

“You have to understand the disruption”: what skills do managers need in an AI-enabled workplace?

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We asked Chartered Managers at the frontline of digital transformation what skills budding leaders need to develop now to ensure their future employability in the age of AI



We may come to regret ever grumbling about having to draft an email, trawl through a spreadsheet or proofread a report. Nasser Zahman Chowdhury CMgr MCMI, a CEO specialising in business process outsourcing, e-learning and AI adoption, eloquently highlights the key role that such hands-on, often repetitive tasks traditionally played in building critical capabilities such as judgement.

“Learners made mistakes, received feedback and slowly learned what good looked like,” he says. “Much of that early work may have felt routine, but it was also where people developed professional instinct.”

Today, AI is busy rewriting these age-old human processes and condensing or removing many of those steps. And while this creates clear benefits in speed and productivity, it also brings other risks.

“AI can accelerate the answer, but it can also remove the learning that used to happen before you get there,” says Nasser.

Understand the disruption

So, where should junior staff be applying their attention at a time when their current role, let alone the idea of advancement into mid-level management, may feel acutely challenged?

First, learners need to understand the new tools. According to Jacky Wright CMgr CCMI, chair of CMI's AI Advisory Council, AI fluency has to be a “basic minimum”.

“For you to understand the implications of how you manage individuals and teams, you have to understand what the disruption is,” she says. “In the old world of managing, you had to understand how to incentivise and motivate individuals, and how to build a good team. In the AI world, you also need to establish what each person's capabilities need to be, now that the technology will also be able to do tasks for you. It's about understanding the implications of AI and how it changes how you work.”

Artificial Intelligence; Real Leadership

Our report reveals that a striking 70% of managers seek advice from generative AI, rather than going to their managers for guidance. It reveals that the biggest barriers to successful AI adoption are not technical, but human, with a significant capability gap preventing many organisations from translating ambition into measurable business impact.

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For Jacky, the key word here is change. "As we're at the early stages of AI, this is all about transformation," she says. "You have to be an expert in what has changed in general. How does it affect who I am, the work we do, the implications on our team? What outcomes do I need to focus on? And what do I need to be able to do?"

According to CMI's report *Artificial Intelligence: Real Leadership*, while aspiring managers don't need technical skills such as data engineering, their commitment has to extend beyond using large language models, such as ChatGPT or Copilot.

"It needs to involve a level of understanding of the underlying concepts of AI and even building small-scale agents for personal use," the report stated. "This new requirement mandates a practical AI literacy that sits between basic usage and technical expertise, allowing managers to read system outputs, recognise signs such as hallucinations and understand confidence scores."

Exercise judgement

Patrick O'Brien CMgr FCMI, managing director of the Amanuenses Network, cautions that while learners should understand the technologies and applications relevant to their businesses, to know what to use, when to use it and how to use it well, they also need the judgement to know when not to use it, why not, and what might be a more appropriate resource instead.

"We should not treat every business problem as an AI nail simply because we suddenly have a very powerful AI hammer," he says.

Patrick goes on to stress that Amanuenses chooses to use the term "AI-enabled" workplace, rather than "AI-driven", because it keeps people in the driving seat.

"AI will continue to accelerate along its own trajectory, but people don't have to be dragged along in its wake," he says. "Humans should still determine direction, make choices and take responsibility for the consequences."

Shift your focus

Dr Koon Vui Yee CMgr MCMI, principal teaching fellow at Sunway Business School's Department of Management, echoes Patrick's insights. She believes employees shouldn't waste time trying to become faster at routine tasks that AI can already handle reasonably well, such as summarising information, producing first drafts or basic analysis. Instead they should focus on judgement, communication and working well with people.

"The greater value will come from knowing what to do with the output," she says. "Can you spot when an AI-generated recommendation doesn't fit the situation? Can you explain a difficult decision to your team, deal with disagreement or make a judgement when the information is incomplete?"

Systems thinking

Yet if leaders are going to extract real value from AI, it's not simply a case of changing individual behaviour. They also need to consider the processes, workflows and wider organisational systems surrounding them.

For Patrick, this requires the ability to stand back from the immediate task and see the bigger picture. This type of systems thinking can create real value, but it requires a wide range of human skills.

"It takes motivation to look closely at routines, curiosity to notice patterns, imagination to see connections, and a holistic perspective that helps us understand how changing one part of a process may affect other parts around it," he explains. "It also requires awareness of where technology might help, a willingness to experiment and, perhaps, a healthy tolerance for a little ambiguity."

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