Cultural Daily

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Cultural Sensitivity Is Invaluable

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, July 26th, 2017

As the popular opinion goes, we need more STEM-educated kids in America. We need more people prepared to go into careers related to science, technology, engineering, and math. The success of our country and the success of civilization in general depends on STEM. Other countries know this, and that's why they're ahead of us in STEM education.

Yet, a counterwind is blowing. The wind smells like machine parts and it speaks in zeros and ones. It is a wind of our own making, promising to level entire career paths, rendering them obsolete beneath its steely gaze. That's right—the robots are coming. You or I might not take this seriously, but automation could consume 47 percent of jobs in the future, according to an Oxford report.

The safest jobs in the coming robot crisis aren't those associated with STEM. They're associated with cultural sensitivity. Mental health and substance abuse jobs stand only a 0.3 percent chance of being automated. Occupational therapists and the clergy are also not likely to lose their jobs to robots. The jobs that do require a science background—physician, surgeon, dietician, nutritionist—also require a high level of cultural sensitivity. To do these jobs, you have to be able to communicate sensitively with a wide variety of people from different cultures.

When it comes to social work, the job pool is expected to increase by 12 percent between 2014 and 2024—that's almost twice the average rate of increase for other professions. Another quickly growing field is psychiatric nursing, which is part of a 31 percent increase in demand for nurses by 2024.

A huge part of social work and psychiatry is cultural sensitivity. You have to be able to connect on a human level with people. People are unpredictable, and at times they're irrational. In that sense, robots can't help someone navigate through the labyrinth of an arbitrary mind. Artificial intelligence is the opposite of arbitrary.

But there's also the sense in which a person's behavior is determined by their culture. There's a logic to that, so you could expect a robot, programmed with knowledge of a culture's customs and mores, to be able to determine which behaviors are culturally motivated. Even so, a robot can't empathize with a person who is feeling psychological pain because they're maladapted to the mainstream culture. Nor can the robot think of a creative way to help a person cope with such pain.

Besides social work and psychiatry, some of the other robot-proof jobs are those that require creativity. Musicians, poets, artists—these are the careers of the future.

Hard to believe, right? Capitalism has doggedly gnawed down the income from the fruit of creativity. Billions of people do art of one form or another, but very few get paid for it. Yet futurist Martin Ford, author of “Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future”, identifies jobs that involve “genuine creativity, such as being an artist,” as the ones that will hold up once robots take over.

To be a good artist, you must have cultural sensitivity. Great art reflects and comments on the culture within which it blooms. Think Shakespeare, Bob Dylan, Picasso—these are artists whose work mines the rich cultural deposits of their time. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed does not.” Varying cultures and the individuals within them are the water of society. Great art that immerses itself in the water is timeless.

The rise of the robots is a good thing. It’s a litmus test for timelessness and universality. After all the detritus is gone, humans will come to remember what’s truly (in)valuable again. Robots will never be able to replace the uniquely human ability to love, make art, and create culture.

Feature image: Tsunami, by Katsushika Hokusai / Wikimedia

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