



Lifelong learning is partly a matter of individual motivation. But a person's capacity to act also depends on the opportunities around them, such as employer support, training subsidies and the pathway of jobs with newly acquired skills. The GROW study should be able to tease out some of the barriers in a worker's way, says the writer. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

When AI changes the job, who helps the worker change?

Workers and small businesses need advice on training that works, and the opportunities that are opening up. A new study may help.

Mathew Mathews

I have spent much of my working life as an academic synthesising large amounts of research and using the appropriate technical methods to analyse the data and present a coherent narrative.

Until recently, I had assumed that these were fairly durable, highly sought-after professional skills. I am less certain now.

A generative artificial intelligence tool can produce a reasonable first summary of a body of research, run all kinds of statistical analysis and churn out impressive reports. It does make mistakes and can make assertions with far more confidence than it can guarantee accuracy. But it does get enough right, and does so quickly enough, to push me towards changing the way I work.

My work with research assistants, for example, has taken a different tenor. Previously, we might have had several rounds of discussions deciding on how a presentation should be argued, selecting the evidence, and working out how best to communicate it. Their insights and judgment are still needed, but their value is shifting increasingly towards questioning AI's argument, checking the evidence and noticing what the machine has overlooked.

I am fortunate. Working in a university provides me with opportunities to learn new techniques, test emerging tools and keep up with developments in my field. Even then, it is not always obvious what I should learn next.

What, then, of Singaporeans whose workplaces do not provide the same time, support or room to experiment?

SHIFTING TIDES

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated in 2025 that one in four workers worldwide was in an occupation with some exposure to generative AI. The ILO assessed that most of the jobs affected were more likely to be transformed than

completely replaced because human input would still be needed.

This offers only limited reassurance.

A worker does not have to lose his entire job to feel the impact of technological change. It is enough for parts of the job to be automated, or for a human skill developed over many years to become less scarce or less needed and therefore less valuable.

Singapore has already invested heavily in helping people to learn and to find work.

SkillsFuture Singapore has made lifelong learning a national priority, while Workforce Singapore has built up career guidance, job matching and employment support.

At this critical juncture of industrial change – possibly even an inflection point – many workers are wondering how greatly they will have to adjust in order to adapt to changing work processes and whether attending more training will help them retain their jobs, remain employable, move into better roles or prepare for roles that are emerging.

An International Monetary Fund analysis of millions of online vacancies found that around one in 10 job postings in advanced economies required at least one new skill. Vacancies specifying such skills also tended to offer higher wages in the United States and Britain. The gains may be uneven, with workers who have the time, employer support and opportunity to acquire new capabilities better placed to benefit than those who do not.

Few adults take a course because they want another credential. They want to know whether it will help them keep their job, move into a better one or lead them to earn more.

There is an emotional dimension, too. A person who has worked in one field for 20 years may understand the logic of changing direction and still doubt whether an employer will take a chance on him. There is a need for guidance that helps people see the path from where they are to where greater opportunities may be.

Employers have their own part to play. Buying an AI system is relatively easy. Redesigning work around such a system is harder. A firm needs people who understand the business well enough to use the technology sensibly.

Smaller companies may

struggle when they lack a dedicated team to work out which roles should change or which training will help. For an SME owner focused on meeting payroll, serving customers and keeping the business running, workforce transformation may be important, in theory. In the day-to-day reality, it is hardly urgent enough to receive sustained attention.

JOINING THE DOTS

Against this backdrop, the formation of the Skills and Workforce Development Agency (SWDA) on July 1 is an important move.

It brings together SkillsFuture Singapore and Workforce Singapore, linking the Government's skills- development and employment-support capabilities into one agency.

In workers' lives, jobs have never been divorced from skills.

A mid-career worker in her mid-30s should be able to find out which sectors are hiring, which of her present skills can carry over, what she needs to acquire and what realistic opportunities may then become available. She should not have to anxiously piece the journey together by scouring multiple websites and speaking to different skills specialists or career advisors.

For employers, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, the same integration could provide clearer help with job redesign and workplace learning. Workers cannot be expected to keep upgrading themselves if firms do not create roles in which new skills are recognised and rewarded.

Support should also be available before someone loses a job. By the time retrenchment is imminent, financial pressure and anxiety may have narrowed the job seeker's choices. Better information about how occupations are changing, regular career conversations and opportunities to make smaller adjustments earlier could make transitions less disruptive.

Merging two agencies on paper is the easier part. Such a development will matter only if Singaporeans seeking help experience the services as connected and receive advice that makes sense for their circumstances. This intent was reflected in the launch of Connect by SWDA, which brings learning, career guidance and employment support under one roof. As Prime

Minister Lawrence Wong put it at the launch, people "should not need to know which agency runs which scheme before they can get help".

As SWDA builds a more integrated front door for workers, it will also need to know whether the support people receive actually makes a difference over time.

This is where a new five-year longitudinal study can help. Gauging Returns on Workforce Development (GROW), run by the Institute of Policy Studies and SWDA, examines how 10,000 Singaporeans participate in and benefit from continuing education and training, and career planning and guidance.

Following the same people over time can reveal whether an apparent success lasts. Is a participant who completes a programme still in a better job two or three years later? Who progresses after training, and who does not? Are some groups of trainees repeatedly returning for training while others disappear from the system?

Such findings could help SWDA adjust its programmes for working people at different stages of life.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development reported in 2025 that only about two in five adults across participating economies engaged in formal or non-formal adult learning in a year. Participation was uneven. Older adults, those with less education and those in lower-paid or lower-skilled work were less likely to take part.

Clearly, people do not enter work transition with the same resources. Some have supportive employers, flexible schedules and confidence born out of earlier educational success. Others who may need training the most may find it hardest to step away from work or even know where to begin.

Lifelong learning is partly a matter of individual motivation. But a person's capacity to act also depends on the opportunities around them, such as employer support, training subsidies and the clear pathway of jobs with newly acquired skills. The GROW study should be able to tease out some of the barriers that stand in a worker's way.

SWDA will need to make sophisticated labour-market data useful to an ordinary person. Telling someone that a sector is growing is only a start. The harder task is helping that person judge whether the opportunities available fit his experience, what the transition will cost and whether employers are hiring people with his profile.

Most Singaporeans will not judge SWDA by how neatly two agencies have been merged. They will judge it when their own work and opportunities begin to change.

At that point, can they find reliable advice, learn what they need and see a realistic path to another role?

That will be the test that really matters.

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