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The HR future is here with AI. Are you ready to upskill?

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Artificial intelligence is more prevalent in HR now, as it's used to screen resumes, write job descriptions and handle other routine tasks. As a result, it's more crucial for HR leaders to learn about AI and how it can make

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Within six years of Carly Holm launching Humani HR, a full-service human resources consultancy, she's hired nearly 40 employees across Canada and the U.S.

Business in her Toronto and Nashville, Tenn. offices is brisk. As more businesses outsource their human resources to companies like hers, Humani HR has doubled its clients, revenue and employees year over year

"HR has gotten very complex since I started my career 16 years ago. It's not what it used to be," Ms. Holm says.

Help with mundane tasks and a higher salary may be on the way for those HR professionals willing to put in the work and training now. Artificial intelligence (AI) is popping up everywhere. You'll find it embedded in existing HR workplace management software and in new AI-empowered tools that promise increased productivity and saved work hours.

Some automate tasks like administration, payroll and employee benefits. Others sift through resumes looking for the best candidates in mere minutes. Still others offer online interviewing services, write job descriptions, and even use predictive analytics and machine learning to determine if a star employee may be thinking of leaving the company.

"Oh, yeah, we're pitched all day long on these AI tools and how we can use them for our clients," says Ms. Holm, who is piloting a resume screening tool. She calls AI "the future" although she maintains we're only just starting the journey.

Jodi Kovitz, chief executive officer of the Human Resources Professional Association (HRPA) in Toronto, agrees.

"The future of work is coming," she says. "And AI skills are going to be increasingly important, so how do we upskill and develop talent to be ready for this new landscape?"

Not only could AI potentially replace hundreds of millions of jobs globally – an HR challenge if there ever was one – but possessing AI skills will increasingly

become mandatory as the technology becomes fully embedded in the HR industry. We're already seeing the first signs of this. According to data from Lightcast, a labour market analytics organization, HR specialists with AI skills are earning US\$35,000 more a year on average than those without, while job postings requesting generative AI skills grew six times in the first half of 2023 compared to all of 2022.

Ms. Holm isn't sure that US\$35,000 difference in pay can be entirely attributed to having AI skills; it's possible employees who are naturally forward thinking are in-demand. But whether or not the wage bump is attributed to causation or correlation, she does know that investing in AI training is important.

Not sure where to start? HRPA is launching a new foundational AI course in October called HR Skill UP: Leveraging AI in the Workplace, which tackles the basics and beyond. Sophisticated enough for C-Suite leaders, Ms. Kovitz claims it's also accessible enough for people at any career stage. The point is, if you're feeling overwhelmed by the tech and its implications on, say, data security, a little education can go a long way.

Ms. Kovitz herself has already taken a Google AI Essentials course to get up to speed.

"HR folks do not need to become software developers," she says. "But I really strongly encourage them to not be afraid of learning how the technology works and playing with it."

Discovering how to write clear AI prompts, develop ideas and accelerate daily tasks is only half of the equation though. Using AI responsibly is important too. Sam Ip, a lawyer and partner in the technology group at Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP in Toronto, says it's vital that HR leaders think of AI in terms of balancing risks with benefits. Yes, a company can store a huge databank of employee information to help inform work force decision-making, but what about confidentiality? Although AI can be a game-changer on the job, there still has to be human oversight.

“(AI) is just a tool. A very efficient tool. But at the end of the day, the accountability needs to be the person who is using the tool, and ensuring the checks and balances are in place,” he says, recommending that organizations develop a framework for proper governance early on.

Ms. Holm herself has seen what happens when a company’s HR department uses AI without thinking it through. A client once brought her in to help with a harassment complaint investigation. She sat down with the CEO and asked to look at the employee handbook.

“And he kind of sheepishly handed it over and said, ‘Well, AI wrote our handbook,’ ” she recounts. It turned out that a harassment policy was missing, a potentially costly error that opened the employer up to liability. “You have to be very careful when it comes to any kind of legal documents, policies or anything else that’s high risk.”

Conversely, using AI to help write job descriptions? Perfect. The task carries low risk. So is creating a company chatbot that gives 24-7 general advice about vacation days, dental insurance and company investing options. No more answering endless emails, messages and calls.

Ms. Holm likes to think about AI in terms of not how many jobs it will eliminate, but how many mundane or time-sucking tasks will disappear as the technology improves.

“I am hopeful that these AI tools for screening resumes, for instance, are going to get better and smarter,” she says. “But again, I think it’s still early days.”

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