



SuperDataScience

SDS PODCAST
EPISODE 984:
BUILDING AI AGENTS
WHERE 99.9%
ACCURACY ISN'T GOOD
ENOUGH, WITH RAJU
MALHOTRA



- Jon Krohn: 00:00 The headlines shout SaaS apocalypse, but I don't buy it. Neither does my guest today who argues the SaaS opportunity is now far bigger than ever before. Welcome to episode number 984 of the SuperDataScience Podcast. I'm your host, Jon Krohn. Today's guest is Raju Malhotra, Chief Product and Technology Officer at Certinia, an Austin, Texas-based company whose professional services automation software is used by over 1,400 organizations around the world. We've partnered with Salesforce today to explain how their Agentforce 360 platform empowers innovators to turn their ideas into scalable software businesses. We'll look at how successful businesses like Certinia use this platform to bring AI agents securely and reliably to their customers and how SaaS has evolved to include agentic capabilities delivering far more value than ever before. Ready for this? Let's go. Raju, welcome to the Super Data Science Podcast. It's a delight to have you here.
- 00:59 How are you doing today?
- Raju Malhotra: 01:00 I'm doing very well, Jon. Nice.
- Jon Krohn: 01:02 And where are you calling in from?
- Raju Malhotra: 01:04 I'm in the San Francisco
- Jon Krohn: 01:06 Bay Area. The place to be for all things AI for sure, Raju. So you're the chief product and technology officer at a company called Certinia. And so probably a lot of folks have already heard of your company, but for those who haven't, what problem does your platform solve for enterprises?
- Raju Malhotra: 01:24 Yeah. So Jon, think of Certinia as a growth engine for professional services companies. So on one hand, we have customers like KPMG, IBM, PWC, companies that are pure play professional services organizations. And then



we also have customers where services is part of some other organization or some other sort of business. So companies like technology, companies like Siemens, Salesforce, Google, AWS, HP, Cisco, et cetera, and also some other verticals, accounting, financial services, et cetera, et cetera. But in all those sort of customer scenarios, what Certinia helps on is really help you sell, deliver and manage your services business. And really think about this as connecting on one side to your CRM system, on the other hand, to the ERP system and really helps you sell, deliver, and manage your business at scale.

- Jon Krohn: 02:26 Perfect. And a big part of that is the topic of the past 12 months, AI agents, right?
- Raju Malhotra: 02:32 It is. Yep.
- Jon Krohn: 02:34 Nice. And are you able to maybe make things concrete with a specific customer story so we can kind of understand, you've given us at a high level what you're able to do with Certinia and your AI agents, but yeah, give us a common user story.
- Raju Malhotra: 02:49 Yeah. So if we think about the AI agents, let me actually just back up a little bit. Certinia has been in business for over 10 years. And we've had a software as a service business working with 1,500 enterprise customers, two million users, and we really help our customers with a number of workflow automations, capabilities, really help them be more productive. And I would say for last one or two years, we've been really helping our customers move from automation to autonomy. And that's really part of our AI story. And one example, just a few months ago, we hosted Siemens for one of our customer events where they shared their experience of using Certinia staffing agent. And staffing is a big part of any professional services organization. And this organization within Siemens really helps on driving the services delivery. So



staffing is a big part of what they do on a day-to-day basis.

03:54 The Certinia staffing agent helps their team, the staffing management team, resource management team really find the right resources that would be ideal for that role and then staff them. And as those changes happen, people sometimes get sick, they have to move around, they go on vacation. The staffing agent actually does that optimization in a semi-autonomous way of working with the human team. So think about this as the staffing agent really part of your team, but really taking something that might take hours to a matter of minutes and really deliver that type of quality experience. And in this case, the staffing is not just for one or two or just a few dozen services delivery people. You're talking about thousands or tens of thousands of assignments and they're changing. And it's really not humanly possible to do this without the help of automation and now with the help of autonomy with the agents, it's actually much more easy.

05:00 So Siemens has seen a huge example, huge benefit of the agents that we're talking about.

Jon Krohn: 05:06 Excellent. That's a great easy to understand example. In terms of how the AI agent or the Certinia platform is involved, say in that example, if I am a staffing person at Siemens, I'm a recruiter at Siemens and I want to use a Certinia AI agent, how do I experience that? How do I interact with it?

Raju Malhotra: 05:26 Yeah. So there are different ways of interacting with it. One is really from the Certinia app and you have this user experience that you can log in, you can actually have that connected with your CRM. So the nice thing is that Certinia is native on the Salesforce platform. We're one of the largest ISVs on Salesforce platform. So you really have this intuitive environment that you can do your



day-to-day tasks, and the agent really sits with you in that experience. The other experience that we see increasingly getting more and more popular and really loved by our users is it basically gets exposed within Slack. Even a lot of work now is getting done within Slack. So the staffing agent is actually sort of like your team member in Slack and you can ask that staffing agent, "Hey, you know what? The project that we were working on, the proposal that we had from this prospect, what happened to that?"

06:22 Can we actually staff a new staffing plan, what is going on with any pre-staffing type of situation?" So really Slack is another way to interface that, but it's a different ways of actually interacting with the power of what the agent brings.

Jon Krohn: 06:37 Nice. That makes a lot of sense. Yeah. So there's the app, you could go to certinia.com, I guess is the URL and be able to interact right there or in Slack makes a lot of sense to have it integrated right into the workflow, make things ... I guess it just feels like interacting with another person on the team.

Raju Malhotra: 06:55 That's right. Yep.

Jon Krohn: 06:57 Nice. Now, your business is built natively on Salesforce and you've had several partnership announcements over the years. What does that mean to build on Salesforce?

Raju Malhotra: 07:08 So you're right. Salesforce is a big partner for us. In fact, Certinia is built on the Salesforce platform. We're one of the largest native ISVs on Salesforce platform, and that really allows us on one hand to provide a user experience, which is very easy, intuitive, seamless. So if you are using any other Salesforce products, the Certinia experience really blends in very natively in that sort of workflow. But what's more important, in fact, is that the data that we have access to as part of a shared org, as a native



partner, is really the unified data that our customers have in their environments. And of course, they have complete ownership and privacy of that, but now using our capabilities, both our SaaS capabilities in the past and also agentic capabilities, we are able to access, tap into the power of the unified data that could be sitting in their same agent for sales environment that might be the Certinia created project data, but that's really data that is readily actionable and accessible instead of trying to ETL that in, trying to bring that in through some of their sources, through integrations, is actually really accessible.

08:30 And that's really the power of how well the recommendations and the actions our AI can provide. And we are built on Agentforce natively as part of that platform.

Jon Krohn: 08:45 Nice. Yeah. We'll get to Agentforce 360 in a moment. That's going to be another big topic on this episode. But before we get there, Salesforce is a SaaS business, and we've been hearing a lot in the press in recent months with things like with how powerful tools like Claude Code have become, Codex from OpenAI. There's been an impact on the stock market all over the world for SaaS businesses where people are saying SaaS is dead. What's your response to this kind of SaaS apocalypse sentiment? And does that give you any concerns about having Salesforce as the backbone of everything you're doing?

Raju Malhotra: 09:28 So one thing is for sure that SaaS business and the SaaS itself is evolving. And I think that's how we see it. The traditional way SaaS has been done in a legacy way, in many ways that is dead. And now we are talking about agentic capabilities, but we don't see a world where you have agents that are sort of floating around enterprise untethered or having unfettered access to the data sources either. I think the world that we're moving towards is a combination of SaaS plus agentic. And



whoever came up with the interesting words like SaaS, so clips that I can't even pronounce properly, should probably think about what is the new name for that SaaS plus agent, but really that I think is the power of it. And why that is actually powerful because we do see the role that humans are playing in this workflow.

10:24 It's not about just agents, it's not about just humans either. So it's a combination of how humans and agents work together. And in that sense, there are going to be workflows that are really optimized for humans, and there are some workflows that are optimized for agents. And I think where we are moving towards is that sort of optimization of human plus agents working together. So that's really the choice we want to offer to our customers, our users, and absolutely we see the world where agentic transformation is really disrupting the world. In fact, professional services, if you think about it, is the most manual, most human business that can be. Our customers are delivering bespoke custom services at scale to their customers, and that's where AI comes in. That's where the disruption is actually the most. So in a way, we are helping our customers really transform their businesses using this approach of SaaS plus agents.

Jon Krohn: 11:24 And I think you're touching on something there that means that the total addressable market of this SaaS plus agents world is vastly larger than SaaS alone because you're talking about all the things that people do as part of that addressable market. And so the SaaS apocalypse thing, I don't buy it at all.

Raju Malhotra: 11:44 And there's an interesting thing, Jon, which is you talked about the addressable market. If you think about professional services, sort of if you think not just the SaaS but professional services, our belief is that there is actually a net new opportunity that gets created as a result of the agentic revolution that we are in. And why is that? If you start from professional services, how they get



delivered, they're very much centered on human delivery. So that means who's available, are they in the right time zone, are they in the right geography, et cetera. You add the agents and really think about this as a hybrid team of human agents, you unlock an opportunity on the demand side, which we did a research last year and we found it seven to eight times bigger than the opportunity that currently exists because you unconstrain the fundamental constraint in the professional services, which is about skills.

12:41 And now with the cloud, with OpenAI, with a bunch of other sort of options, that constraint actually goes away. So overall, that in fact increases the addressable market by seven to eight times, which is in fact a big tailwind for the professional services business.

Jon Krohn: 12:58 For sure. You're preaching to the choir here, Raju. All right. So before I went into the SaaS apocalypse thing, which is bogus, we were talking about Agentforce 360. So tell us about what is Agentforce 360? I know it's a Salesforce product, but tell us about it and how Certinia takes advantage of it.

Raju Malhotra: 13:19 Yeah. So first of all, I personally consider Agentforce really closer to a platform. So we have a Salesforce platform that provides a set of APIs and tools and effectively platform as a service. Agentforce is the AI stack of the core platform, and it provides the Agentic services in a trusted, privacy, connected data type of environment. So really Agentforce360, especially Agent4360 for partners is all the ways that we need as a ISV, one of the largest sort of partners for Salesforce to accelerate our transformation for ourselves and for our customers on the AI. Building an agent, by the way, is non-trivial, but building an agent that performs well in an enterprise use cases with compliance, with scale, with the type of permissions, with the type of capabilities that it should have is really, really non-trivial. And I think that's where we combine our



domain knowledge, understanding of customers, and then the power of Agentforce on Salesforce platform and Data Cloud.

14:31 I think it becomes a force multiplier for us to deliver the ISV agents, the package agents to hundreds and thousands of our customers much more easily than kind of DIYing ourselves or worse our customers actually trying to DIY themselves.

Jon Krohn: 14:48 Raja, can we dive into this Agentforce 360 thing a little bit deeper? It recently opened up for anyone to build on top of. And so any of our listeners can go and learn about Agentforce 360 and see how it could be useful for them. How did it change what you can do at Certinia?

Raju Malhotra: 15:06 Yeah. So the Agentforce 360 really fundamentally changes how we are able to deliver the agentic capabilities to our customers. So let's actually unpack what's really needed for a good enterprise grade agent to operate at scale. I think there are really three things that would be critical for that. First is the agent actually needs a lot of context, a lot of context that is grounded in your structured data, your unstructured data, your metadata, telemetry, et cetera. So a lot about how your business operates and that context is really very good starting point for the agent. The second area is really about reasoning and reasoning is how to use, make sense of what data assets, what actions at what point. And the third one is of course the agent experience and how you interact with the agent through Slack, through app, et cetera. Now the power of Agentforce, in fact, over last say year, year and a half as it has evolved, really the power of Agentforce360 is in all those three areas.

16:20 Context is really grounded in the Salesforce data, which is fantastic. But really think about reasoning is an area that it has actually has come up with a lot of new innovations. And the nice thing about this reasoning layer



that Agentforce has developed is that it combines the best of probabilistic, as well as now with the deterministic logic so that the agent is aware of guardrails in a much more tangible way. So just to give you an example, as Certinia, we provide financial resource financial modeling for our customers, and it's not okay to be 99.9% right, right? When you are 99.9% right, someone goes to jail. When you're talking about accounts payable, accounts receivable, the financial statements. And this is where the agent script as part of Agentforce really adds that determinism to the probabilistic, which is a core capability, usually a trend from a LLM perspective.

17:23 So I think that's where the Agentforce just getting a little bit deeper helps us deliver agents that are ready for the enterprise environment. They're actually compliant, they're scalable, they're built on the trust layer. I

Jon Krohn: 17:37 Love that. And I was actually planning on asking later in the episode about like guardrails and what data these AI agents have access to through Agent Force360, but I think you covered all of it right there. Through having these guardrails in place, through having access to all of the right data and telemetry, like you mentioned there, how does that make an impact for your customers? What kinds of results are you seeing?

Raju Malhotra: 18:02 Yeah. So we have seen a ton of great results with the customers who are experiencing the Circenia agents. And I would say the results have been really in two categories and they usually start with productivity benefits and then increasingly, I think they go to the creativity benefits, things that you just couldn't do before. In terms of productivity benefits, we have seen improvement in revenue, improvement in margin, improvement in utilization rate, improvement in just the availability of the team to be able to do some more creative tasks because the agents were able to help on the productivity. For example, in the staffing agent, if you have a staffing agent



working with a staffing team, you can do some of the tasks about restauring and other sort of changes to the team. You can really offload that work to the staffing agent so you can focus on more of a strategy work, more of a creative work.

19:03 So the impacts has been quite meaningful. Just to give you an idea, typically if you have a 1% improvement in the utilization rate for a professional services organization, that translates into 1.3 to 1.5% increase in the top line, and about 1.5% increase in the EBITDA, the profit margins for our customers. So if we can improve the utilization rate just by 1%, that has a tremendous impact. And we're talking about companies that are significantly large at enterprise scale. Many of our customers, for example, are running over a billion dollars off their professional services business through Certinia. So just think about the impact of all these combination of agentic layer with the SaaS layer is having in terms of business.

Jon Krohn: 20:04 Sure. A few percent of a billion is not a bad number. Yeah, that's really cool. Great that you have those hard data for us on the kinds of impact that Certinia and these AI agents are making for your clients. All right. So moving beyond your company specifically, I've got some questions for you that are broader related to what you're seeing, what you're experiencing. As we've talked about in this episode, we've got incredible capabilities that are getting exponentially better all the time in terms of the length of the human task that can be replaced by LLMs. And what excites you about this current wave of AI innovation?

Raju Malhotra: 20:49 So do you mean what excites me even more than the frequently novel moments that we keep living in, like Open Claw and Cloud Opus movies and ChatGPT moments? So there's so many exciting moments that I think we're just on a roller coaster



21:05 That we're living through. But I think this may sound a little bit of an unglamorous sort of answer, but I genuinely feel excited about the fact that we are getting closer to the impact moment for AI, especially in the enterprise. And what I mean by this is, we've seen firsthand our companies, our customers progress from experimentation to really thinking about ROI in production, and they're actually realizing the benefits of putting together a number of agents, applying that to their production environments, and starting to see how much meaningful impact it can have for their own business. And I know this is a disruption. There are a lot of changes happening, but I do think the tailwinds that actually help our customers be more competitive, be more successful over time and really think about their business transformation and their customer's transformation in a meaningfully different way is an exciting sort of prospect.

Jon Krohn: 22:13 Touche, for sure. And it is really exciting times. It's so wild. Hopefully lots of our listeners feel like they need a podcast like this to stay on top of everything that's going on. And speaking of which, a lot of our podcast listeners are hands-on AI practitioners themselves. What advice do you have for folks like that who are building AI powered enterprise products themselves?

Raju Malhotra: 22:35 Yeah, no, I think your podcast title, by the way, saves it all. I think it's about AI. It's about generative, ML, a lot of different types of AI, but really it's about data science. And I would say my number one sort of advice is that with the power of AI that we have with the LLM, with the reasoning, with the inference, with the improvements in the chips, data quality becomes far more important than ever. Unifying, protecting, and making that data accessible to AI as well as to humans is really a key for differentiation, and really thinking about how that data quality really permeates through the organization. So I think that's always been a hard problem, but really now I think it's even more critical. And it's not an easy answer,



right? It's not a journey. I mean, it's not a hundred percent perfect destination. We don't know that, oh, this is perfect, 100% high quality data.

23:37

We have arrived here. I think it's really the thought process of how we accelerate that journey to get to a better actionable data. And I think the other sort of advice, which may seem very kind of intuitive here is having that growth mindset, having that curiosity and learning, because things are changing so fast, I think that's where is really critical. And I know there are sort of studies which say we're basically, there's a pilots and experimentation and there's so much going on. I think, of course, the focus should be on productivity and business impact and it is happening, but I would say in that world, experimentation is still very key. Learning individually, the latest greatest things that are coming up, experimenting and having some type of firsthand experience and experimenting even as an organization as part of your portfolio is going to be a key for differentiation.

Jon Krohn:

24:32

Really nicely said. Great tips for our listeners. Thank you very much. Well, Raju, that's the end of my regular questions. And you said you've listened to a couple of the podcast episodes before you came on air. So maybe this question that I'm going to ask you now isn't going to surprise you. I usually, I'm supposed to give guests a hint that this is going to happen before they're in the episode, but I always ask my guests for a book recommendation. Do you have anything for us?

Raju Malhotra:

25:00

I listened to this book before actually I learned that this was going to be a movie and I loved it. And I think that's something I would recommend. It's Project Hail Mary by Andy Weir, the same author who wrote Martian. I have to say, I love the book so much. I listened to it on kind of trips and just couldn't get enough of it. I am slightly nervous of watching the movie because usually the



movies don't quite live up to the standard. But if there is one book, at least I would recommend listening or reading, that would be the book which really takes the fantasy, but science also generally gets it right and it is so much fun, quite an interesting read.

- Jon Krohn: 25:49 Yeah. I think The Martian famously got a lot of the science right around how that could possibly work. And that was a great film. I actually, I haven't read the Martian book. So that's a great recommendation. And then I also heard potentially what will make the film better for you if you do end up watching it. I haven't watched it yet. I do intend to, but I read an article that said that the director fought to ensure that it had the same ending as the book, which apparently was a bit of a struggle.
- Raju Malhotra: 26:18 Oh, I can't imagine why that was a struggle, but I'm glad if you made the ending as the book, I would have been disappointed if the ending was different than what was in the book, because that ending is great, not to give away anything to your listeners.
- Jon Krohn: 26:32 For sure. A great ending is probably not much of a spoiler. All right. Raju, it's been so nice having you on the show. Really enjoyed your insights today. If people want to get more of your thoughts after the episode, how should they do that? Where should they follow you?
- Raju Malhotra: 26:48 I think socials anywhere, but I would say LinkedIn is probably a good way to catch up on. I'm happy to connect with someone and anything that comes up, please feel free to ping me there.
- Jon Krohn: 27:00 Lovely. All right, Raju, thank you so much, and hopefully we'll catch you again on the show sometime soon.
- Raju Malhotra: 27:06 All right. Nice talking to you, Jon.



Jon Krohn:

27:10

Informative episode today with Raju Malhotra in it. He covered how traditional SaaS isn't dead. It's evolving into a hybrid of SaaS plus agentic capabilities where humans and agents work together in optimized workflows. He described how by removing human skills constraints from professional services delivery, the agentic revolution could expand the addressable market by seven to eight times, and how the Agentforce 360 platform combines probabilistic AI with deterministic logic and guardrails, which is critical for say financial use cases or even a 0.1% error rate is unacceptable, and just in his words, could lead to people going to jail. All right, that's it for today's episode. I hope you enjoyed the conversation. To be sure not to miss any of our exciting upcoming episodes. Subscribe to this podcast if you haven't already, but most importantly, I hope you'll just keep on listening. Until next time, keep on rocking it out there, and I'm looking forward to enjoying another round of the SuperDataScience Podcast with you very soon.