

Smart machine or smart people?

LETTERS:As we are witnessing the rise of the Covid-19 crisis and trying hard to cope with limited resources and skills, Albert Einstein's quote comes to mind: "In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity".

The digital realm is overtaking and redefining everything familiar even before we had a chance to ponder and decide. Amid slowing economic activity, Covid-19 has led to a surge in e-commerce and accelerated digital transformation.

So, what are the opportunities that can be foreseen through the crisis? In years to come, there will be more demand for skilled workers compared to semi-skilled workers. Therefore, the future generations need to be equipped with appropriate skills to face a dynamic world.

Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Seri Dr Adham Baba said there were concerns over the shortage of highly skilled workers to meet the industry demand especially in new and emerging technologies.

He said, at least 45 per cent of the nation's total workforce need to be highly skilled workers to enable Malaysia to compete with the world's leading countries. He said according to a Department of Statistics Malaysia report, the country is dominated by 62.2 per cent semi-skilled workers, 24.7 per cent skilled workers and 13.1 per cent low-skilled workers in the second quarter of this year.

From the statistics, we can conclude that, shortage of skilled workers might generate higher rates of unemployment, leading towards economic disruption in the future.

What are the future skills needed then? Here are some of the future top 10 job skills according to the World Economic Forum: Analytical thinking and innovation, active learning, complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, leadership, technology use and design (digital skill), stress tolerance and flexibility and ideation. These skills are important in businesses and institutions across industries — be it healthcare, banking, agriculture, manufacturing, or government services.

The next concern is, how to produce skilled future generations? The answer is, "definitely through education". Obviously, given the economic value of education and the skills it provides, it is worth considering whether the educational system is producing workers with the skills and educational qualifications that employers are demanding now and in the future. Firms and businesses face difficulties hiring new workers with the appropriate skills.

The future demand for skilled workers could vastly exceed the supply. By 2029, the demand for workers with an associate degree could be higher than the supply. These educational and skill shortages could result in loss of economic output.

Nevertheless, the basic message to policymakers and future generations is clear: Current levels of educational attainment and skills development are unlikely to be adequate over the next decade.

Therefore, there is a need for sound policies that encourage skills development through education which is vital for a healthy economy.

Higher education syllabus needs to be revamped by integrating future skills. By boosting these, the future labour force could better match the needs of employers, minimising loss of opportunities.

So, ask ourselves this - "Are we all going to be working for a smart machine, or will we have smart people around the machine?"

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