

How should university students prepare for digital transformation?

Whenever I discuss the topic of digital transformation in class, I often receive questions from worried students who ask: "Professor, will robots take my job? What should I study to prepare for the digital era?"

My response has tended to be: "Well, you need to adapt to the new digital society, learn more and learn faster."

The unspoken message is that one will not survive if he or she does not adapt to the digital transformation taking place around us.

A popular saying is that the fittest in digital transformation are those with comb-type knowledge structure that calls for inter-disciplinary learning.

But how can one adapt to this new environment? Is it just about learning more maths and programming?

Digital transformation is unstoppable and has already gained momentum in many aspects of business and society, from factories to auditing services and to hospital diagnostic processes.

According to a study by Deloitte,



a substantial portion of accountancy-related jobs have been replaced by business-process automation.

To ride the digital wave and be ready for the disruption brought about by technological advancement, many primary schools in Singapore have started digital literacy programmes to prepare the younger generations.

However, after discussing this topic with several practitioners who are implementing digital transformation in their businesses, I changed my mind.

Digital transformation is indeed revolutionary, but the response to it need not be a radical shift to a new paradigm.

This is based on my three observations of digitalisation.

First, digitalisation is a tool.

To solve real business problems, it is the insights and expert knowledge that matter most.

According to Professor Michael Porter from Harvard Business School – a guru in strategic management – future digital transformation will be driven by traditional companies which know the business problems

inside out and not by tech companies or Internet companies which know the digital tools well.

Second, digitalisation frees human resources for tasks that need more critical and creative thinking.

Robots cannot do everything and artificial intelligence, though it has made significant progress, is still limited in scope and ability.

They are really powerful when it comes to repetitive tasks that can be automated, but the automation of these tasks, as seen in factories, has been taking place for many decades.

The result is relief for the workforce from tedious and repetitive work to focus more on work with more value add.

Third, digitalisation is the transformation of thinking.

If the Internet is about connectivity and platform-based co-production, digital thinking is meant to break the boundaries of different disciplines and domains because the digits 0 and 1 do not make a distinction between marketing data or operation data.

New opportunities can emerge if we embrace this digital thinking to have a fresh perspective on our current tasks.

My suggestion to students is to delve even deeper into their disci-

plinary knowledge.

Although having an open and inter-disciplinary mindset is important, it is not correct to think that inter-disciplinary knowledge will replace disciplinary knowledge.

The digital economy is ultimately still a knowledge economy where knowledge is the most valuable asset.

Digitalisation will function as a facilitator and a multiplier, but it will be the biggest value add when it is applied to a solid knowledge base.

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