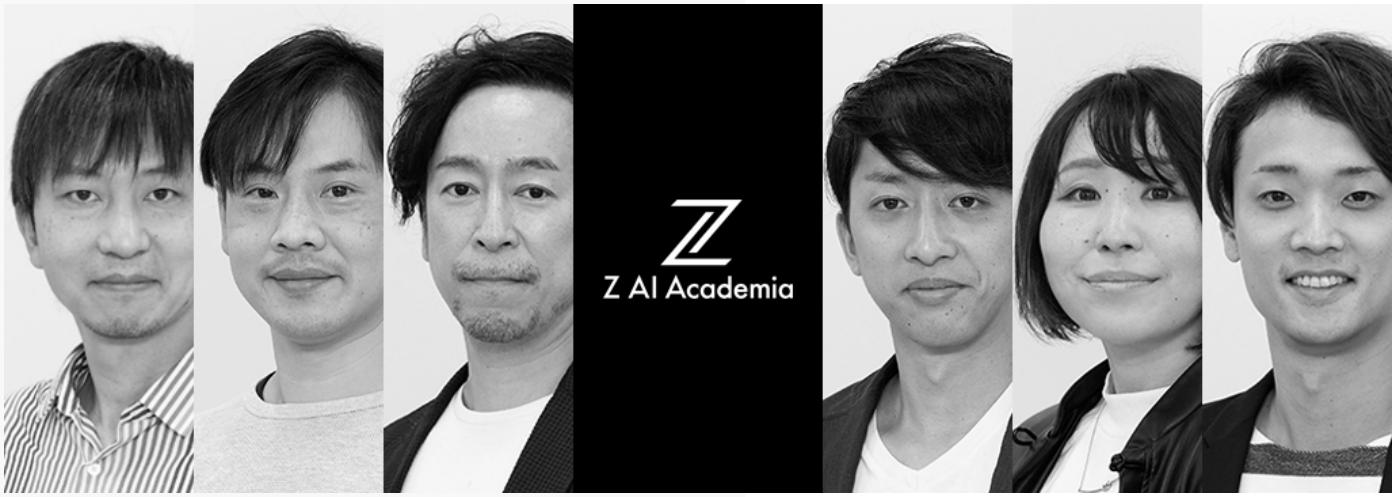
AI-Related Courses Thrive in In-House University　Z Academia" — What Were the Take-Aways from Z Humanities AI School?



Along with the promotion of digital transformation, all eyes are on "reskilling," the redevelopment and retraining of employees' professional skills. A particularly important issue is how companies can provide learning opportunities for employees to acquire skills and know-how in the AI and data domains.
Z Holdings Corporation (hereinafter "ZHD"), which aims to become a leading AI tech company from Japan and Asia, focuses on reskilling also in its in-house university, "Z Academia." In FY2021, 201 courses* were held for all the employees of the ZHD Group, participated by a total of approximately 26,000 employees. In 2022, Z Sustainability Academia was launched to realize sustainability transformation (SX), and ZHD is working to create synergies through the exchange of extensive human capital within the Group.
In FY2021, AI-related courses (e.g., Z AI Accademia) accounted for ten of the top twenty Z Academia courses in terms of the number of participants.
In this article, we bring you the efforts of one of the most popular courses, Z Humanities AI School, where the participants' results are beginning to take shape.
*155 courses held as seminars; 46 courses held as archived video

Z Holdings Establishes Z AI Academia to Develop AI Professionals with Dual Focus on Arts and Sciences
https://www.z-holdings.co.jp/en/news/press-releases/2021/0715/

"Z Sustainability Academia" Launched to Promote Understanding on Sustainability from a Business Perspective
https://www.z-holdings.co.jp/en/news/press-releases/2022/0516/

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What are Z Academia and Z AI Academia?

Z Academia, an in-house university, was established in April 2020. Aiming to be a base camp where employees of the ZHD Group companies can share the awareness of creating a future, chart a path together, and learn from and teach each other, Z Academia serves to connect the weft of the employees of the ZHD Group companies and accelerate group synergy.
In July 2021, Z AI Academia was launched as a community for training AI talents among Group companies. Board members from Yahoo! JAPAN, LINE, Ikyu, ASKUL, and ZOZO group joined to share the latest AI case studies. From September 2021, Z Humanities AI School, a six-month practical program, was launched for Group companies' employees with humanities backgrounds. 674 AI personnel were trained in Z AI Academia, raising the level of knowledge and practical skills related to AI and develop human resources across the ZHD Group.

AI specialists from Group companies joined as board members

Z Humanities AI School received a high degree of attention within the ZHD Group

In Z Humanities AI School, a six-month program (seven online sessions) was held which also included AI planning based on five Ws and How and AI implementation using practical no-code tools (a service that allows users to create applications without programming). In the last session, the "Best AI Project Selected by Everyone" was held to vote for the best AI project presented by the participants, and three projects were selected from each of the two categories of "Division Project" and "ZHD Cross-Division Project."
"Understanding the Purpose of Customer's Store Visit" is an AI project by ASKUL's Daiki Yasuda which won second place in the "Division Project" category. The presented AI improves the accuracy of recommendations and sales promotions by estimating the customers' purpose of visit to the store, and is currently under consideration for practical application in ASKUL.
We invited six award winners and asked them to discuss their knowledge and learnings gained from the Z Humanities AI School.

Participants

Daiki YASUDA -- ASKUL Corporation ("ASKUL")
Joined ASKUL in 2017. In ASKUL Business Planning, ASKUL Business Unit, utilizes data to plan and promote business strategies across departments.
Title of AI project: "Understanding the Purpose of Customer's Store Visit" (AI which improves the accuracy of recommendations and sales promotions by estimating the customers' purpose of store visit)

Tomoaki TOMITAKA -- LINE Fukuoka Corporation ("LINE Fukuoka")
Joined LINE Fukuoka in 2013. After working in sales and screening, is currently involved in patrol operations as the Senior Manager of Content Moderation Department.
Title of AI project: "Chat Communication Emotion Diagnosis" (AI that points out improvements in chat expressions for smoother communication)

Shunji IIDA -- Yahoo Japan Corporation ("Yahoo! JAPAN")
Joined Yahoo! JAPAN in 2007. As manager, is engaged in the customer support of YAHUOKU! (auction service) and PayPay Flea Market.
Title of AI project: "AI that Converts Jargon Used by Other Companies into the Company's Own Terminology" (AI that converts different terms used in Group companies to facilitate communication)

Shiho OONO -- Yahoo! JAPAN
Joined Yahoo! JAPAN in 2017. Engaged in product support for YAHUOKU! (auction service) and PayPay Flea Market.
Title of AI project: "Particular and Precise Search" (AI that searches for items in clothing, sundries, furniture, etc., based on the characteristics of product images)

Hiroyasu ASANO -- Yahoo! JAPAN
Joined Yahoo! JAPAN in 2005. As technical director, is engaged in the development/operation of Yahoo! JAPAN Mail, Yahoo! JAPAN Calendar, etc.
Title of AI project: "Easy Journal Entry with Photos" (AI that enables easy journal entry from photos taken, facilitating day-to-day review)

Yuki KAJIWARA -- Yahoo! JAPAN
Joined Yahoo! JAPAN in 2013. After working as an engineer, currently works as a system planner in the Sales Promotion & Customer Attraction Development Department.
Title of AI project: "Spare Time Matching Solution" (AI that suggests and matches available slots in hotels and beauty salons to users)

What did you learn from Z Humanities AI School?

Yasuda (ASKUL): Working in a department in ASKUL that deals with data, I was already in a position where I had to actively consider the use of AI. Prior to the course, I was also assigned to a project to consider how to approach new customers. Therefore, in Z Humanities AI School, I decided to work on that theme for this project. New customers are difficult to approach based on their purchase record because they have only purchased once or never yet. But if we regarded ASKUL as a store, customers always have a reason for visiting stores. So I thought that estimating the purpose of the store visit would make approaching new customers possible.
In the course, I heard Noguchi-san*, the lecturer, say that there is a shortage of "people who can use AI" rather than "people who can create AI." Hearing this, my mindset changed, and now I want to be a person that can make a difference through AI planning. In the Venn diagram of data science, this would be the business power part.
Because this AI project won a prize, it gave momentum to the company to make this project a reality. We are in the process of coordinating with the sales promotion team to conduct Proof of Concept.

*Lecturer, Ryuji Noguchi is the former CAIO of ZOZO NEXT and is currently director, CMO of ELYZA, Inc.

Tomitaka (LINE Fukuoka): I, too, had a belief that the people involved in AI were "those who could match AI with issues and actually create them," and I felt that this was a high hurdle for me, as I do not have the programming skills. However, I was shocked to hear in the first session of the course that there is a shortage of people who can match AI with issues, rather than persons who can create AI.
I strongly felt that breaking down the required skills is important, but also that acquiring the skill to match AI with issues is necessary in the frontline, and that I must acquire such skills. This sparked my interest in taking the rest of the course.
There is already a movement to use AI in the work I am in charge of. Now that I understand the framework of AI, I can ask myself, "What is the purpose of this project? Is this the right direction?" In the future, I would like to develop a system so that I can make concrete proposals from the frontline.

Oono (Yahoo! JAPAN): I agree with both of you. I also had a vague image of AI as a very advanced technology, but now I feel that it may be possible to incorporate it into more familiar issues, and in a good way, the hurdle has been lowered. In fact, I feel that many of the winning projects, including the project I submitted, dealt with themes very close to our daily lives.
At the same time, I came to have more and more respect for engineers who can implement AI. I would like to be able to talk with engineers from the same standpoint when discussing AI as an AI user in the future. I would like to be a person who can understand the difficulties of both sides, the creator and the user, and have such a sense of balance.

Iida (Yahoo! JAPAN): My department has also been increasingly involved with AI, but it was only all talk and I had not been able to link AI to my own actions. Since Z Humanities AI School dealt with this issue, my understanding of AI was greatly enhanced, and I am now able to think about the theme of "how I can contribute to AI" with a sense of ownership. Learning more about AI expands my dreams, but I do not think it is a tool that can be thrown in at random to magically improve something. I feel that the benefits of AI can only be maximized if there are people who can master it, so I would like to make sure that what I have learned is incorporated in the workplace.

Asano (Yahoo! JAPAN): I am an engineer, so I think I have more knowledge about programming than most others. However, as someone who has not been involved in AI at all, it would have been a hurdle for me to suddenly tackle AI. The fact that the first course was for non-engineers made it easy for me to get into the subject. I feel that the level was just right as an introductory course.
Many engineers are interested in the AI field, so even though the course was a Z Humanities AI School designed for liberal arts majors, I got the impression that quite a few engineers and designers also participated.
In terms of the AI project, I was honestly surprised that my project won an award. I received in-depth feedback, so I realized once again that it is important to participate in such occasions and to actively communicate with others.

Kajiwara (Yahoo! JAPAN): As a former engineer in charge of systems planning, I too believe that I was able to participate in a valuable learning opportunity.
There was a lecture in which President of Ikyu Corporation, Sakaki-san came as a lecturer. He said that he uses AI to send online newsletters to very finely segmented users. Sometimes, the newsletter is sent to as few as a few dozen users, and I was very surprised to know how particular he was in tailoring to the users' taste. Sending many different types of newsletters to a small number of people, rather than sending one type of newsletter to everyone, requires a lot of operational man-hours and seems extremely difficult.
YAHUOKU! and PayPay Flea Market, the services I am in charge of, also send targeted push notifications, but the target is much larger. Sakaki-san also said that he is competing with the employees to create such a model. I was also impressed by the fact that the president himself is leading and promoting AI.

Lastly, we asked Yoichi Ito, Z Academia President for his comment.

"Growing into a forum where we learn and teach each other." - Yoichi ITO, Z Academia President

It is a year since we launched Z Academia University, a learning community. We have released over 150 programs on various topics such as AI, communication, business skill, and well-being. Over 20,000 employees of Group companies have participated.
In addition, Z Academia has become a place for Group employees to "learn and teach each other" by inviting Group employees with a variety of backgrounds and skills to participate in the program as Z Academia certified lecturers.
In FY2022, in addition to AI and many other programs, we will take on many new challenges and expand this arena of learning, "Academia," even further. I hope you will look forward to our efforts in the future.

Next, to expand the initiative beyond the Group

This rich exchange of human resources within the Group and the synergies that arise from it, as well as the reskilling efforts for AI talent, will support the medium- to long-term growth of Z Holdings.
In FY2022, Z Academia is considering further initiatives by creating a common effectiveness measurement index for all courses and compiling a database of participation logs to visualize individual changes after attending a course. Z Academia also plans to open the courses on the theme of AI, a common theme in society, to participants outside of the ZHD Group in order to expand the horizontal framework of teaching and learning beyond the Group.

Employees with humanities background are also AI talents - What they learned from AI courses in the in-house university
https://about.yahoo.co.jp/info/blog/20220728/zaiacademia.html (Japanese only)

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