

How do we create “employable” graduates?

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If there was any advice I would give the wave of young people about to enter tertiary studies in the New Year it would be to focus on employability skills and get the STEM qualifications new workplaces increasingly require.

There is no doubt that work is changing, and jobs along with it. Many of Ai Group’s member companies are transforming their workplaces through new technologies and systems and developments in artificial intelligence and robotics. Digitalisation is meaning fast moving workplaces, globally connected systems and rapid change.

With all of these daunting developments taking place and the education system failing to keep up, the result for frustrated employers is that they find some new entrants to the labour market as verging on “unemployable”.

Those embarking on the next stage of their education should be keen to know the key things that employers value.

Employers’ frustration with job applicants often relates to the lack of employability skills that they want and need but often can’t find in new graduates.

Over the past few years Ai Group’s surveys of employers have identified the sorts of employability skills most valued by businesses. These skills include the ability to work alongside others in teams to get more complex tasks achieved.¹ Employers want young people who are well able to manage themselves, to use their initiative and to solve problems around the work they are doing. While many jobs require specialisation at different levels, more than ever all jobs need generic types of skills in order for workers to be efficient and comfortable with an acceleration of technologies - working with people, systems, machines and virtual spaces.

The future of work suggests that people will move through an increasing number of work opportunities during their lives. Added to this are the trends for part-time employment – it has increased threefold since the 1970s.² – and for self-employed ‘gig’ work.

To make their way through different work and job roles, possessing the so-called employability skills above will give young people the firm base they need on which to build a career. Being able to develop good relationships, take initiative and be adaptive will help with further development.

It is really important that job applicants are able to demonstrate their command of these skills to prospective employers when they are going for jobs.

But employability skills are not the only important capabilities into the future. As a young person entering the workforce now, an ability to participate in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) related work and tasks is anticipated to provide big advantages. It has been acknowledged for some time now that the fastest growing occupations in the economy require STEM skills. Within this broad field, they will need a good digital literacy level as this is increasingly needed in all work. An OECD Survey of Adult Skills has found that on average more than half of the population can only

¹ Workforce Development Needs Survey Report, Australian Industry Group, December 2016.

² Committee for Economic Development of Australia, Australia’s future workforce?, 2015.

perform the simplest set of computer tasks, or have no IT skills at all.³ Improvements in this area need to go along with lifting the performance in other foundational skills of literacy and numeracy. We still need to get the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic right.

Job seekers will have an advantage if they can use digital technology purposefully and confidently to communicate and find information.

Those looking for more involved digital work will need to be able to evaluate, configure/program and use complex digital systems. Even more advanced skills are needed to be involved with building digital technologies such as software development, complex excel macros and additive manufacturing data files.⁴

Employability skills are built over time through a number of complementary activities and it is a real advantage for students to be exposed to workplaces and get on-the-job experience during their education and training. With the complex and changing workplace of today and tomorrow, providing young people with opportunities to integrate theoretical knowledge with practice is now recognised as a key way to prepare them to contribute productively in the workplace.

Australia's education and training institutions are ramping up their connections with industry to enable learning that is based in or integrated with work and industry is also doing its bit. But there is a long way to go to build the support young people need to develop the capabilities for a rewarding and productive life in the workplace.

As some jobs disappear or fundamentally change, thousands of new jobs are being created. We and you just need the skills to fill them.

³ Skills for a Digital World, OECD, December, 2016.

⁴ Digital Skills for Tomorrow's World, UK Digital Skills Taskforce, 2014.