

# 'There is a shortage of digital skills across sectors'

The IT industry in India has been grappling with a situation where the graduates, who enter the workforce, are already in some sense "outdated" in terms of the skills they possess vis-à-vis the demands. But now India is faced with an even bigger challenge: How do you ensure that the tech skills needed to survive in today's world are imparted across sectors and industries? The pandemic has aggravated the need as every category from housewives to healthcare workers were forced to adopt technology and develop digital skills overnight. Nasscom president **DEBJANI GHOSH** tells Anjali Bhargava how the non-profit is working to bridge the skills gap and elaborates on its latest initiative, the Future Skills Prime project, for the government. Excerpts:

**Technology is emerging as a double-edged sword in many ways: can't live with it, can't live without it...**

I find too many people blaming technology like it's human or a living thing. Across many fora, I hear people say technology has to be "responsible" or it has to be "trustworthy". Humans have to be responsible or trustworthy, not technology. Second, people have to remember that it's not a panacea for all our problems. It has advantages and limitations. We have to assess where it can be useful and where it won't.

Even before the pandemic, jobs were getting displaced. They were not going away but the skills were changing and we were failing to keep pace. I am not referring to just the IT industry. Banking, finance, healthcare and hospitals, education — no matter which industry, the staff and employees have been grappling with the inroads digitisation has made. What's more, even before the pandemic, we were still figuring out the new skills required not to be successful but to survive.

Now, the pandemic has accelerated the pace of digitisation. Exponential sounds tame. Across industries, there is a shortage of digital skills. Banks and hospitals are hiring more data scientists and analysts than anyone else today.

**What kind of shortage was there and what kind of shortfalls are envisaged given the pandemic and subsequent faster pace of digitisation?**  
Across industries, the demand is



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already 8X more than supply and this is expected to go up to 20X by 2024. The kind of jobs the advent of artificial intelligence, data science and so on are creating simply didn't exist before.

Now, the Indian education system is pretty behind the curve, too. There are two problems here. First, there is no way that an education system that takes almost 20 years to churn out the final product can be up to date. The world and its skill requirements are and will keep changing every two years. Only a very flexible education system can adapt to that. Education has to create the foundation for an open, trainable, adaptable and mind that learns quickly.

Second, I feel the passion for learning has to make a comeback. Today, youngsters have a passion for marks, performance, highly paid jobs, but the passion for learning has taken a hit. Earlier we emphasised having a strong foundation in math and science. Today, math and science remain important but having the

softer skills one learns through liberal arts is equally relevant. In yesterday's world, a coder would be in the back-end and never come in contact with the client. Today, he needs to sit across the client, understand a client's problem/business and then customise the solution through his coding skills.

**What then is Nasscom doing about both — building digital skills in IT and the rest of the economy or industries?**

We started this in 2018. The industry leaders identified what the problems are going to be. Every single leader came back to say: Shortage of the right kind of talent is going to be the biggest gap. We launched Nasscom Future Skills, a programme that looked at the new technologies (we identified 10) and the new jobs they are creating — like data analysts, robotics managers, data scientists — and we built skilling pads with the industry, identifying the basic level of competency required to do these new jobs. Almost 30-40 per cent of the content we put together was non-technical: project management, communications, design thinking — all became big requirements. A mix of professional and technology skills are required. This was a B2B model. It's an online portal we built and run. In the last two years, 500,000 people have got skilled using these platforms. In total 1.5-2 million people have been skilled in the last two years through the new initiatives.

Last year, the government (ministry of electronics and IT is financing this) came to us with a very real ask: Digital skills are needed well beyond the IT industry. That's when we created a B2C platform called Future Skills Prime, which has been launched recently. It will soon be opened up for training for all cohorts including university students, across industries with a view to building employability. In the next few years, we are aiming to train around four million people through this platform.

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