

Technology's always been a job creator

AI is here to stay. Sure, some jobs will go, but others will be created. And human intervention will always be required

G KRISHNA KUMAR

Recently, economist Paul Krugman warned that India could lose its dominating position in the global services trade space due to the threat of artificial intelligence. He feels this could result in massive unemployment.

Artificial intelligence or AI is the intelligence demonstrated by machines. Essentially, computers continuously 'learn', mimicking cognitive functions like humans. AI has already started impacting our lives. Voice-based search used in smartphones is an example of AI. Self-driven cars is another.

According to Gartner's Technology hype cycle, mainstream adoption of AI is expected to take off over the next 2-5 years.

From an industry perspective, the evolution of technology must be juxtaposed with the rate of change of customer needs. This means IT companies are required to support customers with stable/legacy technologies (such as the airline booking system or 2G or core banking software); at the same time, customers need leading edge technologies. The challenge for companies is to create the right mix.

Will AI be a threat to the current and future IT workforce? Will it wipe out the IT Industry? Certainly not. We still need people to monitor and maintain automated systems.

Co-existence is the mantra

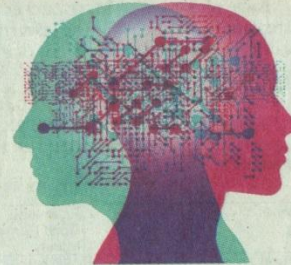
The tech era is about 50 years old. Historical data shows that evolving technology has been a job creator. Man and machines need to co-exist. Many of the jobs that exist today did not exist 20 or 30 years ago; back then the same issues and concerns existed around job security.

It is a fact that AI-based bots and chatbots have already taken away jobs in the IT industry. This will continue and automation will certainly take over many low engagement jobs.

However, over a period of time, we will end up with a more engaged and motivated workforce that would like to perform exciting and challenging tasks rather than mundane activities. For this to happen, an environment that can foster innovation is needed.

AI is likely to create more jobs than it would destroy. A Gartner's report predicts that by 2020, automation will create 2.3 million jobs, while only 1.8 million jobs will be lost.

In order to keep pace with disruption,



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tions, the IT workforce need to Learn, Unlearn and Relearn. Reskilling/upskilling both out of individual interest and through organisational initiatives will be required. The key is the willingness of an individual to learn and adapt. The IT workforce needs to demonstrate the right attitude, analytical skills, strong domain knowledge and programming skills to stay relevant.

Collaborations and partnerships are needed to demonstrate agility and relevance in the industry. Lately, experts are being hired on need basis for specific tasks; they

may end up working for different companies simultaneously. 'Uberisation' of the workforce is gaining popularity. Uberisation simply indicates freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs.

A recent WEF report states that US leads the way in uberisation. Already, 36 per cent of its workforce are freelancers and by 2027 the majority will be freelancers. They keep themselves abreast of evolving technology.

Organisations must be willing to accept and promote the concept of remote workers, anywhere on the planet, with negligible 'control' over the people. This calls for a shift in mindset.

Better training

Other than the fact that engineering colleges piggybacked on the IT industry in India, industry-academia collaboration for ensuring industry ready talent has been a challenge. We need an IT workforce that can be future-proofed through better training.

The output from engineering colleges has been a major cause of concern for the IT industry. There are over 3,000 engineering colleges in the country, with close to eight lakh students passing out every year. Some 55 per cent of the students as-

pire for software employment while only 3 per cent of them are ready for such jobs.

Strict action from the Government to reduce admissions into engineering colleges must be put in place. In addition, tighter industry-academia collaboration is extremely important. The Government should consider imposing mandatory six-month training (similar to the concept of interns in the medical field). However, the sheer volume of students passing out every year is a deterrent for IT industry participation in guiding aspiring software engineers and getting them close to industry-ready.

Considering that AI and technology disruption is a given, we need innovative models through which gen-next engineers can gear up to face future challenges.

So, how shall we prove Krugman wrong? We know man and machines will co-exist. We need cohesive actions for upskilling existing talent, embrace uberisation of the workforce and ensure high quality gen-next engineers for India to handle the impact of AI.

The writer is an ICT professional and columnist based in Bengaluru. The views are personal