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AI's here, are we ready?

Accenture Strategy report delves on the characteristics of the future workforce

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Reimagine work; pivot the workforce; and scale up "new skilling."

These three key courses of action are what employers should take to fully maximize both artificial intelligence (AI) technology investments and employees' potential, says Accenture Strategy in its report "Reworking the Revolution," which poses the question: "Are you ready to compete as intelligent technology meets human ingenuity to create the future workforce?"

Accenture Strategy is the global professional services firm's strategic planning arm which combines deep business insight and understanding of how technology impacts industries, with focus on digital disruption, competitive agility, operating and business model and the future workforce.

In its recent report, Accenture Strategy says the "real opportunity" for businesses in AI lies in how they can work together to "develop differentiated customer experiences and to create entirely new products, services and markets." Such human-machine alliance, the report adds, could boost revenues by as much as 38 percent by 2022, and raise employment levels by 10 percent.

To find out if businesses are ready for human-machine collaboration, Accenture Research conducted a global survey from September to November last year among over 1,200 CEOs working with AI, and over 14,000 workers spanning four generations and representing all skill levels.

The research covered 11 countries (Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Spain, United Kingdom, United States) and these industries: automotive, consumer goods and services, health and life sciences, infrastructure and transportation, energy, media and entertainment, software and platforms, banking (retail and investment, insurance, retail, telecommunications, and utilities.

The results: While 74 percent of executives said they plan to use AI to automate tasks to a large or a very large extent in the next three years, almost all (97 percent) said they intend to use AI to enhance worker capabilities.

There is, however, a disconnect: only 3 percent of business leaders said their organization planned to increase investment in training programs significantly in the next three years. Such result also reflects how employers underestimate their employees' willingness to acquire new skills, states the report, as these executives deem only about a fourth of their workforce as AI-ready.

However, Accenture's research

* TECHNOLOGY
* ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

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shows that 68 percent of highly skilled workers, and 48 percent of lower skilled ones are positive about AI's impact on their work. Overall, 67 percent of workers said it was important to develop their own skills to work with intelligent machines.

To achieve higher rates of growth in the age of AI, companies need to invest more in equipping their people to work with machines in new ways," says Mark Knickrehm, group chief executive of Accenture Strategy. "Increasingly, businesses will be judged on their commitment to what we call Applied Intelligence—the ability to rapidly implement intelligent technology and human ingenuity across all parts of their core business to secure this growth."

The report thus makes three recommendations to business leaders. The first: Reimagine work.

The most pressing issue surrounding AI is the risk of job displacement. The report states, however, that "the most significant impact of AI won't be on the number of jobs, but rather on job content."

This means companies need to redesign the jobs they assign their employees by taking into consideration the technology available to them to make work more efficient. Accenture Strategy suggests doing the following: Assess tasks, not jobs; then allocate tasks to machines and people, balancing the need to automate work and to elevate people's capabilities.

The next course of action is to pivot the workforce, says the report, to areas that unlock new forms of value. It will take four steps for companies to achieve this: 1) align the workforce to new business models by shifting their purpose to sync with your unique value proposition to customers; 2) reinvest savings made from use of AI in training programs for employees; 3) encourage an open culture and experimentation, which allows people more autonomy and decision-making power; and 4) foster a "new leadership DNA" which will create leaders out of employees at all levels.

Finally, Accenture Strategy advises companies to scale up "new skilling"—a framework the firm developed based on a progression of skill level and using a suite of innovative digital learning methods that maximizes training investment at speed and scale.

It takes three steps to do this, says the report: First, prioritize which skills to develop. While this will depend on an organization's AI investment and its existing skills, according to Accenture's research, executives rank the following as the top five most important skills in the next three years: resource management, leadership, communication, complex problem-solv-

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ing, and judgment/decision-making.

Second, create training programs that will address both employees' skills and willingness to learn new capabilities. Lastly, the report recommends that companies use digital tech, such as virtual and augmented reality, to create more innovative learning methods that, at the same time, will help employees master the use of smart machines.

"Business leaders must take immediate steps to pivot their workforce to enter an entirely new world where human ingenuity meets intelligent technology to unlock new forms of growth," says Ellyn Shook, Accenture chief leadership and human resources officer. "Workers are impatient to collaborate with AI, giving leaders the opportunity to demonstrate true applied intelligence within their organization." INQ