

Why managers need to sharpen their human skills

Written by Patrick O'Brien CMgr FCMI

Tuesday 06 October 2026

Source: <https://www.managers.org.uk/knowledge-and-insights/article/why-managers-need-to-sharpen-their-human-skills/>

As AI becomes more capable, managers must consider the distinctly human skills that will help us work more effectively with technology – and with one another

Much of the conversation around AI focuses on how quickly technologies are advancing, what they can now do and whether humans can keep pace. This can surface doubts and fears that may, in turn, put us on the wrong track.

Technologies are increasingly capable at what they do particularly well, so we are unlikely to outperform them there. But do we need to? Perhaps the more useful question is, 'What do we humans need to become better at doing ourselves?'

That brings the focus back to something much closer to our own control: the skills we choose to develop.

For years, we have distinguished between hard and soft skills. Hard skills tend to be technical or functional, often connected to particular jobs, processes and systems. Soft skills, on the other hand, are more transferable and relational, encompassing areas such as communication, collaboration, relationship-building, storytelling, influence, decision-making and leadership.

You may also have heard these described as personal and interpersonal, transferable, employability or life skills. They've always been learnable, although changing established human behaviours is rarely as straightforward as learning a technical process.

These days, I increasingly prefer the term 'human skills'. It's not because technical skills matter any less; far from it, we need both. Rather, the term 'human skills' draws our attention towards capabilities that help us relate to others, interpret what we encounter, adapt to changing circumstances, exercise judgement and decide how to act.

Humans still work with humans

Digital capability and AI literacy demand considerable attention. Yet we risk overlooking something obvious: humans still spend an enormous amount of their working lives interacting with other humans.

We talk with colleagues, customers, suppliers and partners. We listen, explain, question, disagree, negotiate and, occasionally, misunderstand one another. Ideas emerge through conversation. Problems surface when somebody notices what others might have missed.

Solutions improve when different perspectives come together. Trust grows as relationships are formed and strengthened through repeated human interaction.

Yes, technology participates in much of this, but human relationships enable it, placing relationships and trust closer to the centre of that human edge.

Empathy is part of that, within the broader territory of emotional intelligence. Here, empathy is more about sensing and gathering human information through interaction, rather than simply 'being nice'. We observe, ask questions, listen, explore another person's perspective and try to understand their environment, motivations and concerns. Importantly, we defer judgement until we have enough insight to exercise it more wisely.

Communication therefore becomes more than another human skill sitting on some laundry list. It is the connective tissue that runs through many of them.

Communication now extends beyond humans

Something else shifted during those darker Covid days; we became accustomed to communicating through technology. More recently, we have also needed to become more effective at communicating with technology.

Early excitement around generative AI centred on prompts and prompt engineering. That was understandable. Yet human-to-technology communication involves rather more than finding clever words to put into a box.

We need to provide context, express intent, ask useful questions, interpret what comes back, clarify, refine and sometimes even challenge. There are obvious parallels with human-to-human communication. The two are complementary human skills and should grow alongside one another, without one crowding out the other.

Becoming better at communicating with technology can happen alongside becoming better at communicating with people. Indeed, the more technology mediates our working lives, the more important our ability to build authentic, trusted human relationships may become.

From answers to critical thinking

AI is changing our relationship with information too. We were already living in a data-rich world, and now AI is accelerating the pace by generating, summarising and analysing information at remarkable speeds. The challenge becomes less about finding an answer and more about deciding what answers deserve our confidence.

What is relevant? What assumptions sit beneath that? What might be missing? What do we trust and why? That is where critical thinking becomes increasingly important.

Critical thinking helps us examine what we are given, rather than accepting it at face value. Discernment helps us distinguish what is relevant, credible or useful from what is not. Judgement helps us weigh those pieces in context, before decision-making requires us to choose and act.

When AI offers plausible answers, humans still need to challenge the framing, notice what may be missing, weigh consequences and decide what they are prepared to stand behind.

Leadership involves more than finding information. What matters must be identified, what is appropriate must be determined in context, choices must be made, and responsibility for action must be made clear.

Once again, communication underpins this. Good questions open up thinking. Listening exposes us to perspectives beyond our own. Dialogue helps us test assumptions. Criticality can be thoughtful rather than confrontational, helping us become more considered before reaching a conclusion.

From prompting towards delegation

Increasingly capable technologies remind me of a young intern growing into their role. As managers, there comes a point when we need to let them stretch their wings. Because technologies are now doing more on our behalf, our relationship with them also needs to evolve. Simple directions and prompts can take us only so far. And asking technologies to take on more complex challenges calls for a different mindset, one more akin to effective delegation.

Managers know delegation requires more than issuing instructions. We need clarity about intent, outcomes, context, boundaries, resources, checkpoints and feedback. The same broad principles provide a productive way to think about increasingly capable technologies.

With humans, as with technologies, the important distinction is delegation, not abdication.

Technologies can assist, recommend and act within agreed boundaries. However, humans still need sufficient understanding of their capabilities and limitations to determine what should be delegated and ring-fence its scope, including how much authority is appropriate, where review is required, and who ultimately owns the outcome.

Widening the lens with systems thinking

One further human skill deserves greater attention, and that is systems thinking.

Much of our early exploration and use of AI starts with ourselves, asking whether it can help us perform our tasks faster or better, and whether that creates value. However, the bigger opportunity may come when we pull back, widen the lens and bring three broader questions into focus.

1. How can I improve my own work?
2. How can I help my team improve how we work together?
3. How can I help my organisation improve the processes and workflows around us?

That requires us to stand back, notice patterns and connections, and consider how changing one part of a process may affect others. It asks us to notice routine rather than simply flow with it. Should something be retained? Could it be improved, automated or redesigned? Or is this somewhere that human involvement continues to add particular value?

AI may help us explore those questions, for sure. Yet the curiosity to ask them, the confidence and initiative to raise them, the communication needed to involve others, and the judgement to decide what happens next remain distinctly human contributions.

Perhaps these are some of the skills shaping the human edge as AI continues along its own rapidly developing course. Our opportunity is to become more deliberate about our own course, rather than simply follow in its wake.

In a world where relationships continue to matter, our ability to connect authentically, think critically, discern carefully, build trust, make good decisions and take ownership of the choices we make remains central.

Because the human edge is about how effectively we work with increasingly capable technologies and, just as importantly, it's also about how effectively we continue to work with one another.

Patrick O'Brien CMgr FCMI sits on the CMI Singapore Regional Board. He is founder and managing director of The Amanuenses Network Pte Ltd, Singapore. Amanuenses helps people and organisations navigate growth and change by strengthening human skills such as communication, relationship-building, critical thinking, judgement and leadership.

[For More Amanuenses Soft Skills Articles, Click Here](#)

www.Amanuenses.Net © 2026