

Facing up to the AI challenge

The task ahead is to re-skill 1.5-2 million people in the next three to four years, in at least nine disruptive technologies

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The WEF Future of Jobs Report, 2018, is the perfect backdrop for a conversation on re-skilling. That, 75 million jobs will be displaced by disruptive technology and 133 million new ones will emerge concurrently means that huge opportunities are up for grabs, but only for those prepared.

Companies realise the need for immediate action. Sixty-nine per cent of Indian business leaders concur (re: Accenture) that adopting intelligent technologies will be a critical differentiator; while 84 per cent expect that AI-driven man-machine interface will add substantial value and improve efficiency.

Fifty-nine per cent worry about talent insufficiency being a major hindrance, and yet, only 29 per cent have earmarked investments for training.

In the midst of stark empirical evidence, only 20 per cent of Indian business leaders believe their workforce to be AI-ready.

Opportunities and challenges

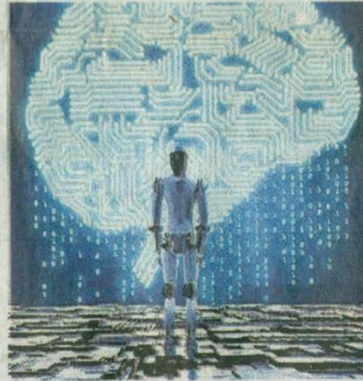
The recent news about a very large IT company offering a massive differential pay to entry-level engineers with new-age digital skills, caught everyone's attention.

Spurred on by skills shortage, this trend will be the new norm as companies scout for capability, available in pockets. It is particularly conditioned for scenarios where digital revenue of large companies is around 20 per cent and the smaller ones — avowedly “born digital” — clock growth of around 40 per cent. As the contagion catches on, the supply mismatch will have to be addressed to remain competitive.

Unarguably, talent availability will sustain India's position as an IT superpower but can we run fast enough to meet the proverbial advantage of demographic dividend?

Given the magnitude, our response will have to be mission mode-like where the government and academia join hands with the industry and discard the prevailing silos. The fear of job losses — albeit understandable — will have to be de-fanged by new jobs creation and preparing the workforce appropriately.

As it follows, Nasscom's primary focus right now is to catalyse industry-wide digital transformation. Nasscom's FutureSkills initiative addresses the nine disruptive technologies such as AI, Analytics, AR (augmented reality) and RPA (robotics process automation), describes the 66 job roles in those technologies and offers learning



India must get AI-ready ISTOCK

content on the 155 skills required for those job roles. Moreover, it isn't a case of an either/or situation, but really the combined power of these technologies.

Autonomous vehicles combine AI, Big Data, IoT and cloud, and human-like chatbots provide a superior online experience based on the seamless combination of both AI and AR to augment reality.

While a few Indian IT companies are progressing remarkably towards meeting the amplified needs in a very short time, given the scale, this challenge will require a multi-pronged approach through a coalition of competitors.

Investment concerns

Curiously enough, while the discussion on emerging technologies is oft-repeated, ironically, very few in-

dustry people actually understand what it really means.

As an industry, we will need to re-skill 1.5-2 million people in the next three to four years which will require substantial investment. A worm's eye view will also entail that this kind of investment may be well beyond the scope of many companies. Thus, risk mitigation will seek out viable alternatives such as democratised learning, open-source, collaboration and co-creation.

Despite large companies having L&D departments, learning strategies, resources, technologies *et al*, they aren't cushioned from the challenges altogether. They too are often unclear about the specific kind of training that's required, periodicity or even the source of the content, yet remaining agile all along.

And the perennial conundrum of buy or build in-house, remains. Smaller companies remain unsure about investing in training, and understandably so. Poaching of talent, particularly of the niche variety remains a veritable threat.

The pace of change makes constant learning an imperative. Peter Drucker once famously said, “The only skill that is necessary is the skill to learn”. As much as it resonates and yet we have to be prag-

matic: motivating people to learn is the most challenging task in any organisation, particularly if it is online and self-paced.

In the current environment, the responsibility to stay relevant is shouldered equally between employer and employee.

Nasscom has responded through FutureSkills. Learners, experts and training providers are on an even keel to reap thousands of hours of curated content. Also, one can delve deeper into the “marketplace” to connect with the world's leading training providers and platform providers.

Micro-learning content addressing an array of needs, ensures that users aren't overwhelmed. The AI-backed engine constantly curates content.

For smaller companies, this is an inexpensive and elegant way to get plugged into a continuous evolving eco-system. It marks a clear shift from prescriptive learning modules to chunks of learning that are relevant at a point in time.

The fear-mongering narrative of job losses needs cleansing and to be replaced by a more realistic one of enhanced productivity, where robots and humans complement one another.

The writer is President, Nasscom.