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'Cern for AI' seen as a positive step

By Sophie Hogan

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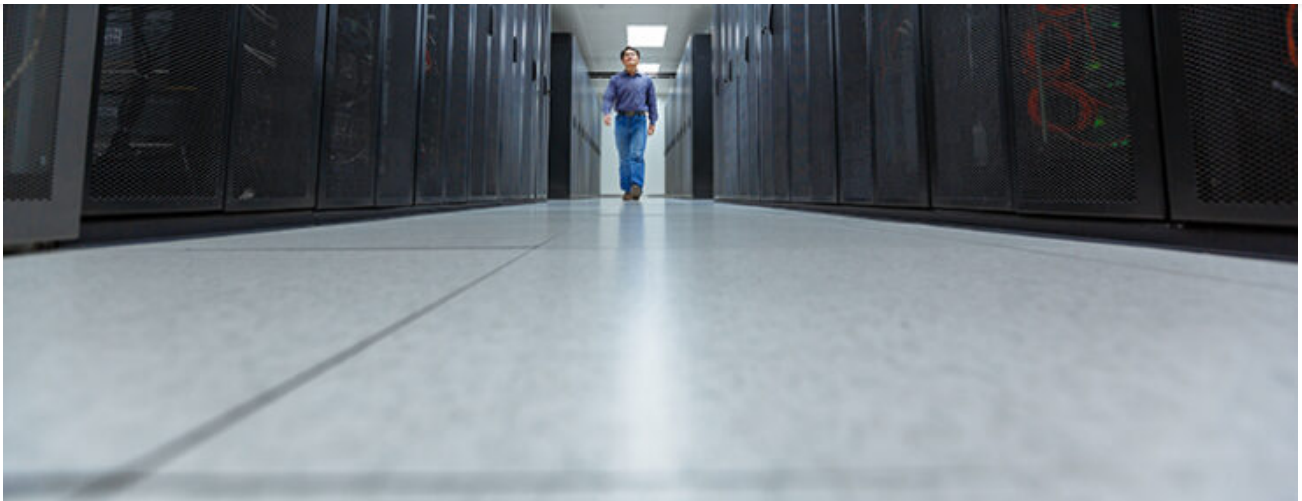
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Commission plan for EU 'gigafactories' is welcomed, but some experts want to see more

A plan to create an EU public-private partnership for building artificial intelligence infrastructure, likened to a "Cern for AI", has been welcomed as a step in the right direction. But it may not be enough to ensure European leadership in the field, some experts have said.

The plan for the InvestAI partnership, which would create 'gigafactories' to enable researchers and companies to develop advanced AI systems, was announced earlier this month by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, who said it would be "akin to" the European organisation for nuclear research.

Cern is an intergovernmental organisation, created in 1954, that for decades has coordinated investments in enormous particle physics infrastructures as well as the world-leading research making use of them.

Experts told Research Professional News that the plan to create the AI partnership was a welcome recognition that Europe needs an initiative along these lines for the field.

Nebojša Nakićenović, deputy chair of the Commission's group of chief scientific advisers, said: "I do think that this is a great initiative." He said it was "consistent with" 2024 recommendations from the group on promoting the uptake of AI in science, which called for a "distributed institute for AI" to support the community.

More to think about

"President von der Leyen's proposal aligns with the direction we've been advocating and is a substantial move towards responsible AI development," agreed Ljubiša Bojić, a senior research fellow at the Institute for AI Research and Development of Serbia. He was lead author on a 2024 paper that set out a theoretical framework for a Cern for AI.

But in keeping with that paper, Bojić added: "I believe there are areas that require further attention...To fully address the challenges of AI alignment, it is vital we incorporate multidisciplinary research, focus on ethical considerations and establish robust testing environments as part of this initiative."

Kimmo Koski, managing director of the CSC IT science centre in Finland, said more thinking was needed around "what the impact" of extra computing capacity could be and "how to achieve it".

"Instead of reinventing the wheel, the EU should think about how to make the most of what we already have in place," Koski said, suggesting that the existing EuroHPC public-private computing partnership already provides a solid foundation for a "competitive" AI ecosystem.

Von der Leyen announced that the InvestAI partnership will get €20 billion in EU funding as part of a broader €200bn AI investment from the EU, industry and other sources. But she was short on further details.

Max Reddel, advanced AI director at the Centre for Future Generations, a think tank that also published a report in 2024 on a Cern for AI, said the amount for the partnership was "very promising". But he added: "We're not done yet, right? The question will still be, what does it mean—where are they going to be? How are they going to be run?"

“This move is something we at CFG have long said would be necessary...If it takes on a strategy that is more high-risk, high-reward investments for research, taking the ones that are most promising to scale-up, I think it can be very effective and promising,” he said.

Not just infrastructure

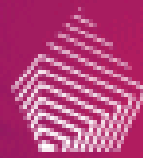
Elliot Jones, senior researcher at the UK-based Ada Lovelace Institute for AI and data research, pointed out that Cern was not created with the intention of just “pooling resources to build bigger and bigger facilities”.

“It was about international collaboration...to push forward humanity’s understanding of fundamental science,” he said. Likewise, a Cern for AI “should lead on responsible AI diffusion and adoption that genuinely benefits citizens, rather than a race towards training ever-bigger models in the name of ‘sovereignty’”.

Matteo Cinelli, associate professor of computer science at the Sapienza University of Rome, agreed that the challenge for the EU is not just to secure investment or build infrastructure. For him, it is to ensure that it “can innovate quickly”.

“One of the biggest risks is falling into the usual traps: fragmentation and bureaucracy...We have the expertise, but we struggle to connect the dots that make us competitive,” he warned. “If these AI gigafactories end up as slow, centralised institutions with limited access, they won’t be engines of growth—they’ll just be expensive, inefficient projects.”

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