

Reading comprehension

(1) Over the last several years, the pace of innovation in artificial intelligence (AI) has accelerated. This field of computer science is devoted to creating machines capable of performing tasks that used to require human intelligence. Today, AI applications are being launched that can drive our cars, take our customer service calls and even prepare our taxes. These same AI innovations are causing anxiety about the prospect of machines taking away jobs.

(2) Predictions have led to a spectrum of different opinions. Some believe AI will liberate us from tedious tasks and ensure maximum efficiency . Others think AI will lead to mass job displacement . Between the hype and the fear, however, is a reality to which companies and the people they hire can all adjust. Change is inevitable. Certain jobs will be automated, but at the same time, AI will offer new opportunities for companies to create value, give rise to new jobs and change the emphasis on the types of skills employers will need to thrive.

(3) Many employers, workers and students are now wondering what those new types of skills will be. Stories are emerging about companies paying superstar salaries for highly technical, AI-related developer skill sets. The supply of knowledge in newer applications is extremely scarce compared to demand, but flying below the radar is a nearly opposite type of demand that is likely to grow in the future — the need for human soft skills. For many professionals, understanding the importance of those soft skills may be the key to future career success.

(4) “Soft skills” refer to the interpersonal characteristics that enable a person to interact effectively with others. For many workers, these skills will be increasingly important for employment and career advancement in the age of AI disruption. These skills, which include communication, listening and empathy, differ greatly from “hard skills,” which are acquired through education and on-the-job-training.

(5) Lawyers, accountants and even IT security experts are all examples of highly skilled professions that can be at least partially automated due to advances in AI. Each of these careers is shaped by a need for people who possess deep knowledge, have quick recall and have developed learned skills. AI can replicate many of these capabilities. For example, a legal researcher can now use AI applications to quickly identify relevant information for any case, a task which previously took many hours of work. In fact, one study has found the legal realm to be one of the fields highly susceptible to automation.

On the other hand, that same study found some of the safest fields were ones focused most highly on human interaction: social worker, occupational therapist and clergy. This forecast is not surprising. While an AI application can respond, analyze and predict based on the input it receives, robots and algorithms are not capable of producing authentic and genuine care and empathy.

(6) For employers and workers, it's crucial now, more than ever before, to focus on refining humanity's defining traits of listening, understanding and empathy. Such skills remind us what it means to be human and that there are people who hear what you're saying and truly care — even in a tech-driven society. Can a machine deliver that level of empathy or compassion? Probably not. AI may automate some tasks, but it can't replace the human capabilities needed for so many roles.