The one skill you need in today’s jobs market...

By Quentin Fottrell

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People are still more important than automation in 2015

*Everett Collection*

C-3PO wasn’t always known for his tact or diplomacy.
American companies are rewarding people who have one special quality.

Jobs like computer research scientists are in higher demand than the average rate of job growth, government figures show, but that’s also because they are among the math- and computer-centric jobs that also require polished social skills, according to a new study by David Deming, an associate professor of education and education at Harvard Graduate School of Education and faculty research fellow at the National Bureau of Economic Research, private and nonpartisan research organization based in Cambridge, Mass.

“The slow growth of high-paying jobs in the U.S. since 2000 and rapid advances in computer technology have sparked fears that human labor will eventually be rendered obsolete,” he writes. The latest example: A machine that claims to be the world’s first laundry-folding robot, which aims to liberate users from 375 days of this particular chore over the course of a lifetime. But he concludes, “The labor market increasingly rewards social skills.”

Deming found that jobs requiring high social skills are outpacing those jobs requiring low social skills, regardless of whether they require people with high/low knowledge of math. He analyzed jobs that required math and social skills among the Occupational Information Network, a nationally representative survey on job tasks administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, and cross-referenced these with job growth from the U.S. Census.

One caveat: There are a lot more high-paying jobs that require high math skills and high social skills. Jobs with high social and math skills include registered nurses, physicians, financial managers, engineers, and jobs with high social but low math skills include police officers, detectives, social workers, lawyers and dentists.

The One Skill to Have in Today's Job Market?
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What's the one skill you need to succeed in today's job market? Marketwatch's Quentin Fottrell has the answer on Lunch Break with Tanya Rivero.

While millions of jobs have been replaced by computers within the last half-century, nearly all job growth since 1980 has been in occupations that are relatively social skill-intensive, Deming says. Jobs that require high levels of math but low levels of social interaction have fared especially poorly, he adds. These include book-keeping, machinists, bank tellers, statistical
clerks, electricians and general office clerks. (Jobs that require both low math and social skills fared even worse; they include carpenters, auto mechanics, truck drivers, laborers and welders.) The growing importance of social skills can potentially explain a gradual closing of the gender gap in earnings, Deming says. (Women dominate in fields such as nursing, teaching, social work and education, accounting, which require high social skills.)

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His research is supported by a 2014 report by the Pew Research Center, a nonprofit think-tank based in Washington, D.C. That study’s authors interviewed nearly 1,900 experts, including programmers, executives, economists and Internet entrepreneurs. Automation and artificial intelligence will permeate most jobs by 2025, they found, but experts were divided over whether this will displace more jobs than they create.

“Computers had typically been thought of as best suited for jobs that involve routine, repetitive tasks that can easily be reduced to lines of code,” they found. “But with computer-controlled devices and systems already capable of doing far more than projected even a few years ago, many experts now see more complex jobs coming into play.”

The Pew report looked at everything from driverless cars potentially replacing taxi drivers or truck drivers to artificial intelligence replacing legal clerks and, in some cases, earnings reports released by automation instead of journalists.

“Certain types of jobs will resist the pressure of automation than others,” says Aaron Smith, associate director of research at Pew, and co-author of the report, which is part of an ongoing 10-year project. “Traits such as empathy, creative thinking and judgment are things that machines will never be able to do, or anything approaching a short timeline. We still have a lot to offer.” (The Pew report canvassed opinion and, unlike Deming’s recent study, was not a nationally representative survey.)

Why are social skills still so important in a market when so many jobs are automated?

This should be reflected in how students are taught in schools. “If you close your eyes and picture what a classic fourth grade math class looks like, it’s obedient children and sitting at their desk passively receiving information from their teacher,” Deming says. “That’s the industrial revolution model for education. It’s important, but it’s not enough. We need to encourage schools to look like the modern workplace.” (In fact, one recent study found that students who use computers at school frequently do worse than those who don’t.)

Computers are becoming more cognitively sophisticated, beating people at the television show ‘Jeopardy’ and are even world-class chess champions, Deming says. “But the one thing that computers aren’t good at is social interaction.”

Of course, this also means the employee — not the computer — must take responsibility when things go wrong. As C-3PO said in “Star Wars” (1977): “I don’t know what all this trouble is about, but I’m sure it must be your fault.”