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How students can future-proof their careers against automation

With the evolution of AI and robotics, jobs are being automated at a fast pace. To protect their future careers, students must develop soft skills, which are both highly valued by employers and less susceptible to automation. **Juan José Mena Greenham** *and* **Daniel Jolles** *list five proven real-world experiences that can help develop the most in-demand soft skills.*

By 2030, 375 million workers around the world are expected to transition to new roles as automation and artificial intelligence (AI) continue their expansion. Given this persistent automation, how can students prepare themselves with the skills needed to thrive early in their careers? While technical skills remain in high demand, soft skills like critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and collaboration are becoming increasingly valuable as they are less susceptible to automation.

Despite this increasing value, the majority of employers believe graduate candidates are failing to demonstrate the requisite soft skills when seeking to join their firms. With mass automation shaping the job market, what steps can students take to develop the soft skills that will set them apart from other candidates?

Reshaping the workforce

In simple terms, firms opt to replace people with automation technologies to reduce labour costs, minimise errors and increase available data. These technologies can be as simple as self-checkout machines in supermarkets, or as complex as using AI to predict stock market trends. With 2.25 million industrial robots currently being used in the world, many firms are betting on further automation to increase productivity and gain a competitive edge.

Naturally, the workers whose jobs are automated will face displacement. More than a third of the activities in most jobs can already be automated with existing technologies. The tasks most vulnerable to automation are those in predictable environments, such as operating machinery or preparing fast food, but increasingly in data collection and processing. Currently, jobs with the highest potential for automation include clerks, telemarketing, paralegal, accounting and back-office roles.

By contrast, the jobs that rely on soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity, people skills and problem solving are less likely to be automated. These jobs can often be found in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), medicine and management. Manual jobs occurring in unpredictable environments such as gardening, plumbing and caregiving are also likely to be more resistant to automation.

The soft-skill power of experience

Hard skills, the technical abilities and knowledge gained through practice and training, are essential for any candidate looking to join an organisation, but without soft skills it is nearly impossible to successfully work with others and resist the coming wave of automation. The World Economic Forum, which has monitored employers demands since 2016, consistently ranks soft skills like critical thinking and problem-solving at the top, year after year. Also, employers highly value competencies such as ability and willingness to learn, teamwork and cooperation, and analytical thinking, which are believed to significantly contribute to the success of fresh graduates in the workplace.

Strengthening soft skills requires engagement with real-world experiences, receiving feedback, reflecting on these experiences and applying the lessons learned to further refine these skills. Below are five proven real-world experiences that can help develop the soft skills most valued by employers:

Group-based projects and extracurricular activities are opportunities for students to develop leadership, teamwork and self-awareness. Activities and projects that arise from societies, clubs and councils foster relationships and networks, which can make for a more satisfying university experience (provided there is a balance between these activities and study). The real-world problem solving that occurs in many of these groups can improve communication, time management and initiative.

Role-playing and structured debates can help students articulate ideas and analyse different points of view under pressure. Over 90 per cent of debate participants report significant gains in their critical thinking skills. Meanwhile, in-class role-playing can boost teamwork and problem-solving skills. Outside the classroom, AI generated solutions like yoodli.ai give students access to the kind of role-play scenarios that might be encountered in job interviews.

Volunteering is a great way to contribute to the community, while strengthening the communication, project management and adaptability skills required for professional success. Volunteering can be a way to access increased responsibilities or translate academic ideas into practice.

Team sports and group physical activities are great for building networks, leadership and communication skills. Sports often expose students to high-pressure environments where they must quickly assess situations, which may help strategic thinking and navigating group dynamics. Student-athletes have been shown to score higher on leadership qualities, which may be due to the many "teachable moments" arising in sports from competitive stress, different skill levels in groups, and the opportunities to lead and be led by others.

Therapy involves structured conversations that explore thoughts, emotions and behavioural patterns and how these influence the self and relationships. Self-awareness, and emotional intelligence more generally, help regulate emotions, respond constructively to pressure and communicate more thoughtfully with others. This means better stress management and wellbeing when faced with personal and professional challenges.

Thriving in an automated world

As students commence their careers, automation will continue to transform industries and redefine job roles. The ability to adapt, upskill and leverage the skills that make us human will be more critical than ever. From participating in leadership roles and role-playing scenarios to engaging in team sports or volunteering, there are many opportunities outside the classroom for students to take charge of their personal development and grow their soft skills. This growth will help them to stand out and thrive in an era increasingly shaped by AI and automation.

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- *Juan José Mena Greenham participated in LSE's The Inclusion Initiative's summer school program, "Navigating the New Normal", held on campus.*

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