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DISRUPTION: THE NEW NORM?

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Accelerating automisation and increasing lifespans are creating disruptions to existing economic and education models. How can governments and industry address the resulting upheavals?

In a 2015 study by management consultancy Deloitte, technology was found to have profoundly changed the type of work humans performed. Between 1871 to 2011 in England and Wales, the percentage of the workforce employed in agriculture plummeted from 6.6 percent to 0.2 percent. On the other hand, those hired in jobs that involved "nursing and care of others" went from 1.1 percent of the workforce to nearly a quarter.

The report also pointed out that technology and the accelerating pace of change, while boosting employment in knowledge-intensive white-collar industries, creates disruption and tremendous stress in the job market.

"What is it that makes us different from robots?" asks **Wong Su-Yen**, Chief Executive Officer of the Human Capital Leadership Institute in Singapore. "We know they can out-calculate us, but there are things that make us uniquely human, and that's where future jobs lie.

"Jobs have transitioned from muscle jobs, if we can call it that, to brain jobs. But we have a lot to solve with regard to caring or 'heart' jobs. That, perhaps, is the transition we need to think about in terms of where future jobs are going to come from."

Wong made those comments at a recent panel discussion "Disruption: The New Norm" for Singapore-based station Channel NewsAsia's Perspectives programme where she was joined by **Arnoud De Meyer**, President of Singapore Management University; **Pranav Seth**, Head of E-Business, Business Transformation and Fintech and Innovation Group, OCBC Bank; and **Brajesh Panth** of the Asian Development Bank.

While technological advancements are the obvious sources of change, Panth points out the many effects that have prompted the argument that disruption is, indeed, the new norm in the 21st century.

"Technological changes, demographic changes, urbanisation – so how do we cope with that?" he asks. "I think we need to look from that perspective. Now you have clients without borders, employers without space, so the whole notion of a job itself is changing.

"But if you look at the education system, how much has it changed? Although there are a lot of things happening, you know you have technology, you have different modalities of educating people, but [the education system] has more or less remained the same. So I think if we really are looking for disruption, it has to change."

CHANGING TO TEACH CHANGE

Methods of education, it was pointed out by more than one panelist, have stayed largely unchanged despite questions about its effectiveness in today's ever-changing technological and employment landscapes. While reiterating the importance of "learning to learn", De Meyer insists that universities are still the right place to prepare for the workplace.

"University education is more than giving foundational skills," he explains. "First, we give them an environment in which they can socialise with each other. A university education is about building up a network interacting with other people, learning how to work in teams, doing projects etc.

"Also…we have now so much information online. How can we as a professor know more than what a student can learn by downloading from all these databases and information sources? What we can do however is help them navigate the information, differentiate between the good, the bad, and the ugly, or what is now called now 'alternative facts'. It's about grooming them so they can work with data."

Seth echoes that assessment with regard to translating skills learnt in school to the workplace.

"[With] technology's changing so fast, what we started doing two years ago on blockchain technology is not relevant anymore, and we are doing a lot of things on blockchain and similar technologies.

"Now, the people who are succeeding in this space are people who can learn very fast, jump into a situation, work with very different sets of people with very diverse points of view [and] assimilate that learning and put it into productive use."

RE-THINK, RE-TRAIN...OR REVOLT

With fresh graduates coming out of universities and armed with the latest technical knowledge, older workers are hard pressed to stay relevant in the job market. Add to that longer lifespans, and the need to re-tool and re-train to feed oneself is imperative.

"One of the things that we see traditionally amongst companies is that you train people for the job that they need today," Wong observes. "That's a very practical way of thinking about it, but…with people having longer careers, longer lives, I think there's a question to be asked about how much should a company do to train people for tomorrow as well.

"Because if you're just stuck in today, eventually you'll find workers are no longer relevant and then you say, 'Well, I'm going to get the next batch,' but they just don't exist. So it's really important to evolve for the future."

Yet, because it is more cost-effective to invest in technology instead of people, companies can be tempted to increase automisation to save on relatively costly training of humans. While logical, De Meyer warns against such cold calculations.

"If you don't invest in people, the people will revolt against the technology," he admonishes. "Governments that look at the future cannot deny that they have to invest today in the education of people. Companies that want to avoid being displaced need to invest today in the development of their people."

That line of argument led to a question from the audience about the dangers of automisation, which brought this reponse from Panth:

"There are two isues: One is concentration of wealth because inequality has been a major issue. So who will control the robots and who will benefit [from them].The second aspect from a developing country's perspective is [that] people have to be more prepared to get to that level [of technical expertise] but in many countries we are still talking about fundamental issues. So how do you deal with that [difference] between developed country and developing countries in terms of opportunities?"

A resulting rise in income gaps have fueled an increasing backlash against the globalisation trend that is both cause and consequence of accelerating automisation. With rising nationalism and populism, what can be done to maintain the long-term sustainability of the global economic system?

"What we do know from history [and] revolutions," Wong points out, "[is that] it comes to a point where you have a large portion of the population that does not have a purpose, feel a sense of inequity, feel that they are not represented and so on and so forth.

"So it is very much in the interest of business and of course governments to rethink the economic models that we've been so accustomed to."