



&SAMHOUD: HOW IS AI REDEFINING THE BUSINESS CONSULTANT?

"I'm really the optimistic guy who thinks AI will change the world for the better, but I know it will also change it for the worse. My role is to change it for the better."

—Salem Samhoud, Founder, &samhoud

Salem Samhoud has long been captivated by the promise of data and artificial intelligence (AI). A technology optimist, he firmly believes in the transformative power of digital innovation to drive meaningful change in the business world. His keen interest in technology is complemented by his passion for art; he is an avid collector with a particular fondness for controversial and innovative works. This unique combination of interests reflects his penchant for bold, unconventional ideas, which has been at the core of his vision for &samhoud, a Dutch consultancy firm specializing in change management, which he founded 35 years ago. In recent years, his appetite for innovation has focused on leveraging AI and data-driven analysis to develop impactful and sustainable business strategies. However, persuading his customers—sometimes his own colleagues—to adopt this mindset, has not always been without challenge. “AI makes me better” he says about his interactions with AI-hesitant customers, “so why would you say that you’re not going to use it? The first task I have is to inspire people to use and to be open to AI.” To do so, Salem believes that &samhoud must practice what it preaches, and stand at the forefront of AI adoption.

Background about &samhoud

Founded in the Netherlands in 1989, &samhoud is a boutique strategic consultancy firm known for its distinctive human-centric approach, emphasizing transformative change. Over the years, &samhoud has built a strong reputation for combining deep analytical expertise with a genuine commitment to fostering strong, trust-based relationships with clients. In early 2024 Salem was replaced by Ingrid Smolders. While he stepped down from his role as CEO, he remains involved in the firm’s strategic activities.

Ingrid describes the firm's strategy as being deeply intertwined with its commitment to leadership development and the human aspect of organizational change. She emphasizes the importance of real conversations and trust-building within leadership teams, which are central to &samhoud’s consulting approach. The challenge, she points out, lays in figuring out how to leverage AI without

undermining this human aspect. To her, the future is one in which “connections between people will get more and more important”. She believes that AI and technology must enhance these connections, not replace them.

From the outset, &samhoud has been committed to continuous learning and innovation. The firm actively invests in research and development to stay ahead of technological advancements and continually refine its methodologies. This commitment ensures that &samhoud remains a trusted partner for organizations seeking to navigate the complexities of modern business landscapes.

GAMING

&samhoud’s focus on technology predates the AI buzz catalyzed by ChatGPT’s release in late 2022. In a strategic foray outside the traditional path of consulting, in early 2015 &samhoud acquired a 50% stake in Ranj (later rebranded &ranj), a boutique games and gamification company founded by Marcus Vlaar and Michaël Bas in 1999. The primary reason for acquiring &ranj was to leverage its advanced gamification techniques and technologies to bolster &samhoud’s portfolio of services. &ranj has a proven track record of developing engaging, educational games that facilitate learning and behavioral change. These capabilities align with &samhoud’s mission to drive transformation and strategic growth through innovative solutions. Their focus is on creating personalized learning experiences and simulations that address complex challenges in professional environments, such as leadership development, risk management, and strategic decision-making.

For example, &ranj designed a simulation for the Ready Initiative in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University and various NGOs. The simulation prepares field managers for outbreak scenarios by placing them in a virtual environment where they must manage resources, ensure the safety of their staff, and take appropriate countermeasures. In other instances, &ranj developed gamification solutions that encourage employees to overcome adoption obstacles during processes of technological and cultural transformation. This enables &samhoud to offer a portfolio that comprises strategic change consulting services with deployable gamified solutions.

MOVING TO AI

One of the firm’s central figures in developing &samhoud’s AI vision is Remy Middelhof, who joined &samhoud in 2012 as trainee and later became a junior consultant. His journey to becoming the firm’s AI lead is marked by his proactive efforts to establish a comprehensive data-driven approach within the firm. Starting around six years ago, Remy identified a significant gap in the company’s utilization of data and AI technologies. Driven by his background in innovation and entrepreneurship, and his fascination with computation and academic research on the topic, he began working independently on building a dedicated data team in his free time between projects. “I actually considered doing a PhD” he testifies about himself, “but I eventually decided I will probably not enjoy it, because I love working with clients and businesses more than being in a research lab.”

Remy’s initial focus was on enhancing the firm’s data capabilities by improving questionnaires and conducting more rigorous experiments. He introduced natural language processing (NLP) techniques, such as sentiment analysis and topic modeling, to analyze open-ended responses from questionnaires, significantly enhancing the depth and accuracy of data insights.

The advent of large language models embodied the transformative potential of AI for &samhoud. By 2022, Remy was exclusively focusing on AI and data opportunities, and spearheaded several AI initiatives designed to streamline internal processes and enhance client services.

Remy's efforts culminated in the formulation of a structured AI strategy for &samhoud, which he launched two years ago. This strategy encompassed three horizons: optimizing internal processes with AI, advising clients on AI adoption and change management, and exploring potential startups and disruptive ideas born out of their AI work. On the first and second horizons, two resulting projects were the **bias checker** and the **interview analyzer**.

THE BIAS CHECKER

The idea for the bias checker emerged from &samhoud's recognition that many existing AI tools and solutions, such as LLMs, often come with inherent biases that can skew results. Remy and his team sought to develop a tool that went beyond superficial AI applications, focusing instead on leveraging a rigorous, research-based approach to identify and address biases. "The bias checker idea came from looking at ... academic research, and thinking about something more than just an AI tool with a nice prompt."

Remy's team compiled a comprehensive database of academic studies and relevant research, initially identifying around 150 different biases, which they later refined to 80 key biases that are most pertinent to organizational contexts. The primary motivation was to create a tool that not only aids the firm's consultants but also extends its use to clients and the broader public.

The bias checker is designed to be user-friendly and accessible, available freely online to both consultants and clients. The tool assesses various texts, documents, and organizational communications to identify potential biases. It operates by cross-referencing the input with its extensive database of known biases, highlighting areas where biased language or perspectives might be present.

Consultants at &samhoud utilize the bias checker during client projects to ensure that their recommendations and reports are free from unintentional biases. Mara Soekarjo, an experienced senior change consultant, found it helpful for improving her own work. She uses it as a tool for checking her analyses, ensuring that she considers relevant biases that could affect her interpretations, and helping her verify she has considered relevant blind spots in her analysis. It acts as a prompt to make sure nothing significant is missed, providing a structured way to identify and address systematic omissions or misinterpretations. The bias checker is also useful for interaction with clients. "I sometimes use it as an example, to explain better to my client why there's a problem here, and why it needs to be addressed" she explains.

THE INTERVIEW ANALYZER

The interview analyzer tool at &samhoud was conceived to address a significant pain point in the consultancy process: the time-consuming and labor-intensive nature of conducting and analyzing interviews. The rationale behind the development of this tool emerged from surveys and feedback, indicating that interviews and case writing were among the most time-consuming tasks for

consultants. It was noted that while consultants enjoyed the analytical aspects, the repetitive and manual work of conducting interviews and documenting them was less valued and more draining.

Inspired by the need to enhance efficiency and optimize consultants' time, Remy and his team decided to automate this process using AI. The primary goal was to leverage AI's capabilities in summarization, transcription, and synthesis of large volumes of information. The interview analyzer works by recording and transcribing interviews conducted during consultancy projects. Once the interviews are transcribed, the tool draws on AI to summarize the content, identify key themes, and extract relevant insights. This includes maintaining continuity by stitching together different chunks of information, ensuring that no critical context is lost in longer interviews.

The tool allows consultants to quickly process and review interview data, significantly reducing the time spent on manual transcription and initial analysis. It can be particularly useful in large-scale projects where numerous interviews are conducted, providing a scalable solution to handle extensive qualitative data effectively.

Romeé Janet and Milou van Breda Viesman are two junior consultants who had recently joined &samhoud, and who use the interview analyzer to enhance their own efficiency. As relatively new consultants, they find the interview analyzer and similar tools particularly useful for quickly assimilating industry terminology and understanding the nuances of client interactions, effectively speeding up their learning curve. As juniors, they join senior consultants in interviews. Historically, junior consultants were responsible for documenting interview content.

Beyond assisting with communication, the tool aids in project management by documenting decisions and tasks, ensuring that deliverables are tracked and understood by all team members. And by analyzing and summarizing interviews, the tool helps identify key themes and challenges, offering insights that might be missed. "Instead of me having to write everything down" says Milou, "now co-pilot is just on, and I know, okay, the meeting is being recorded. That's fine. And then afterwards I can ask, okay, what are the to-dos, what are certain topics we touched upon, what was being said here. It makes it easier for me to contribute to the conversation".

The two acknowledge there are downsides to using the interview analyzer. There are limitations in the transcription accuracy, on top of the need to cross-verify the information, especially for exact quotes. There is also occasional hesitance from clients regarding the recording of meetings, though these are typically addressed by explaining the benefits. Perhaps most concerning to them both is the potential for over-dependence on this technology. "When you start as a junior consultant, you do not have that much experience, so at first, co-pilot was quite good" says Romeé. The interview analyzer further helped her contextualize the interviews, and understand concepts and ways of thinking she was not trained to engage with in university. "I really believe that our human touch is what distinguishes us also from other organizations" she added, highlighting that ultimately it is the consultant's, not AI's, role to analyze.

THE PATH FORWARD

AI adoption, as everyone at &samhoud realizes, is an ongoing task. Since its skunkworks beginning several years ago, &smahoud's focus on AI has increased, and now includes a dedicated team, comprising AI specialists Hugo Philips and Daan den Otter, as well as internal AI strategist Nina Hilhorst. The team is focused on finding AI applications that will deliver clear and relatively

immediate value by streamlining operations and increasing productivity. Its members also recognize that AI reconfiguration is an ongoing process that necessitates constant experimentation, and educating internal users. It is a fast-moving world that requires the AI team to stay up to speed with AI innovations which are occurring at a dizzying pace.

Pleased by &samhoud's initial success, Salem and Ingrid are mostly focused on thinking strategically about the future. Both are preoccupied with the need to deploy AI responsibly, ensuring that it does not perpetuate existing biases or create new ethical dilemmas. They advocate for transparency and accountability in AI applications.

But &samhoud is, ultimately, a consultancy firm with expertise in people and relationships. As Ingrid points out, it is not a tech company. "There is consensus that LLMs are transforming language into data" she highlights, "everyone can see that. But there is still skepticism if we are the right company to do something with it."

And while Salem is less ambivalent about the need for &samhoud to adopt AI in its core competences, he has concerns about the potential negative effects of AI integration. He stresses the importance of consultants taking the time to think deeply and reflect, rather than relying solely on AI. He worries that people might stay superficial in their analysis if they depend too heavily on AI. His enthusiasm about AI is also tempered by his realization that we still understand very little about the effects of AI on the humans using it. And he does not fully understand what AI adoption will do to people at &samhoud, and those working for its clients. "What does AI do to employee morale?" he asks rhetorically. "For me" he stresses, AI is about "taking humans in the company to the next level". "It will change a lot for people" he asserts, "and if you close your eyes to that, you don't see the future". At the end, however, Salem considers himself a people evangelist. "That's my role. I believe in people."