LEARNING TO BE MORE HUMAN: A SKILLS MANDATE FOR 2020

There is a tectonic shift in the hiring landscape, with employers set to favor 'human' skills like creativity over process-oriented skills like quality control. We explore its potential effects and how organizations can respond to this new paradigm.

The services industry is undergoing a radical, under-the-radar transformation of its skills and capabilities. Amid the market changes triggered by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, we are witnessing a notable shift in skill-priorities as the line between the roles of people and technology in organizations continues to blur.

This is more than just an observation. In its 'Future of Jobs' report, published in February, 2016, the World Economic Forum (WEF) detected a change in the skills requirements of the digitally-enabled service economy as follows:

Top 10 skills	
In 2020	In 2015
Complex problem solving	Complex problem solving
Critical thinking	Coordinating with others
Creativity	People management
People management	Critical thinking
Coordinating with others	Negotiation
Emotional intelligence	Quality control
Judgement and decision-making	Service orientation
Service orientation	Judgement and decision-making
Negotiation	Active listening
Cognitive flexibility	Creativity

The shift in required skills is a reflection of the growing autonomous role that technology will have in the next few years.

While the two lists look similar, the few differences between them are critical to changing the job market over the next few years. Amid constants such as 'complex problem solving' and 'people management,' we see skills like 'quality control' (number six in the 2015 list) and 'active listening' (number nine in the 2015 list) — which are currently in demand — becoming far less important by the end of the decade. On the other hand, by 2020, skills such as 'emotional intelligence' (number six in the 2020 list) and 'cognitive flexibility' (number ten in the 2020 list) are expected to be far more critical to business needs. This shift in required skills is not about developing new capabilities in order to use technology, but rather a reflection of the growing autonomous role that technology will have in the next few years.

Rather than devaluing the importance of quality control, the WEF data reflects the increased role of machines and technology in dealing with quality control functions autonomously, with artificial intelligence enabling self-diagnosis and self-healing. Companies are veering away from paying humans to perform 'checking' and 'fixing' functions now that they can be reliably and efficiently handled by machines.

Similar scenarios apply to skills like 'active listening.' Companies now realize that listening must be paired with the appreciative and empathetic responses that characterize emotional intelligence, rather than being a skill in isolation. Future service delivery will require a combination of physical behavior (listening), intellectual activity (analysis and problem solving), and on-target emotional response to be truly effective and to help companies stand out from the crowd.

Superior service demands agility, which is why we are seeing 'cognitive flexibility' emerge as a top 10 skill for 2020. Who hasn't been infuriated by a call center agent who seems capable only of reading a script, rather than answering your specific question? The user experience all of us now expect is an on-demand, personalized, and conversational one. Service providers must be able to think on their feet and seamlessly shift gears

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between intellectual activities and possible solution sets.

While some industries are rising to the challenge, it is not enough. These are not skills that can be easily taught in a classroom, let alone online. They require on-the-job training in order to establish context and real-world cognitive responses. Shrinking training budgets are mostly targeted at issues of scalability, speed, reusability, and automation in learning programs. These are good attributes, although not conducive to developing deep, compound, multi-faceted, experiential skills such as emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility. Millennials have extremely short attention spans for in-depth training, and most new technologies are so intuitive that they eliminate the need for it. Consequently, companies are getting rusty in developing and delivering complex, in-depth training curricula.

Collectively, we are now finding innovative solutions to our tactical training needs. Today, we use 'Massive Open Online Courses' (MOOCs) to enrich our employees' knowledge, gamification to drive near-term tactical changes, and even artificial intelligence to power interactive online content with many of the same attributes as personalized instructor interaction. However, things like emotional intelligence or cognitive flexibility are closer to a 'practice' than a skill and so require a degree of instinctive reaction or 'muscle memory.' They are built through successive cycles of insight, application, feedback, and internalization.

A current Infosys learning program for a similarly complex area — Design Thinking — offers some ideas on how to achieve this in organizations. Like emotional intelligence or cognitive flexibility, Design Thinking requires a shift in personal mindset alongside retraining conditioned responses. It insists that before rushing into problem-solving, we pause to reflect on and explore the real needs and emotions of users. This is so that we can approach the designing of solutions from a human-centric angle, rather than a process, technology, or financial one. It also requires

us to abandon our fear of failure and criticism, and open ourselves up to successive cycles of prototyping, testing, and feedback. This, in turn, allows us to optimally tune a solution to the real-world needs of the target user.

It is a complex, compound skill that combines listening, empathy, creativity, facilitation, prototyping abilities, and more. It is also something that Infosys has trained over 100,000 employees in, over the past 18 months. We have not only taught them how to complete a design exercise, but also sought to reframe their entire approach to problem-solving and client interaction. Doing this called for a combination of face-to-face instruction, continuous on-the-job practice and application, and creation of a supportive and reinforcing environment.

Design Thinking has enabled our organization to remove internal roadblocks, improve client service, identify new technological innovations, and help clients improve their own agility and innovation. We believe this four-part approach — involving instruction, practice, ongoing application, and creation of critical mass in a supportive environment — is essential to building this complex skill. A similar approach is necessary when organizations tackle the development of emotional intelligence or cognitive flexibility skills.

On a final note, we see one other fascinating influence on the development of deep, compound skills —mindfulness. It inherently helps develop intellect, emotion, self-reflection, curiosity, openness, and other attributes, all of which fuel emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility. A decade ago, the topic of mindfulness was reserved for a spiritual or meditative practice. Today, there are entire conferences dedicated to mindfulness in business, and mainstream companies are investing in introducing mindfulness training in their organizations. Google, LinkedIn, Facebook, Aetna, Ford, Eileen Fisher, Twitter, Slack, and Kaiser Permanente, for starters, have all spoken publicly on this topic and on the positive impact it has had on their organizations. These companies alone showcase the mainstream nature of mindfulness in modern business.

The top 10 skills the workforce and employers require as we approach 2020 are not in the realm of technology. Instead, they reflect the need for better interaction between people. It's a great time for all of us in the world of business to rethink how we will develop the complex, compound skills required to meet customers' rising expectations on service and user experience, and to support our employees in building them.

By 2020, among the key 10 skills will be 'emotional intelligence' (number six in the list) and 'negotiation,'(number nine in the list) both of which are expected to be far more critical to business needs.

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" *Regardless of the job you are in, expect to face pressure to constantly modify your skills. Across nearly all industries, the impact of technological and other changes is shortening the shelf-life of employees' existing skill sets. What's more, in this new environment, a change in business model often translates to a disruption in skill set almost simultaneously and with a minimal time lag. Even jobs that will shrink in number are simultaneously undergoing change in the skill sets required to do them. On average, by 2020, more than a third of the desired core skill sets of most occupations will be comprised of skills that are not yet considered crucial to the job today. In addition, technical skills will need to be supplemented with strong social and collaboration skills. The pace at which this evolution is progressing will require everyone to adopt a new training mindset, requiring to upskill or reskill through lifelong (continuous) learning.* "

About the Author

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Holly brings the scientist's curiosity and observational skills to the world around her. She uses her interactions with some of the world's leading corporations — and their work forces — to form fresh and intriguing insights on education and skills. After 25 years of work in the consulting domain, she remains a hands-on practitioner who helps clients deal with people and organizational implications of agile enterprises and changing business models. Her forte is to deliver learning programs for Infosys and its clients. Holly is now bringing this perspective to the World Economic Forum, as a steering committee member of their Global Future Council System Initiative on education, gender, and work.

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