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HCC in the News: Future jobs in the Tampa Bay Area: Prepare for change driven by robots, tech, etc.

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As companies moved jobs overseas to cut costs years ago, and then brought them back to provide better service in more recent times, outsourcing became an ugly word to describe what not to do in corporate America. But tomorrow's job threat is potentially much closer to home with smart computers and responsive technology in robots that can do almost anything a human can do.

The transition is already underway. Computers with touch screen menus in restaurants. Robots performing repetitious tasks. And technology-enhanced cars helping prevent us from having accidents.

The trend is only expected to accelerate. In the not too distant future, cars will be talking to each other -- and driving themselves. Refrigerators will be programmed to order more eggs and other food as personal supplies dwindle. And you may have your news reported by robots (with the help of a few editors).

"It's up to individual residents to understand the world is changing," says Chelsea Collier, an Austin-based consultant and founder of Digi.City, a web platform exploring advancing technology and how it will affect cities. "You can run from it or you can run toward it."

If you are wondering whether your chosen career will support you in the future, consider this: 54 percent of the U.S. workforce isn't very confident their careers are even likely to exist in 20 years, according to Freelancing in America 2017, a study by Upwork [2] and Freelancers Union.

One way to find out about future opportunities is by looking at employment projections from the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity. In Hillsborough County, the occupations expected to have the most new jobs through 2024 are: customer service representatives, retail salespersons, fast food preparation/servers, registered nurses, and accountants and auditors. Other careers that made the top 100 included construction, janitors/maids, lawyers and paralegals, teachers and teacher assistants, childcare, software developers, assorted health careers, financial and secretarial.

Topping the list of declining careers in Hillsborough County through 2024, in order, are: motor vehicle electronics installers and repairers, where a 36.8 decline is forecast, and switchboard operators, photographic process workers/processing machine operators, lathe and turning machine tool setters and operators, and postal service mail sorters and processors. Also in the top 50: computer operators, funeral attendants, floral designers, typists, reporters, travel agents and tool and die makers.

Jobs that aren't going away

In general, experts say safe careers involve human creativity and service. "Only a human being is going to pay your business," says Kwang-Cheng Chen, professor in the University of South Florida's Department of Electrical Engineering. "How to take care of the human being is always the #1 job."

A good example is the design field. "You definitely want a human being to help you design your house," he points out.

"Manual, routine-type labor is easily replaced," says Ginger Clark, Hillsborough Community College's VP of Academic Affairs, who oversees workforce training. "You can't replace the creativity and the problem solving of the human."

"That human element will never go away. Machines can never replace sitting together in a room and what happens when humans come together to do something," agrees Collier, who says advancing wireless technology will enable a refrigerator to reorder eggs.

That said, the human may not be physically present in the future. "It may be a virtual reality," she says. "There's still a person there."

It's likely that person will be better educated. "It doesn't have to be four-year degree educated," Collier says. "You don't have to have an IQ off the charts to participate in a digital economy."

There must be willingness to up-skill and retool as technology evolves, however. "That's what's going to set you apart in the future workplace," Clark asserts.

"As long as people are OK to adapt, I think any career in technology would be safe," adds Mike Burnett, regional account executive for Tampa's Northern Technologies Group, Inc.

As an employer, a potential employee's attitude is even more important than his or her skillset: They should be willing to do new things.

"We're always looking for sort of a go-getter attitude," Burnett explains.

Losers in the technology job shuffle are likely to include restaurant workers, those who work in the more automated aspects of the banking industry, and doctors' offices impacted by telemedicine, Clark says.

"It will be those individuals who are in your service occupations and entry-level support type workers," she says.

They will need to retool and up-skill. "I hope they're really looking at what's happening," she says. "This may sound a little hokey. I also know somehow we've always found a place for individuals, regardless of their skillset."

Educators at the forefront

HCC already is working on that retraining. "We can't just hire new people to do all these jobs," Clark says.

For example, intelligent transportation systems are being worked into the training program. "We are anticipating this and are trying to be proactive in offering this specific training," Clark says.

HCC is partnering on a Connected Vehicle Pilot Deployment Program involving the Tampa Hillsborough Expressway Authority. Funded through the U.S. Department of Transportation, the program is part of a national effort to promote CV technologies.

"The modules that we're installing in the cars are going to be communicating with their corresponding module on the expressway," Clark explains.

HCC is reworking its building and construction trade coursework as well. "As we move to both smart homes and smart buildings, those individuals are going to have a new skillset, which will be understanding how to work on those wireless-based systems," she says.

Manufacturing careers are no longer just manual assembly jobs. "Automation is a big part of what's happening in manufacturing," she continues. "What we're starting to emphasize to our student is the ability to master the computer program that goes along with the automated system."

Instead of assembly, they'll need to troubleshoot the system, she says.

The welding program is prime for changes too. HCC is preparing to introduce robotic welding into the curriculum, probably in the fall of 2018, Clark says.

Vocational jobs are changing, but they have potential. Nearly 90 percent of the graduates are placed upon graduation, Clark points out.

"I think they will continue to require up-skilling, but I think they are pretty safe for the foreseeable future," she adds.

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