Editorial

Human Touch in a Digital World: The Enduring Value of Soft Skills in AI-Driven Healthcare

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Introduction

"What all of us have to do is to make sure we are using AI in a way that is for the benefit of humanity, not to the detriment of humanity" (Tim Cook)

As we stride deeper into the digital era of 21st century, where algorithms learn faster than we teach, and machines outperform humans in nearly all fields of life including diagnostics, academics, and even creativity, the essence of being human is undergoing redefinition.[1] Artificial Intelligence (AI) has undeniably revolutionized virtually every aspect of our lives including healthcare, academia, finance and governance. However, as AI's reach extends, a paradox emerges: the more intelligent our machines become, the more significance our human-centered skills hold. In this era of exponential technological growth, soft skills; particularly empathy, emotional intelligence, adaptability, communication, and ethical reasoning have become essential.[2]

Soft skills more aptly described as "power skills," are typically defined as personal characteristics and emotional competencies that help individuals efficiently regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. In general terms, soft skills are the personality characteristics, attitudes, and social abilities that are intangible and more closely correlated with character characteristics and social skills than they are with technical proficiency.[3] These include communication, creativity, emotional intelligence, and adaptability—skills that are becoming increasingly important in today's health-care settings. Professionals that can successfully incorporate AI and cognitive technologies with human methods will be the most successful by 2030. AI will improve human capabilities rather than replace them. According to the World Economic Forum, by 2025, more than half of workers will require retraining, with an emphasis on soft skills to support technology improvements.[4]

AI excels at hard skills and automating mundane, time-consuming tasks but it falls short in areas like creativity, empathy, and human judgment. This is exactly where the very core behavioral skills come in, filling the gap and bringing human qualities that are essential for innovation and collaboration. Moreover, competencies like critical thinking facilitate the interpretation of results produced by AI and transform them into strategic decisions. Some essential soft skills for the era of AI include:

Communication Skills:

Communication skills are among the most sought-after soft skills in this era to effectively communicate and facilitate collaboration between humans as well

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as with machines. Effective communication helps in conflict management, boosting creativity, and developing innovation enhancing teamwork. Leaders with strong emotional intelligence can better support their teams in this transition of implementing AI in the workplace without disrupting human dynamics.[3,5] AI can create technical content and give logic, but it cannot lead to team meeting, resolve interpersonal conflicts, or inspire consensus that require trust, shared vision and rapport. Communication skills play a critical role in healthcare because they directly impact the quality of care, patient safety, and health outcomes. Clear, compassionate communication also helps build rapport, reduces patient anxiety, and fosters a strong therapeutic alliance that is vital in every doctor-patient relationship. They hold significant importance in situations involving serious diagnoses, end-of-life care, or vulnerable populations such as the elderly or children. Also, with inter-departmental liaison cases, strong communication promotes better collaboration, enhances coordination of care and produces better outcomes. In fast-paced settings like emergency rooms or surgical theaters, precise communication can be the difference between life and death.

Emotional Intelligence and Empathy:

Emotional intelligence (EI) emphasizes the brain's ability to regulate emotions and process social interactions. The five core competencies of EI as defined by Goleman are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These traits are indispensable in collaborative environments like healthcare. Studies have linked high EI with improved teamwork, leadership effectiveness, and job satisfaction. Empathy, a core component of EI, forms the bedrock of patient-centered care and ethical research conduct in medicine.[6] Empathy is a given person's ability to understand another's perspective concerning his or her circumstances. It is defined as a continuum of three obligatory stages of *comprehension, compassion* and *commitment.* It is widely accepted that empathy plays a critical role in society specifically in healthcare developing and maintaining the physician-patient relationship and various studies have shown a huge positive impact on health outcomes.[7] As AI takes over most of the routine tasks empathy becomes more important than ever in social cohesion, decision making and patient centered care.

Adaptability:

Adaptability is the capacity to adjust rapidly to adjust and respond to the challenges or new situations, embracing change by learning new strategies and finding new solutions.[8] The World Economic Forum (2020) listed adaptability as one of the top ten skills for the future workforce in the age of Artificial Intelligence.[4]The COVID-19 pandemic offered a vivid illustration of how our daily life pivoted to online, clinicians adopted telemedicine and educators embraced virtual classrooms. Adaptability enabled continuity and innovation in the face of this challenge with resilience and innovation. While AI requires reprogramming to adjust to new tasks and challenges, humans have cognitive flexibility to adjust intuitively, combining past experience with new insights. The absence of adaptability in this challenging world can render the most accurate algorithm obsolete.

In conclusion, as artificial intelligence deepens its roots in our daily lives and workplaces, the value of soft skills is growing rapidly than ever. Skills like communication, empathy, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving are what are really required for maintaining the balance in our society. While AI excels in hard skills of knowledge, statistical analysis, documentation and programming, the soft skills to lead, connect and to care, take the center stage. Therefore, as we move forward, building and strengthening soft skills will be just as important as learning new technologies. In this era of growing uncertainty, by reclaiming our uniquely human attributes, we not only preserve the future of our professions, but we also reaffirm our shared humanity.

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