Where will the digital talent come from?

Will it continue to come from STEM disciplines or should we complement it with creative talent that can approach a problem from a different perspective?

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The IT industry was initially a place for computer nerds — intelligent and accomplished in technical quests. They mostly came with STEM qualifications armed with science, technology, engineering and mathematics capabilities to develop complex codes in software labs that changed the course of many industries.

Today, IT is beyond just software skills; it is about transforming businesses with digital capabilities. It's no more about coding alone. It's about solving business challenges using technology-led innovative ideas. It's about design thinking. Being agile. About identifying the right problems to solve. About collaboration and of applying innovative business models in different industries or in different contexts, often times technology inspired. It's about being creative.

Will the digital talent that the industries of today demand continue to come from STEM or do we need to complement them with creative talent that can turn the way we think and approach a problem from a different perspective?

An interdisciplinary approach to solving challenges: A student's approach to problem-solving is deeply influenced by the discipline they come from. They tend to use the knowledge and skills that they are trained in. However, there is no one right way to solve a problem, different perspectives bring different solutions.

If you ask a group of students who come from STEM disciplines to provide a solution to global warming, they will think of retrofitting fuel-powered vehicles with solar technology, while an artiste or an anthropologist will probably suggest carpooling and an efficient public transport. An economist is most likely to advocate a change in the national energy policy. And probably the best solution will be an innovative amalgamation of insights that come from each discipline.

A team of science graduates may design the most efficient artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled medical device that help people with arthritis function better. But do they consider how the users "feel" living with arthritis and how does it "feel different" when they use this device?

We need employees who can offer a different perspective or bring out elements that go beyond commerce and profits, logic and reasoning but have the imagination to include human elements and artistic liberty to bring empathy or aesthetics in the design of products and solutions.

Emphasis on industry-specific and cross-functional capabilities: Every industry needs talent that is aligned with business strategy. In addition, they must be conversant with the demands of a digital environment.

For example, the manufacturing industry had designations like supplier quality engineers, production managers and distribution managers but today you have new positions like digital twin engineers, drone data coordinators, and digital offering managers. Traditional retailers hired merchandisers, store managers and customer service managers. Today, they are looking for e-commerce managers, digital marketing web developers and data analysts.

The work environment is changing rapidly with new technology invading almost every function in an organisation, requiring each function to scale up capabilities. However, the functional divide makes it difficult to manage these capabilities because there is no ownership for most of these essential capabilities.

Therefore, we need to develop an overarching function-agnostic capability development road map. Organisations need to create an environment where employees are encouraged to learn on their own and upgrade themselves with new skills at their own convenience that meet their needs.

Digital talent and where it is likely to be: We have heard of gig economy, skills economy and dynamic labour pools. What do these mean for an organisation? Enterprises will probably have a larger pool of talent to choose from in the future with traditional employment giving way to freelancers and contractual or project based employment.

People will have the opportunity to have flexible career paths as innovations take place at the workplace. Hiring will be more democratic in an open talent marketplace.

Learning will see a lot of innovation, with age, distance or current qualification playing little role in the ability of an employee to learn. It will be all about willingness, learnability and aptitude. Honing and mentoring the existing talent to map up to the changing demands will be a primary focus for most organisations.

Therefore, an organisation that can build a fair and transparent talent management system to create opportunities for employees to continuously learn and grow will make a large impact on its success. And at the core of that system, will be a culture of true learning.

At Infosys, we have a massive plan of developing talent for the future. We have identified a set of future skills and have created learning pathways for our employees and students to learn at their pace and get certified and once they acquire the proficiency, they get the much coveted "skill tag". This offers them an opportunity to move to new roles and projects, gain experience and move forward in their careers.

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