Surviving the Digital Disruption

PRAKASH MENON

As the President, Global Skills & Careers Group, NIIT Limited, Prakash Menon is responsible for the turnaround of the China; Emerging markets business, and for the Skills; Careers business in India. Having seen various facets of the organization as a veteran NIITian since 1985, and with global experience in the fast moving Chinese market since 1997, Prakash has been instrumental in driving new models of Educational Technology to enable successful digital transformation of the China business.

The dark clouds of automation are looming large over the future of teeming millions looking for a job in the times to come. Moving from the role of mass job creator, automation has hit the IT industry hard. The sector and the allied partners have been left gasping, leaving little room for the regular job opportunities in the future.

The axe is hanging on the "low-skilled" lot that is likely to face the major brunt of automation. A recent US study has predicted a loss of 6.4 lakh low-skilled jobs to the growing presence of automation in the IT sector in the coming five years. By 2021, the headcount in the sector would see a dip by 9 per cent, the report further suggests. According to a NASSCOM report, 260 mn jobs will be replaced or augmented by technology globally.

Concerns ahoy!

The growing divide between the demand and supply of job seekers and available jobs are getting wider. At the present rate, year 2025 will see an addition of 80 million new job seekers, majority of them to be unskilled. And with approximately 30 million jobs to be created, the rift in the job canyon is a growing concern.

The exponential growth by technology (read Artificial Intelligence or AI) over last several years along with immense advances in the hardware capability has made deep learning grow exponentially. AI systems are running experiments, driving vehicles, getting into image recognition and outsmarting skilled humans as well.

The advent of personal digital assistants like Google Now, Siri, Echo and Cortana are using technology to their benefit and perform an array of complex tasks, giving a new facet to the traditional role. While technology is lowering the access point with each growing step, it's the human jobs that are at the receiving end of this growth. The sci-fi inspired scenarios are not far away when machines will become more intelligent than humans, reaching technological singularity, outsmarting and not even needing humans. Whether AI assumes the role of a man's best friend or replaces their presence, the race between man and machine is gathering pace, faster than ever.

The Bailout

The pertinent question arising in the minds of decision makers and industry drivers is how to tackle the growing menace of technology, leaving humans redundant and jobless in the near future. Massive skilling and reskilling is what can counter this unprecedented AI growth and bring man at par with technology to walk in arms with the changing tech times.

The demographic dividend if not given the treatment of skills may simply turn into a demographic deluge. The imbalance between the too few skilled workers and fewer jobs for the medium and low-skilled workforce is pointing towards the impending disaster. And it is here that we at NIIT play a significant role in bringing about a paradigm shift in the IT skilling landscape.

Another pertinent need that is gaining strong momentum is to overhaul the education system. Against the 4.9 per cent global average of government spending in education as percentage GDP, India has only been spending about 3.5 per cent of its GDP to impart education to its children and youth. There is a startling disconnect between the GER, which is going north and the quality of education in terms of student takeaways.

And not just spending in terms of money that is needed but efforts are also needed to be made in getting all the stakeholders on one platform. The curriculum at the school level need to inculcate and make students explore skill learning with practical experience. China follows the policy of developing a third of its curriculum by schools in consultation and association with local enterprises. The challenge is of governance and multi-stakeholder coordination that we need to get a hold on.

Information is the key

While grass-root modifications continue at their own pace, what can also aid to tackle the tech deluge is by smart usage of data analytics. As stated by Dave Coplin in the book, The Rise of the Humans: How to outsmart the digital deluge, "Big data is not about handling the data but interpreting it properly instead." While there is no denying the role and breakthrough big data has forayed into the human lives, what is needed is to accept and use the data dynamics for our own benefit. And to do that, as Coplin suggests, Big Data economy will require new skills, tools and ideas that do justice and help organizations channel and harness ideas and the power of digital deluge.

It is these underlying principles of leveraging and harnessing those technology trends and capabilities that are going to play a pivotal role for organizations to counter the growing machine menace. Using information to its hilt, organizations will have a chance to bring in customer service improvements, productivity improvements, and streamline their processes. The only way to survive and maintain a job in this world of digital disruption is to harness their creativity and keep them up-skilled to outsmart the machine as it claws the bottom of the IT workforce pyramid.