

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

CIO JOURNAL.

Element AI Taps Former IBM Innovation Leader To Help Steer Growth Path

Element AI made a splash in June after it raised \$102 million in Series A financing, the biggest such round for a Canadian-based AI startup, according to Dow Jones VentureSource.

By David George-Cosh

Element AI Inc., one of Canada's best-funded artificial intelligence startups, has hired a senior International Business Machines Corp. executive as the company prepares to focus on growing its business outside of the North American market.

The Montreal-based startup added Linda Bernardi, IBM's former chief innovation officer for its cloud computing and Internet of Things businesses, to head the company's growth and product strategy. Ms. Bernardi joined the company earlier this month, she said in an interview. Her role will mainly focus on collaborating with Fortune 100 companies and "help them think from an AI-first mindset," she added.

"Artificial intelligence, unlike anything we've done in computing before, is not defined in a way that somebody delivers a package, they install it and you're good to go," Ms. Bernardi said. "Gone are the days of certain software doing certain things. So, when I look at all the players that really understand this complexity and are approaching it with a certain comprehensiveness, Element AI really stood apart."

Canada has emerged as a hotbed for AI companies after laying roots in studying and developing the technology at various Canadian universities over the past four decades. University of Toronto professor Geoffrey Hinton, who works part-time at Alphabet Inc.'s Google unit, increased interest in Canadian AI and machine learning researchers after publishing a seminal work on neural networks in 2006.

Element AI made a big splash in June after it raised \$102 million in Series A financing, the biggest such round for a Canadian-based AI startup, according to Dow Jones VentureSource. Meanwhile, the Canadian government in March earmarked 125 million Canadian dollars (\$97 million) to set up artificial intelligence research hubs in Toronto, Montreal and Edmonton, Alberta.

Many Canadian academics that specialized in AI and machine learning soon found themselves plucked by U.S. tech giants such as Alphabet Inc.'s Google or Facebook Inc. Element AI, founded in 2016 by Yoshua Bengio, one of Montreal's top AI researchers, and entrepreneur Jean-François Gagné, was set up to help global corporations implement the technology into their operations.

"The problem we're facing today is there are so many different opportunities for us, we need to decide on the right ones," Mr. Gagné said in an interview. "We needed an experience world-class leader that would help us deal with our growth but also build the right product to serve our customers."

Ms. Bernardi's appointment fills in a key role for Element AI, which is looking to open new offices in Europe and Asia in the coming year. The company also is looking to hire a new chief financial officer, whom it expects to announce soon, Mr. Gagné said.

She also plans to spend a significant amount of time interacting with Element AI's fellows, a group of 61-odd academics involved in artificial intelligence research that can later be used in various business applications. As high-calibre AI talent becomes scarce throughout North American universities, Ms. Bernardi said she plans to reach out to various academics in Europe and Asia and recruit them for the company's research network.

Correction: Element AI Inc. was founded by researcher Yoshua Bengio and businessman Jean-François Gagné. The company's artificial intelligence fellows number 61. A previous version of the article said that Mr. Gagné was a researcher and the number of fellows was about 50.