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Future Of Work

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We have perhaps reached an inflection point in the process of digital business transformation, where we are taking more time to consider the deeper implications of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IOT) and Blockchain for the future of the workplace, for people, skills and careers.

This is timely as we recognise that the wave of transformation is now breaking over many economies—creating exciting new job and career opportunities, without doubt, but also raising concerns and even fears about the future of work.

Of course, there is much hype and excitement around these new technologies and so separating fact from fiction is a challenge. Google CEO Sundar Pichai believes AI is one of the most important things humanity is working on—more profound than electricity or fire.

But digital technologies are merely tools in the hands of people—they may replace some jobs but will create others, as with previous industrial revolutions. The big difference now is the speed and scale of change, which can render industries, companies and people skills obsolete, faster than ever.

AI promises the ability to predict the future—or at least future behaviour—based on algorithms and this is leading to new digital companies disrupting traditional companies and industries, within an increasingly digital economy.

Even with traditional industries, the core disciplines of finance, HR, marketing and customer service may still be subject to the impacts of AI, from the screening of candidates to back office admin and logistics, and even monitoring customer sentiment.

If we do not know what the industries, skills and jobs of the future will be, how do we educate and train executives and young people for the workplace of the future?

Business educators and faculty are quickly integrating digital business into the curricula of executive programmes such as the MBA, being delivered to students. The fastest way to achieve this is through the introduction of new 'digital electives' as options for students—such as Big Data Analytics, Digital Marketing Strategy, Information Systems and Digital Strategy, Managing Disruptive Technologies, and the Digital Economy—in addition to core MBA subjects.

Of course, you don't need to be a technologist to understand how IT can lead business change, rather than purely facilitate it. This is essential for every business leader and manager. Disruptive change is often a positive force for good, and these electives explore technology innovation within a range of business scenarios.

In the face of this digital transformation, business executives are taking another look at

their skills and some are deciding to re-enter the classroom to build a fast understanding, appreciation and the skills to deal with the transformation of industries.

The digital skills gap is an issue that business educators must respond to and fill quickly. According to strategy& (the global strategy consulting team at PwC) there is an insufficient regional supply of digital professionals in the GCC due to limited academic preparation for digital skills, slow adoption of advanced ICT courses in the education system, a lack of skilled instructors to provide these advanced courses, and limited focus on developing the technical and vocational education and training sector in the region. Plus, there is an inadequate professional development environment and limited interest in pursuing digital careers.

Digital transformation is all about enabling people in new ways and so the soft skills that underpin effective leadership and management are still essential, along with the openness to new ideas and ability to learn, whatever impact AI and new technologies have on the workplace of the future.

Accenture is taking an interesting approach—"Job Buddy" is their proprietary tool that enables employees to assess their jobs' vulnerability to AI and predicts their training needs for the future workplace. AI may be a threat but it can also provide solutions.

Of course, the U.A.E. is uniquely positioned to benefit from these technologies, with dedicated strategies for AI, IoT and Blockchain, and a business environment conducive for start-ups and SMEs (more than 30 accelerators, incubators and co-working spaces) to nurture digital innovation and, critically, the incentives and opportunities to develop and apply them.

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