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Some Tips on Job Security in the Robot Age

Co-author Tom Davenport of the new book “Only Humans Need Apply” speaks on knowledge workers



Tom Davenport, co-author of “Only Humans Need Apply.” *PHOTO: TOM DAVENPORT*

By **LAUREN WEBER**

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The latest waves of automation threaten professional workers who have long felt safe from job-destroying robots. But that’s not a new fear.

The prospect of automating jobs has haunted workers for centuries, going back at least to the Luddites said to have destroyed textile looms in the early 19th century, write Tom Davenport and Julia Kirby in their new book “Only Humans Need Apply” (Harper Business).

Mr. Davenport, a management professor at Babson College, spoke to The Wall Street Journal about how knowledge workers can thrive in a robot age.

WSJ: Some people say that robots will take all of our jobs, and others say that new jobs will emerge to suit a more automated economy. Where do you fall?

Mr. Davenport: We're more on the optimistic side but it's dangerous to be totally sanguine. We believe job loss won't be catastrophic but there will be some on the margins, and it's a nasty experience for the people who do lose their jobs. They tend to lose them for the rest of their lives. But the fear is overstated. Computers don't tend to replace whole jobs; they replace specific tasks. Also, it's a relatively slow process to eliminate jobs. There are just as many bank tellers now as there were in 1980. It's not a profession that's growing and no one would recommend it for their child, but it takes quite a while to replace jobs.

WSJ: Give an example of someone who is transitioning well.

Mr. Davenport: One of my heroes is a guy named Alex Hafez. He was a lawyer who didn't go to a top law school. He got a job at a law firm but fell off the partner track during the financial crisis and lost his job, so he ended up doing contract document review. He became an expert on e-discovery, and now he's a solution architect for a prominent e-discovery software and services firm. He said, why fight these machines? He became entirely marketable.

WSJ: What would you advise a person graduating college?

Mr. Davenport: You're going to have to work closely with computers or do your best to avoid them. If you do the former, you need to get familiar with the logic of computers, what they do well and what they don't. If you choose the alternative, choose something unlikely to be done well by computers any time soon, like creative or empathetic work, or something so narrow that no one is likely to automate it any time soon. We heard about a lawyer who focuses on cases about malfunctioning automatic garage door openers. That is pretty narrow.

WSJ: How would you advise a midcareer professional on creating some job security for the next few decades?

Mr. Davenport: Hopefully you'll get some help from your organization on this and they'll let you know the areas most likely to be done by machine. One of my Babson students was a financial adviser and he heard the footsteps of robo

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advisers. He said his client conversations were getting more scripted. So he focused on behavioral finance, doing things like reconciling the diverse risk perspectives of husbands and wives. Behavioral finance is unlikely to be automated any time soon.

WSJ: Which skills pair well with the growing functionality of machines?

It is the ability not only to understand how [technology] works and thinks, but also to communicate about it. Some people call this ‘purple people,’ half red and half blue, one side being technical, the other side able to communicate effectively.

WSJ: How should education and social policy change if machines and humans are working together more closely?

Mr. Davenport: It starts you thinking along the lines of guaranteed basic incomes for people who can’t make it, more likely for people lower on the occupational scale, like the three million truck drivers out there.

We’re more believers in giving people jobs to do, because of the connection between having a job and being happy and satisfied. In terms of educational policy, there is often a blind advocacy of [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] education. But we shouldn’t be educating people to do things computers do best. We ought to be careful before channeling everybody into STEM fields, and encourage people to do things that are uniquely human.

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