

Upskill and adapt to remain job-relevant in digital age

A couple of decades back, around the time I started my career, computers were heavy and fixed on a desk, mobile phones had just about hit the market and used to be large enough to resemble a brick. We had to rely on unreliable dial-up internet connections, hoping that emails, which I may add looked very different than today's, were sent without network interruptions. Back then, driverless cars or devices that revealed flight paths by simply pointing skywards, were reserved for sci-fi flicks, perhaps even beyond 007's imagination. And yet, here we are! The pace and magnitude of change resulting from ongoing technological advancements is astonishing. What earlier took decades – or even centuries – to achieve, now happens in weeks or months. The speedy nature of this shift, however, constantly questions our readiness – both in life and at work.

The wave of technological advancement is having a disruptive impact on our workplace landscape. This was seen during previous industrial revolutions when millions of new jobs were created while millions other became redundant. Largely defined as 'uberisation', the fourth industrial wave is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres. Enhanced connectivity is enabling us to fragment and democratise work among various groups or individuals anywhere in the world, by-passing age-old office set-ups.

At the same time, changes in existing business models are influencing a significant redesign of the workplace and constitution of the workforce. As the shift becomes more prominent, leaders are turning to human resource (HR) specialists for help in overcoming the challenges of a digitised workplace. Areas such as recruitment and training, organisational design and structures, strategic workforce planning, and new age leadership

development are all increasingly gaining priority. As a function, HR too is gradually moving towards leveraging talent analytics and workforce planning to make evidence-based decisions around their people strategy.

These changes are also resulting in transition from job security to job relevance and career security. There is an increasing demand for 'premier' talent that is equipped to work in a digitised workplace, but supply of such talent is scarce. This gap, among other factors, has given rise to contingent forms of employment such as project-based, seasonal and freelance employment. Additionally, full-time employees are finding themselves under constructive pressure to continuously upskill and adapt; and those who are unable to, will find it difficult to stay job relevant.

Everyone in the current workforce needs to understand that technology is radically changing the way jobs are being designed and hence the skills required. Take marketing and advertising for example – as consumers spend more time online on mobiles, tablets and laptops, the challenge facing marketers is how to connect with customers through all these tech enabled devices and create campaigns that work across display advertising, e-commerce, social and digital media. Gone are the days when you could rely on hoardings and TV ads alone. Employees need to question themselves on how they will continue to add value and to stay relevant. They need to invest in learning new and advanced technical skills pertaining to their industry or enhancing their behavioural competencies.

The onus of adapting to the changing environment, however, does not lie only on the employees. The approach adopted by a vast majority of companies today is short-sighted and reactive. Lacking a thought through and progressive plan to upskill their

employees, they tend to “right size” and hire new employees with the requisite skills. However, this approach is not sustainable.

Companies need to identify areas where development is needed, and also develop and execute plans for building employee capabilities. Additionally, governmental bodies can play a vital role by reassessing their vision from a future skills perspective. They can drive initiatives to address the skill gap before it becomes a reality. Governments can spearhead comprehensive skill development programmes involving formal organisations such as vocational institutes, polytechnics, on-the-job training and apprenticeship programmes. The initiatives can also include occupational accreditation and non-traditional institutions such as nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) that target academic dropouts and vulnerable sections of the population.

In India, the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) offers similar programmes through public-private partnerships. It aims to provide skill-based training to nearly 150 million people by 2022. Governmental bodies in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand are also establishing bodies to focus on designing and implementing policies to bridge the demand-supply gaps in the skilled workforce.

Any measures taken by policy makers would also have to consider alternative forms of employment that exist today. Quite like the mature and the developed economies, emerging economies such as India are seeing an increasing acceptance of freelancing as an occupational category. With platforms such as Freelancer Alliance, specialised personnel can easily market themselves and secure constant workflow. The approach to upskilling such personnel will be radically different.

Whether we realise it or not, the future of work is already here. Changes in the workplace and workforce are testing employers’ readiness around technology, future requirements, HR programmes and an enabling organisational structure. While organisations have started taking small steps, a concerted effort is needed to address this paradigm shift. Business leaders, people managers and HR need to collaborate to identify and mitigate risks and

take full advantage of the many opportunities that the future of work presents.

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