Will liberal arts have a place in the digital world?

In his much-debated book The Fuzzy and the Techie: Why the Liberal Arts Will Rule the Digital World, the celebrated writer Scott Hartley describes techies as anyone who studies and picks up a career in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) and 'Fuzzies' are those in liberal arts.

Hartley believes the prevailing 'STEM only' concept is a problem of the mindset, quoting examples from the business world to prove his point. Hartley brings up the likes of Stewart Butterfield of Slack, Jack Ma of Alibaba, Susan Wojcicki of YouTube, Brian Chesky of Airbnb and others as examples of people who studied languages, humanities or fine arts and not STEM. While defending the need and relevance of technocrats, Harley reiterates the importance of people who understand human behaviour. He convincingly argues for a background both in 'hard science' as well as other 'softer subjects', as it helps businesses remain open to opportunities and develop products that respond to real human needs. Across the world, well-known business leaders, economists and authors support this view. David Deming, a Harvard economist who researched the importance of social skills, says, "Success will be determined by one's ability to deal with what can't be turned into an algorithm and how well you deal with unstructured problems and new situations."

The Indian scenario

Career choices in India have been sharply skewed towards STEM subjects like Medicine and Engineering. As a norm, our students prefer taking up specific, predetermined career paths, and in the process are less able to explore their passions. From my own experience of mentoring students and entrepreneurs, I agree with Hartely that the bigger challenge is of the mindset. While technology is necessary to build our businesses, including start-ups, it is critical to gain an understanding of human behaviour, needs and wants, communication and collaborative skills.

In his book In defence of a liberal education, journalist Fareed Zakaria highlights creativity, problem-solving, decision-making, persuasive arguing and management as some of the skills developed by the graduates of literature, philosophy and social sciences. As Hartley and others argue, the future business world will be a collaboration between technocrats and those from a liberal arts background. Anand Mahindra, Chairman, Mahindra Group says, "Hartley makes

a timely and compelling case for the humanities and humaneness in an era of the coder and the engineer". Other Indian business leaders like S D Shibulal, Co-Founder and former CEO, Infosys, concur. "The main aim of technology should be to address critical human concerns. Liberal arts education can help people apply their insights into human desires, to create path-breaking innovations," he says.

And a STEM education is finding real-world applications too. In the automobile industry, companies are discovering the use of anthropology to understand human behaviour patterns and build a safer, self-driving car. There are also other examples, like businesses using sociologists, historians and linguists to better understand consumer behaviour.

Way forward

Consider this: most of the jobs in demand today didn't exist a few years back, and some jobs of today will not exist tomorrow. According to a survey by Aspiring Minds, a job skills credentialing company, approximately 80% of engineering graduates are not employable in the current knowledge-driven economy. Further, future jobs will need radically changed skill sets.

Further, future jobs will need radically changed skill sets. Moving away from skewed STEM careers to broad-based STEAM careers is, therefore, a future necessity. Career aspirants would be securing their future by considering either liberal arts career if that's their passion or by even adding a similar subject to the chosen stream, which is now a possibility with National Education Policy. Entry barriers of technology in businesses have vastly reduced, enabling even those with no technical expertise to easily collaborate with technocrats. As future businesses will be driven by collaboration, there will be great career opportunities for both Techies and Fuzzies to build the world of the future.

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