The Most Important Skill in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the pace of digital development worldwide, as everything—from meetings to medical consultations—moved online. This might sound overwhelmingly positive.

For tens of millions of workers, it was not.

They may not have the necessary skills to compete in this new world. These are accountants, typists, and executive secretaries searching for jobs in a new economy where hired candidates have titles like "Cloud Engineer" or "Growth Hacker" on their résumés. Without a concerted effort to retrain them, researchers at RAND Europe have found that they are likely to be left behind.

And not just them. The cost of this growing skills gap will be measured in trillions of dollars and will hit hardest in places that lack reliable digital infrastructure, such as internet access or widespread digital literacy. As the global economy struggles to recover from the impact of COVID-19, this skills gap threatens to keep pushing it down.

“There simply aren’t enough people with the right digital skills to enable the transformation that companies are seeking,” said Salil Gunashekar, research leader and associate director at RAND Europe, who focuses on science and technology policy.

At some point in the coming years, the world will reach a major milestone: the number of hours worked by machines will equal the number of hours worked by humans. A recent Salesforce survey found that three-quarters of workers worldwide feel unprepared for the jobs they might encounter on the other side of this milestone.

Those planning to work in healthcare or financial services, for example, may need to learn how to use artificial intelligence-powered computers. Those looking to work in metal mining may need to understand how to operate robots and analyze Big Data. An accountant may become the operator of a process automation robot.

Business leaders have been warning for years that what they see on résumés does not match what they need in new hires. Europe’s Digital Economy and Society Index recently found that nearly 60% of employers are struggling to fill digital roles with qualified candidates. Yet, the realities of the pandemic have left them with no choice: four out of five global business leaders say they are accelerating the automation of processes and daily tasks within their companies.

The world's leading economies could now lose $11.5 trillion in potential growth by 2028 if they fail to close the skills gap, according to the global consulting and professional services firm Accenture. India, South Africa, and Mexico will be particularly affected. So will groups that can least afford the economic loss: the elderly, racial and ethnic minorities, and people living in rural areas.

The World Economic Forum estimates that 85 million jobs could be lost to automation in the next three years across more than a dozen industries. At the same time, it expects 97 million new jobs to emerge, better suited to the future of work. On paper, this should be a win. But

without a major commitment to upskilling and retraining existing workers, RAND Europe found that it will be a loss for employees and a loss for employers.

There are no simple solutions here. Companies need to become more agile in reallocating and redeploying their existing workforce to better meet their needs instead of trying to hire their way out of the skills gap. They also need to do more to help these employees acquire technical skills, such as programming and data analysis, as well as interpersonal skills, such as teamwork, that are essential for success. National governments can help by investing in vocational programs and other support for displaced workers.

An important step would be to develop a common "skills language," researchers wrote. This would ensure that candidates and employers have the same understanding when using terms like "Cloud Engineer" or "AI Engineer." It would help hiring managers quickly assess candidates based on the skills they bring to the job rather than just the name of the university on their résumé (which, in today's world, is increasingly irrelevant).

Workers, on the other hand, need to change their mindset. Education no longer ends with a high school diploma or a college degree. The skills they have now may not be relevant in a few years. As a technology manager in Canada advised during the research: "Be Good at Learning."

Yes. This is the most important skill in the age of Artificial Intelligence:

"Be Good at Learning."

Digital transformation requires you to learn, unlearn, relearn, and stay in this cycle if you truly want to remain employable. The ability to adapt to new technologies and the skill to learn faster and faster will be what sets you apart from machines.

It doesn't matter your field, your industry, your degree, your age, or your gender. The world is undergoing a deep digital transformation, and jobs as we know them are being reinvented. Those who fail to keep up with this natural evolution will be left behind, as we have seen many times throughout human history. Learn as much as you can about different subjects, from interpersonal skills to technical skills. The only limit to what you can learn is the one you impose on yourself.

"Be Good at Learning." Stay in a constant state of learning.