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Fresh grads urged to use, critique AI to get a leg-up in employment

Employers today keen on those with prior industry experience, knowledge of AI tools

Sarah Koh

Where junior software developers were once hired to hammer out routine code, they are now expected to act as critical gatekeepers by auditing AI-generated drafts for security, logic and business fit.

As its capabilities grow and artificial intelligence takes over routine tasks, employers across sectors are no longer content with entry-level workers who can produce a first draft of software code or marketing scripts, business associations, schools and manpower groups told The Straits Times.

Instead, being able to put AI tools to work while applying sound judgment skills is now the new basic expectation.

This shift comes amid concerns from the Government about the "bottom rung" of the career ladder being broken by AI, said Prime Minister Lawrence Wong earlier in October.

He urged employers to be more deliberate in training and mentoring junior hires.

Business associations and manpower groups said that employers are still keen to hire fresh graduates, but those with prior industry experience and knowledge of AI tools will have a leg-up.

"Graduates will be expected to spend less time producing a first draft and more time applying judgment, engaging clients, solving cross-functional problems and checking the quality of AI-generated work," said Kok Ping Soon, chief executive of the Singapore Business Federation.

"AI may produce the first draft, but people must still provide the judgment, context and accountability."

For instance, consolidating spreadsheet data and checking transactions for inconsistencies used to be the bread and butter for junior finance executives, but AI tools can now assist with such tasks, said Linda Teo, country manager of recruitment firm ManpowerGroup Singapore.

"But someone still needs to verify the accuracy of the output, investigate discrepancies, understand the underlying business context and determine what actions should be taken," said Teo.

Similarly, junior marketing executives who had sunk much time into drafting social copies and writing reports in the past can now use AI tools to speed up the work.

These junior marketeers are

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Gain experience through longer internships, workplace attachments

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now expected to review AI-generated copies, use AI to analyse audience data and develop campaign concepts, and show how they assess the results and refine the final recommendations, said Teo.

Apart from knowledge of working with AI tools, human capabilities such as communication, creativity, empathy and accountability will also become more valuable as AI improves, said Kok.

He urged youth to gain practical experience early through internships, apprenticeships and part-time work.

LENGTHY INTERNSHIPS IN VOGUE

To help students build more sustained and in-depth work experience, placements for longer internships and workplace attachments have gained traction.

Over the next three years, 3,000 tertiary students are expected to take on year-long internships that would give them time to contribute to substantial projects and learn from experienced colleagues, under a programme led by the Infocomm Media Development Authority.

In a similar vein, the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) in September began piloting a new "2+2" learning model, which would see select students spend nearly half of their four-year degree programme attached to a workplace.

"Rather than experiencing the workplace through a shorter internship, students have more time to integrate into workplace teams, tackle authentic problems, receive sustained feedback and mentorship, and take on progressively more complex responsibilities," said Susanna Leong, SIT's deputy president (academic) and provost.

"It also reinforces the important role of employers in providing purposeful assignments, supervision, feedback and mentorship as the nature of work evolves."

Ultimately, the quality of internship experiences should still matter more than the length of an internship, said NTUC Youth's executive secretary Natasha Choy, who emphasised the importance of meaningful responsibilities and strong mentorship.

"(Internships) should not simply be extended without meaningful learning experiences, and risk replacing entry-level roles," said Choy.

SCHOOLS REDESIGN LEARNING

In preparing graduates for a changing workforce, polytechnics and universities have also redesigned their curriculum to ensure that students have a solid grasp of applying AI know-how to domain knowledge.

Since August, it became mandatory for National University of Singapore (NUS) students across all disciplines to undergo foundational modules in AI.

"For example, law students first learn how to draft contractual clauses independently, before evaluating AI-generated critiques," said Bernard Tan, senior vice-provost for undergraduate education at NUS.

"Business students use AI-powered simulations to practise negotiations, evaluate recommendations and sharpen their decision-making skills. Such approaches ensure that students develop core competencies while learning to harness AI thoughtfully and effectively."

At Singapore Management University, assessments are designed to go beyond conventional take-home assignments and towards oral presentations, live demonstrations and staged submissions.

But graduates still face increasing challenges in securing their first job.

"Based on our conversations with employers, (the) more cautious hiring outlook reflects a combination of factors such as geopolitical uncertainties, broader economic conditions, adjustments to post-pandemic hiring levels and the growing adoption of AI," said Prasanthi Guda, director of SMU's Dato' Kho Hui Meng Career Centre. "AI is reshaping certain job functions and skills employers seek, but it is not the sole driver of the more challenging graduate market."

According to a 2026 survey done by the ManpowerGroup which involved 651 firms in Singapore, the information and utilities sectors were among the hardest hit by early-career hiring declines.

Employers in both sectors said AI-driven automation and cost pressures favour experienced candidates who can contribute immediately, but it is also hard to find these experienced candidates, said Teo.

Chee Yeow Meng, provost and chief academic and innovation officer at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, urged job candidates to hone their communication skills, such as persuasion and dispute management, as these are evergreen. "Seek out work that stretches you, especially those that involve other people, volunteer to lead a project and try building something that someone else will actually use," said Chee.

"Some of the most valuable learning comes from struggling with difficult problems and working through them with others. We should not lose sight of that as AI becomes more capable."

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