Technical upskilling is crucial, but so is building people skills

Cos look for agility, collaboration, leadership abilities

Sujit John & Shilpa Phadnis | TNN

The technology industry is going through a phase where its demand for certain skills far exceeds supply. Anyone going through these pages would by now know that those blockbuster skills include AI, ML, data science, cloud computing, IoT, cybersecurity, blockchain and social media marketing. Salaries for some of these roles are soaring.

There's an urgent need to upskill talent. But upskilling is not just about technology. The tech industry today is looking also at very different people skills. And these were the subjects of our webinar last week in association with Hero Vired, a major provider of online courses. The webinar was the culmination of the tech challenge called Vired Conquer, organised by TOI and Hero Vired.

Everyone on the panel noted that the best way to build technical skills is to apply your learnings in projects, and not be dependent only on what is taught in the educational curriculum.

"You have to have this continuous learning mindset – not just what you learn from your college or institute, but what you learn from the broader ecosystem. There is so much that is available to do, with projects, with tech challenges like these (Vired Conquer)," Anupam Trehan, senior director for people & communities at Cisco India & Saarc, said.

Anjali Rao, senior director of HR at Intel India, said you should

STUDENTS, FRESHERS MUST DO PROJECTS THAT CHALLENGE THEM

" We are hearing more about upskilling now because demand for skilled talent has perhaps never been more important, with pay ranges hitting the ceiling. The India skills report of 2020 shows employability ranging between 45-47%. This is the best time to groom the talent our colleges are producing.

Satyajit M Menon | HEAD, PEOPLE & CULTURE, HERO VIRED

You have to have a forward-looking learning mindset. Do projects that challenge you. Sometimes you fail, sometimes you succeed, and you must be open to that. People who don't have a learning mindset, they will at some point feel the world has surged ahead, and they are where they were.

Anjali Rao | SENIOR DIRECTOR, HR, INTEL INDIA

When we hire, we do an assessment of technical skills. But for us, people skills are more important – agility with respect to learning and change; problem solving, from the lens of both creativity and simplicity; collaboration skills, not just with your static team, but also across different teams.

Anupam Trehan | SENIOR DIRECTOR, PEOPLE & COMMUNITIES, CISCO INDIA & SAARC

The most successful entrepreneurs are those fresh out of college. That's when you have the fire in your belly to start off. A big reason why startups succeed boils down to culture. When your culture is influenced by what you have seen in larger organisations, your ability to create a new kind of culture goes.

Siddarth Pai | FOUNDING PARTNER, CHIEF FINANCIAL AND ESG OFFICER, 3ONE4 CAPITAL

Vired Conquer Tech Challenge winners

100% SCHOLARSHIPS
- Hritwij Shrivastava
- Devarajula Umamahesh
- Gaurav Gawade

50% SCHOLARSHIPS
- Aviral Goel
- Deborshi Lahiri
- Ritham Reddy
- Sagar Gulati

do projects that challenge you, and not those that land you in a comfort zone. "And don't be afraid to fail. Innovate, take risks, challenge the status quo.

These are skills that the educational system does not necessarily inculcate," she said.

Siddarth Pai, founding partner and chief financial and ESG officer at venture capital firm 3one4 Capital, noted the success of the founders of drone company AUS (Aarav Unmanned Systems), a company they have funded. The founders had started straight out of college. "They had designed the drone in-house, they had solved complex aerodynamics problems. What really attracted us to them was that the founders were exceptionally driven, and they had deep domain expertise. Both the skills are not contingent on the education you have got," he said.

Everybody emphasised the need for agility. "You have to break things and fail fast, without upsetting everyone around you. To me, agility, without being too fragile, without cracking under pressure, that is super important," Satyajit Menon, head of people & culture at Hero Vired, said.

Trehan said you need to be agile both with respect to learning – finding the appropriate things to learn at the right time – and with respect to your ability to adapt to change.

The ability to collaborate is another quality that is now seen as crucial. "We lived in a world where competition was what we thought would take you through. But startups have taught us that it's collaboration that takes us there. It's not about one function

doing better than the other. We are looking at people who can work with multi-functional teams, as opposed to those who like to work in silos," Menon said.

Trehan too emphasised that collaboration is no longer about how you work with your own team, but how you work across different teams. "How do you influence and work across boundaries!" she said.

Trehan and Rao said mentorship is one of the best ways to understand the path forward quickly. "Often you rely on your classmates or your peers. But sometimes, look for a coach or sponsor," Trehan said. Rao said you could immerse yourself in what you are doing and you may be doing it extremely well, "but you have to take a stock check periodically, get someone who can show you the mirror from time to time."

Menon said a major shift that is taking place is also around leadership. He noted that while a leader would earlier have 20-30 years of experience, now you have your head of tech who is in the 20s. "Age and experience helps, but to get the job done is what matters more. You will have an interesting blend of people who have youth and experience together. But leadership will remain a big challenge in the times to come for the technology industry. The questions will be, is there a strong pipeline, will they be able to force the company into the next stage of evolution," he said.

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