

COMPUTERS AND THE FUTURE OF SKILL DEMAND IN THE LEGAL SPACE

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According to Wikipedia, a “Computer is a machine that can be instructed to carry out sequences of arithmetic or logical operations automatically via computer programming. Modern computers have the ability to follow generalized sets of operations, called programs. These programs enable computers to perform an extremely wide range of tasks.”

For the purpose of this discourse, the term “computer” is used to refer generally to computers, robots, and other types of information and communications technologies.

Nowadays, computers are used to carry out activities which in the past were carried out by humans. In the education sector, learning has been taken beyond the four walls of a class room, with the advent of online/virtual learning platforms such as Coursera, edX, Udemty etc., there now exists opportunities to gain knowledge outside the classroom and most of these courses are self-paced. It has been unofficially reported that the largest percentage of Nigerian software developers/programmers did not learn the skill in school but learnt the skill via online learning platforms such as YouTube, Codecademy etc.

Another example which readily comes to mind is the banking sector. The Automated Teller Machine (ATM) is another means wherein computers have been employed to carry out duties traditionally carried out by humans. These machines are found on almost all streets in Nigeria, which makes depositing and withdrawal of cash, ATM card request and hotlisting among other things easy, unlike in the past when bank customers have to wait on a long queue for bank officials in order to deposit, withdraw money or request for other services.

Without further ado, the uses and attendant ease that the invention of the computer has brought to the human race cannot be overstated. The computer is used in every facet of our life as it makes life easier. However, a critical examination of the statement above “computers are used to carry out activities which in the past were carried out by humans”, leave the mind to wonder about the continued relevance of the human brain, knowledge and skills in the future coupled with the continued development of computer.

Computer scientists are working on reproducing all human skills with computer capabilities using artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotics. The development of these capabilities will have far-reaching implications for work and education.

Unsurprisingly then, many people worry that these advances will dramatically change work skills in the years ahead and perhaps leave many workers unemployable.

According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2017 assessment, the expert assessment showed that 62% of workers in OECD countries use skills (the three general cognitive skills of literacy, numeracy and problem solving) on a daily basis at work but with proficiency at a level that computers are close to reproducing. Only 13% of workers now use skills on a daily basis with higher proficiency than computers.

With the above backdrop, it is pertinent to state here that the concept of virtual/remote work and online freelancing is no longer news and it is fast gaining ground even here in Nigeria. Companies and organizations now employ workers who work from home between a stipulated period of time, even though this development may have its own disadvantages but its advantages includes reduction in the cost of procuring a large office space, office equipment such as workstations, laptops etc.

Also, there has been arguments about building robots to be recruited into the police force and the army in order to fight crimes and go to wars. Some of the arguments include the fact that since robots are not human, there will be a great reduction in the corruption going on in the police force especially the issues of bribery and demanding money for bail, after all you can't bribe a machine. It was also argued that robots fighting wars will reduce soldiers' death rate, hence preserving their lives. Others have argued that if robots take over all or some of human jobs then unemployment will skyrocket as there will be a huge reduction in the demand for manpower.

Historically, there have been periodic waves of concern about unemployment resulting from new technology. This stretches back at least two centuries to the early industrial revolution (Mokyr, Vickers and Ziebarth, 2015). As technology advances, automation of certain skills is raising questions about the changes in the quantity of jobs that will be needed in the future.

Globally in the legal profession, one of the characteristics of a good law practice or a good law firm is its library. Lawyers are known to boast about the number of law textbooks, law reports, statutes and legislations, law dictionaries, law digests etc. they have in their offices. This was indeed a prestige and in order to manage a law library there is a need to employ a librarian or at least a "library keeper".

However, there is a need to ask whether these "library keepers" skills are still in demand since nowadays law firms are going "paperless". Law reports are now compiled on

platforms which are easily accessible on computers through the internet such example here in Nigeria include LawPavillion, Legalpedia etc., softcopies of laws are now available and some have been developed into downloadable mobile applications, legal text authors are now making the softcopy of their texts available online, important documents are now kept on cloud storages etc.

Furthermore, recently the notion that Artificial Intelligence (AI) i.e. computerized systems can replace human thought processes and interactions, continues to gain traction in all areas of life including the legal profession and in particular in the field of dispute resolution.

According to Kluwer Mediation Blog, in November 2017 there were news headlines about 'Case Cruncher Alpha', a project at Cambridge University, where an AI system predicted the outcome of 775 financial ombudsman cases with 86.6% accuracy. A panel of 100 experienced lawyers assembled to perform the same task achieved 66.3%.

It is argued that by around 2045 a point of super artificial intelligence will have been reached creating almost limitless capacity for tasks such as problem solving. Humanly speaking, such predictions seem more unsettling, even frightening, than reassuring or exciting.

In a country like Nigeria, where the system of dispute resolution is adjudicatory in nature, could AI have the potential to process claims faster and even make a decision about cases? Would claimants tolerate their cases being resolved by computers? Will AI reach a point where a robot might represent a client or even chair a mediation session?

However, as AI increasingly becomes part of our day-to-day lives – e.g. the use of automated machines, online shopping and payment, the use of Siri and or Cortana, online courses etc., to the point that we allow AI to drive us and our families around in self-driving cars – there will come a time where we are completely comfortable in letting the algorithm adjudicate our case for us. What once sounded like pure science fiction is now, because of developments seeming remote but not impossible.

Conclusively, over the coming decades it is likely that there will be strong economic pressure to apply computer capabilities in almost every sector of the economy. It is reasonable to conclude that there will be an overall decrease in demand for “those workers” – the vast majority – whose proficiency is no better than that of current computer capabilities. This does not mean that these workers will become unemployed, but they will become less valuable for many work tasks, and that will reduce employment in some cases and reduce wages in others.

In a world where technology is improving every day, the future of skill demand in all sectors especially in the legal space is shaky as computer scientists keep working on reproducing all human skills with computer capabilities, however there is a need to stay relevant since these machines directly or indirectly need human input or control to function.

Hence in order to stay relevant, it is recommended that legal practitioners as well as paralegals should endeavor to upgrade their skills (the same way computer operating systems are continuously upgraded) and acquire new skills especially skills that are relevant in this technological era.

At this juncture, it is important to reiterate that communication, negotiation, legal research and advocacy skills are solely no longer enough to stay relevant in the legal space vis-a-vis the dynamic nature of technology.

According to World Economic Forum (WEF), by 2022 the growing skills outlook include analytic thinking and innovation, active learning and learning strategies, critical thinking and analysis, leadership and social influence, emotional intelligence, reasoning, problem-solving and ideation, creativity, originality and initiative, complex problem-solving among others.

While acquiring new skills and upgrading old ones, it is important to state that these skills should not only be learnt but also mastered up to proficiency level higher than computer capabilities.

One thing is certain – the world is fast moving and we need to keep abreast of the technological developments in the legal space, unlearn redundant skills and learn new ones, without this one will be left behind in the world of oblivion.