Core skills remain crucial in this age of AI and ML

Using AI to transform business depends on domain expertise, knowing how to talk to AI

Akhil George & Sujit John | TNN

Professionals are today grappling with the challenges of staying relevant in a world where technologies like AI are dramatically changing businesses. In our webinar last week, industry experts delved into the opportunities that young engineers have in this landscape, and the skills they need to build a successful career.

Suresh Kandula, CTO of integrated services and director of marketing & sales technology at Ford Motor Company, said opportunities are particularly good in India, since the country now plays a strategic role in the global tech ecosystem and is no longer just maintaining and managing services. "We are building new capabilities that are foundational," he said, noting that Ford's team in Chennai is working on platforms that are core to Ford in terms of their e-commerce, EV, and hybrid technologies.

This, in turn, means that engineers are now required to possess skills that go beyond "keeping the lights on" and focus on building modern technologies and be strategic in their approach to problem-solving.

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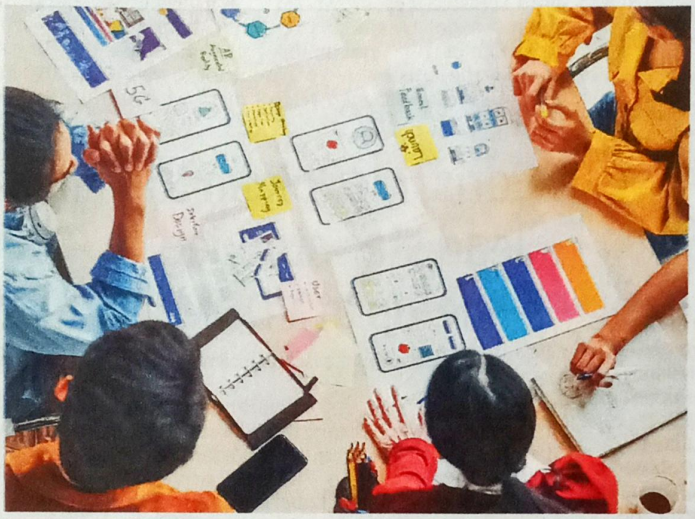
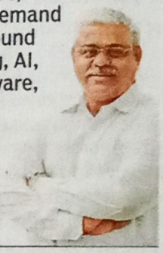


"By 2027, six out of ten current workers will need training, but only half will have those opportunities available. Employees need to strive to move up the primary value chain of their company, shifting from efficiency-driven work to innovation. Continuous skilling and building tech and business acumen are necessary. From a hiring perspective, the skills that are growing in demand the most are around cloud computing, AI, embedded software, and big data.

Dhananjay Nair | HEAD, HR, FORD BUSINESS SOLUTIONS – INDIA



"Lifelong learning is crucial in the tech industry. The demand for skills is expanding to tier two and three towns, not just metros. We're seeing a good balance between demand and supply, with 2.5 million tech graduates coming out yearly. However, there are skilling gaps that need to be addressed. We're working with industry partners and academia to develop courses in emerging technologies like AI, blockchain, and green tech to meet future demand.

Abhilasha Gaur | CEO, IT-ITES, SECTOR SKILLS COUNCIL, NASSCOM

"AI copilot tools are changing rapidly, but domain expertise and communication skills remain crucial. Engineers need to understand how to use these tools effectively and get the last 20% of work done independently. The future will require skills in building AI tools, not just using them. Focus on becoming a subject matter expert and understand how to apply AI in your business domain, whether it's supply chain logistics, fleet management, or other areas.

Suresh Kandula | CTO, INTEGRATED SERVICES & DIRECTOR, MARKETING & SALES TECHNOLOGY, FORD MOTOR COMPANY

The domestic market in India is also seen to present opportunities, with the pre-Covid startup economy taking off and unique challenges in areas such as mobility and the gig economy emerging. As Suresh put it, "The engineering talent required to build solutions for India, in India, is also increasing."

He further noted that while AI/ML tools are incredibly useful, they do not negate the need for fundamental skills. "You still need to know what to ask the AI tools. You still need to be able to get the last 20% of the work done on your own without needing any help," he said. Which is why communication skills and domain expertise, he said, are extremely crucial skills. You need to know how to apply AI in the particular context of an industry.

There's demand across industries

Abhilasha Gaur, CEO of Nasscom's IT-ITeS sector skills council, pointed out a few other demand-side factors at play that should give aspiring engineers hope, like the fact that the need for tech skills is no longer confined to IT sectors but is spreading across various industries. "Even in construction and building management you see a lot of IoT sensors are being used for functions like lighting, heating, ventilation and air conditioning," she said.

But Abhilasha noted that there is also a critical need to upgrade skills and be industry ready. "There are skilling gaps that need to be addressed by both govt and industry."

Nasscom, she said, has introduced several initiatives, such as the Future Skills Prime platform, which offers over 500 courses in partnership with industry and academia. Most of them are subsidised or free of cost.

The govt, she noted, is also playing a role in facilitating lifelong learning, by establishing the Academic Bank of Credit (ABC) system and the Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry (APAAR ID) that allows for a more comprehensive view of an individual's skills and qualifications beyond traditional degrees.

Dhananjay Nair, head of HR at Ford Business Solutions for India, said that since the ability to unlearn and relearn on the fly is increasingly being seen as a crucial skill, organisations have a responsibility now to provide learning platforms for employees to upskill and to foster ecosystems where people leaders mentor and support employee development. "That said, the primary responsibility for development still lies with the employees," he said.