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Wanted: Employees Who Can Shake Hands, Make Small Talk

Bank of America teaches empathy in-house; Subaru pays for soft-skills training



PHOTO: ISTOCK

By *Kate King*

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Scott Johnson, president of Certified Retail Solutions, doesn't mind teaching his workers on the job. These days, to his dismay, that includes showing them how to shake hands.

"You have to teach them how to look you in the eye when they do it," Mr. Johnson said.

When Kyle Wheat started as an apprentice at Mr. Johnson's New Hampshire technology company, which sells and maintains hardware to retailers, he was "terrified of all interactions." He once spent an entire day trying to figure out how to take apart a printer because he was too scared to ask his manager for help.

"I didn't really know how to talk to people in a professional manner," said Mr. Wheat, who started there at 17. "It's not something they really teach you in high school." Mr. Wheat now shakes hands with confidence, Mr. Johnson said.

New jobs, meaning those not killed off by automation, require substantially more social skills than the manufacturing and factory jobs that once powered the economy. Robots still can't be friendly, make small talk and calm disgruntled customers, which offers opportunity for people. Turns out a lot of them aren't very good at it, either.

Bank of America has developed a national training program to help its employees show empathy.

Tellers don't deposit paychecks or handle withdrawal slips anymore, given the dominance of online banking. Workers are now expected to offer a broader range of services to clients, said John Jordan, who heads training and development for the bank's consumer division.

"We're trying to help people in the moments that matter in their lives," Mr. Jordan said. The bank's "life stages" program shows workers what it is like to be a parent, carer or retiree. About 17,800 workers have enrolled.

Carilion Clinic in Roanoke, Va., uses online courses, job coaching and video-recorded simulation labs to help employees develop skills, such as the best way to approach difficult conversations with patients, said Executive Vice President Jeanne Armentrout.



PHOTO: ISTOCK

“All of us text more, all of us use cellphones more, less live conversations,” she said. “So we’re not as practiced at verbal communication and even writing skills.”

Lisha Osborne, a nursing unit director at Carilion, said advances in technology has made the need for soft skills such as patience and communication even more pronounced.

“When I first started out as a nurse, people didn’t ask a lot of questions. They just took what the doctor said and accepted it,” said Ms. Osborne, who has been a nurse for 18 years. “Now, our ability to help families and patients understand what’s going on is probably one of the biggest things that we do.”

Jobs requiring high levels of social interaction grew by nearly 12 percentage points as a share of the U.S. labor force between 1980 and 2012, according to a study published last year by David Deming, professor at the Harvard Kennedy School. Less-social, math-intensive jobs fell by 3.3 percentage points over the same period.

“Work, broadly speaking, has shifted toward an emphasis on things that we can’t do with technology,” he said. “There’s no way to program a robot to figure out when a customer has had a bad day.”

Companies are responding by investing more in training, which is also a way to retain workers in today’s tight labor market, said New York Fed President John Williams in an interview late last month.

“Employers are having to become much more creative and much more proactive,” Mr. Williams said.

‘There’s no way to program a robot to figure out when a customer has had a bad day’

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College graduates aren’t proficient at critical thinking, communication and professionalism, according to 2017 surveys conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

“Education, perhaps, hasn’t kept up with the demand in the economy for these skills,” said Gerald Chertavian, founder and chief executive at the national nonprofit workforce-development organization Year Up. “You can teach someone how to fix a computer or test a software product, but bringing those professional skills to the corporate world is absolutely critical.”

Subaru of America, Inc., which opened a new U.S. headquarters in Camden, N.J., earlier this year, has invested more than \$1 million in local workforce-development programs since 2016, according to a spokeswoman.

One of those programs, Respond Inc., has incorporated into its curriculum topics like showing up on time and wearing appropriate attire, said board member Ron O’Neal.

Freddie Alford, 42 years old, landed an internship at Subaru after taking automotive training at Respond. The company then hired him for a full-time warehouse job, and in March gave him a plaque commemorating his one-year work anniversary.

“I just needed that little kick in the butt, I guess,” he said.

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