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SPECIAL FEATURE: GETTING STARTED WITH AI

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THE HUMAN EDGE (PART 2): APPLYING SOFT SKILLS IN A DATA-DRIVEN WORLD

— As AI tools proliferate and remote work becomes the norm, the real competitive advantage isn't technical prowess—it's humanity. In Part 2 of his article, Patrick O'Brien, Chartered Manager and Managing Director of The Amanuenses Network, argues that soft skills like empathy, presence, and critical thinking are no longer optional extras but essential capabilities for navigating social media, virtual collaboration, and artificial intelligence without losing our human edge.

By Patrick O'Brien, Chartered Manager, FCMI, Managing Director of The Amanuenses

In Part 1 of our article in the previous issue of the Orient, we explored how soft skills are becoming increasingly central in a world shaped by digital tools, automation, and AI. Rather than dividing skills into hard or soft, we suggested a spectrum, one that invites reflection, adaptation, and smarter development choices. We also considered five criteria that help make sense of how different skills function and how they're evolving in today's workplace.

Back in 2015, the American technologist Martin Ford published The Rise of the Robots. It was a thoughtful look at how automation might influence both manual and professional work. He argued that jobs most exposed to automation were those that followed routine patterns, repeated tasks, or offered predictable outcomes. His conclusion was clear: the more your role is based on repetition, the more likely the risk of, or opportunities for, technological substitution.

Ford though didn't just forecast disruption, he also offered direction. He encouraged individuals to focus on the areas that machines still find difficult to emulate. Skills like creativity, empathy, and emotional intelligence stood out. In effect, he encouraged us as professionals to explore what it means to be human, and to lean more deliberately in to develop those strengths.

This second article picks up from there. It's an invitation to notice where repetition shows up in your daily routine, and to consider which parts you might choose to systemise, or deliberately keep human. More importantly, it's a prompt that elevates us to think about how we can shape our work in ways that feel more meaningful and human.

BY PATRICK O'BRIEN, CHARTERED MANAGER, FCMI, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE AMANUENSES NETWORK

We'll do this by looking at three familiar domains: social media, remote working, and artificial intelligence. While all three are often seen as heavily technology-centric, we'll explore how soft skills are just as relevant within them. With greater awareness, it's possible to navigate each with more intentionality, more presence, and more choice.

The Context: A Data-Driven World

For Let's now explore how these soft skills operate in practice, especially within the digital and data-driven contexts that increasingly shape our work and behaviour.

If hard skills are the engine, then soft skills are the steering; one provides humans with power and traction, the other affords us control and direction. This duality helps frame what follows as we drill down to examine three major technological shifts shaping the modern workplace: social media, remote working, and artificial intelligence.

Each digital evolution offers benefits, but each also poses specific challenges. Strengthening our soft skill foundations can help us in addressing these challenges.

1. Social Media: For Connection, or Comparison?

Social media has transformed how humans connect, learn and express themselves. It offers access to communities, kindred spirits and real-time information. However, it also brings with it the risks of information overload, burnout and that relentless comparison trap.

Why? Because it can be addictive; platforms are engineered to capture attention, trigger emotional responses and feed our need for validation. Without boundaries, we become reactive and driven by compulsion, rather than reflective and in control.

Soft skills can boost our ability to stay present, filter out the noise and connect intentionally. Paying attention to these areas can help, for example, self-awareness, emotional regulation, assertive communication, mindful engagement and time management.

2. Remote Working: For Freedom, or Disconnection?

In the post-COVID world, remote working has enhanced personal autonomy, yielded greater flexibility and retuned our ability to focus and choose. However, as the line between work and life has blurred, new challenges have emerged, such as miscommunication, isolation, and diminished personal visibility and presence.

Why? Because remote communication often lacks emotional cues and context; reducing it to transactional levels takes away the emotional connections that are vital to building trust. And lack of boundaries can further cause work to bleed into every corner of life, eroding personal motivation and well-being.

Soft skills can strengthen our ability to weave the invisible threads necessary to sustain collaboration and identity across a labyrinth of physical distances and geography of mediated spaces. Paying attention to these areas can help, for example, showing up authentically, communicating with clarity, holding emotional presence, demonstrating empathy, and designing effective daily habits.

3. Artificial Intelligence: For Amanuensis, or Abdication?

We cannot deny that AI is now part of our daily workflows. It offers a helping hand for productivity gains, opens up new possibilities in idea generation, and calmly supports us through AI tools like conversational assistants and coaching platforms. However, the blending of what appears human versus machine also raises concerns, such as loss of voice, overreliance on AI outputs, and fears around future job security.

Why? Because of the ubiquity and rapid pace of AI's adoption; humans out of the AI loop can feel overwhelmed, especially as new tools emerge faster than we can keep up. we're often in coping mode before we've had the chance to truly understand or learn. The real challenge isn't AI itself, but how we think about it, with it, and around it. Are we using it to harness and amplify our thinking, or are we simply outsourcing our judgment?

Soft skills can strengthen and empower us to firmly lodge humans in the loop not just as passive users but as active, conscious co-creators and ultimate decision-makers. Paying attention to these areas can help, for example, skills like questioning and deep listening, or critical thinking with the tenacity of a detective, a willingness to experiment and learn, adaptability to engage an AI mindset and sound judgment.

Final Thought: Keeping the Human Edge

Across these two articles, we've explored both the framework and the real-world relevance of soft skills. From understanding how they differ from hard skills, to seeing how they play out in areas like social media, remote working, and AI, a central message emerges.

Soft skills are no longer the optional, junior partner in the relationship. They are now part of the central executive function we call on to navigate complexity, connect with others, and remain resilient in the face of change. They enable us to adapt, not just to our changing environment, but to each other.

So, while data may drive decisions we make, and as technologies reshape our future world of work, it is still humans who must make meaning, hold context, and own choice. Building relationships that we trust is increasingly important, and it is through soft skills such as presence, empathy, adaptability, and insight, that we will continue to hold our human edge.

Amanuenses help people and organisations navigate growth and change through the design and delivery of soft skills development solutions.

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