A fifth of IT fresher jobs may go AI way

- IN Q1, TOP SIX INDIAN IT FIRMS MADE THE SHARPEST CUT IN HEADCOUNT IN LAST 3 YEARS
- MORE YOUNG PROFESSIONALS GOING FOR CONTINUOUS UPSKILLING TO COMPLEMENT AI

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

JOB CHECK

AI CAN REPLACE	AI CAN'T REPLACE	EMERGING JOB ROLES THAT COMPLEMENT AI
Data entry	Critical thinking	Prompt engineering
Basic coding	Emotional intelligence	AI training and testing
Software testing	Problem solving skills	AI moderators
Repetitive processes	Effective communication	AI auditors

Source: Adecco India, Great Learning

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The debate surrounding whether artificial intelligence (AI) will replace jobs has been ongoing for a while, but there now appears to be a consensus among human resource (HR) experts that AI is indeed replacing several entry-level technology jobs.

According to HR firm Michael Page, entry-level technology jobs have seen a decline of 15-20 per cent this year due to the impact of AI. Consequently, this trend is driving young professionals to pursue continuous upskilling in skills that complement AI.

In the first quarter of this financial year (2023-24), the top six Indian information technology services companies recorded the sharpest contraction in headcount in the last three years. This can be attributed both to the macro-economic slowdown and AI. Hiring at Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Infosys, HCLTech, Wipro, LTIMindtree, and L&T Technology Services (LTTS) contracted by 18,000, worse than the negative 9,000 recorded in the April-June quarter of 2021, according to data by Xpheno over the last three financial years.

TCS and LTTS were the only exceptions, adding 523 and 1,159 employees, respectively, in the first quarter.

"AI has been a buzzword for the past five to six years. While there have been numerous conversations about it, there was no substantial impact on actual hiring. But now, we are witnessing its impact on hiring at the junior level," said Pranshu Upadhyay, regional director and head of technology practice at Michael Page India.

Manu Saigal, director of general staffing at Adecco India, concurs.

"Entry-level technology jobs that primarily involve data entry, basic coding, and repetitive processes will face repercussions from AI," he said.

However, this situation presents the technology industry with an opportunity for upskilling and reskilling to develop expertise in areas that complement AI.

"Complementary skills include data analysis, machine learning (ML), and AI ethics, enabling professionals to remain relevant and thrive in this evolving technological landscape. Job seekers and employers alike should remain cognisant of these advancements and prepare and adapt to the changing demands of the job market," added Saigal. Experts believe acquiring niche skills can be a smart way to stay relevant in an AI-driven market.

"Specialisation and niche expertise in a particular domain or industry can make an employee invaluable. AI may perform tasks, but deep expertise and specialisation remain uniquely human," added Saigal.

Moreover, soft skills are in high demand in an AI-led environment.

"While AI excels in specific tasks, human skills such as critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, and effective communication are irreplaceable. Focusing on honing these soft skills is essential in the digital era. Learning to collaborate with AI tools and leveraging their strengths within a team set-up can significantly enhance productivity and efficiency," said Saigal.

Educational technology platform Great Learning has witnessed an average annual growth of 80 per cent in the enrolment of freshers from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) backgrounds in its courses over the last two financial years.

Additionally, 54 per cent of the engineering graduates who opted for upskilling in 2022-23 were from computer science backgrounds.

"Programs in data science, software development, data analytics, AI, ML, Cloud computing, and electric vehicle design are witnessing the highest demand among technology graduates," said Hari Krishnan Nair, co-founder of Great Learning.

Nair points out that in an AI-assisted environment, several new functions are emerging — prompt engineering, AI training and testing, AI moderators, AI auditors, and so on.

"These roles involve applying a layer of human judgement to the use of generative AI technologies to maximise their capabilities. In this environment, recent graduates must adapt. While existing roles will persist, fresh graduates in these new roles will be expected to go beyond elementary tasks, using AI to become faster and more creative in their work," Nair added.