

Way forward is to focus on human strengths

Don't fret about robots replacing people, be prepared to adapt, says panel on future of jobs

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There is no need to worry about robots and machines replacing humans or whether people can learn to beat computers.

Instead, the way forward for tomorrow's workers is to double

down on human strengths, said Education Minister Lawrence Wong.

For instance, robots and computers will never be able to think creatively, have face-to-face conversations, brainstorm, challenge one another or come up with solutions as a team, he added.

Spontaneous "social learning" is

also something machines will not be able to do, he said.

Mr Wong was speaking yesterday at a dialogue on the future of jobs and skills for Singaporeans.

Joining him on the panel were the five mayors: Ms Low Yen Ling (South West District), Ms Denise Phua (Central Singapore District), Mr Desmond Choo (North East District), Mr Alex Yam (North West District) and Mr Fahmi Aliman (South East District).

Said Mr Wong: "People start thinking, 'What should I do to be better today? Should I learn more programming, coding, IT? I think all of these are important skill sets. We need to better understand technology so that we can work well with machines... but we do not have to learn how to be better computers to beat the computer."

"The way forward is for us to double down on our human strengths... It's not to be taken for granted that human soft skills are natural and innate, and that everyone can do it well. We need to practise and get better at it."

Ms Phua said not all future skills have to be tech-related – emerging sectors like eldercare and disability

care are not necessarily tech-heavy.

She said: "Most of us feel like all the jobs of the future have to do with technology, and that's why the main words we hear today are 'data analytics' and 'cyber security'."

But there are other jobs, such as in healthcare, that will focus on care models or the process of caring for patients, with technology used more for communication purposes, Ms Phua added.

Mr Choo touched on how fresh graduates and young job seekers should be ready to adapt. He said: "Changes are quite rapid. But the silver lining we have seen is that workers who are prepared to make changes and adapt, and willing to get retrained... generally do find that getting a job is much easier."

The dialogue was held after a memorandum of understanding was signed between Ms Low, SkillsFuture Singapore chief executive Ong Tze Ch'in and Employment and Employability Institute chief executive Gilbert Tan. Ms Low was representing the five Community Development Councils (CDCs).

The three-year agreement, which will run until August 2023, aims to

provide Singaporeans with information on SkillsFuture programmes and how to tap various resources for career planning and upgrading.

Since the SkillsFuture Advice initiative was launched in 2017, more than 110,000 people have attended over 4,300 SkillsFuture Advice workshops.

Yesterday, the agencies also said SkillsFuture@CDC 2020 – a virtual event offering career workshops and a guide to resources for skills training – will be extended.

It was initially conceived as a week-long event from Aug 10 to 16. In that time, it attracted more than 257,000 participants, and has now been extended to next July.

The event, organised by the five CDCs, includes workshops to help residents better understand the job market and skill trends amid the pandemic, and live chats with experts from various industries.

Ms Low said: "Our priority (with SkillsFuture Advice) is to expedite job search opportunities and ramp up programmes and initiatives to meet the growing demand for upskilling and reskilling."

Later, at a dialogue organised by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public

Policy, Mr Wong addressed a range of issues, such as encouraging a more multidisciplinary approach to learning at tertiary institutions and boosting opportunities for students from low-income homes.

He said the universities, polytechnics and Institute of Technical Education are reviewing their curricula. "In the real world, many issues are complex and cut across different disciplines. They cannot be solved by an engineer alone or architect or scientist. Different skill sets need to come together."

Live-streamed on Facebook, the dialogue, called *After The Pandemic: Reimagining Education*, was the fourth in a series and supported by the Singapore Global Network.

Mr Wong also spoke on how the Education Ministry is finding more ways to level up opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. "We put in more resources to schools with a higher proportion of students with greater learning needs, as well as those who come from families with lower incomes."

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