

This one uber skill will always keep you employed

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Everybody wants a highly rewarding job in a recession-proof field. But the labor market changes constantly and a safe job today can be an endangered one tomorrow.

There's one vital skill, however, that transcends many jobs and fields and may be every worker's best shot at financial security. Schools don't usually teach it, and employers don't usually mention it in job postings. Yet it will help you get hired, outperform your peers, find the best opportunities and stay a step or two ahead of the computers, robots and other machines that are making many jobs obsolete.

The skill is conceptualization: the ability to see how the elements of an abstract whole fit together and to identify problems that need to be addressed before others do.

That might seem like a fuzzy, well, concept, but scholars and policymakers struggle to come up with any other single qualification that will allow middle-class Americans to enjoy the living standards they've come to expect. Even though the U.S. job market finally seems to be [recovering in earnest](#), the digital revolution is transforming the economy into one that requires far fewer workers to sustain industries such as manufacturing, finance, business services, education and, of course, information. Many workers aiming for a middle-class lifestyle are already discovering that any job a machine can do nearly as well as a human is likely to become automated. There are more robots on many assembly lines than there are people. Bank tellers have become an endangered species as more people manage their money through ATMs, web sites and smartphones.

Seeing the big picture

At a [recent panel discussion on job displacement](#) sponsored by consulting firm McKinsey, economist Martin Baily of the Brookings Institution identified conceptualizers as "the people who can take advantage of technology" and are the ones most likely to get ahead in the digital economy. There's no standard definition of a conceptualizer, but employers usually recognize them as creative problem-solvers who see the big picture and make insightful connections in ways even a supercomputer can't. They might have technical skills, but they also tend to read a lot, write well and show curiosity in many unrelated things.

"You have to be able to express yourself and explain, what's the problem we're trying to deal with here?" Baily said in a follow-up phone interview. "It's a scarce skill that is highly valued in our society."

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A lot of famous entrepreneurs fit the profile, including FedEx ([FDX](#)) founder Fred Smith, Apple ([AAPL](#)) prodigal son Steve Jobs and Facebook ([FB](#)) CEO Mark Zuckerberg. All of

them built (or rebuilt, in Jobs's case) successful companies by using emerging technologies to meet an important marketplace need in ways no one had done before. But the ability to conceptualize can be a standout skill at all levels of the labor market, especially when it involves creative ways to use new technology or other workplace tools. A few examples from the rank and file:

Auto mechanic. The job today involves the use of electronics to diagnose and address problems, yet it still requires human-powered logic to sort out puzzles data can only hint at. Plus, cars these days rely on numerous computerized gizmos that require new skills to understand and care for.

Plumber. Some plumbing problems come straight out of a textbook, but plumbers and other tradespeople also have to deal with unpredictable situations that require creative workarounds. High-tech drain cameras can reveal what's deep in the pipes, for instance, but they can't explain how to fix every leak or determine what caused a busted line underground.

Salesperson. Anybody can take an order. Anticipating a customer's future needs or finding new ways to provide valuable services is a lot harder. There's no shortage of market analytics to help companies drum up business. Yet employers in many fields say effective salespeople able to think ahead are hard to find and hold on to.

Logistician. It's a huge world, and tons of stuff moves around in the global economy, which means efficient logistics can provide a key competitive edge -- just ask Apple or Walmart ([WMT](#)). Talented people with a knack for streamlining supply chains and finding more efficient ways to deliver products can sometimes [work their way up from entry-level positions like retail clerk](#), without the need for a college degree.

Healthcare technician. The need for human insight to complement digital wizardry may be more intense in healthcare than in any other field. Caregivers at all levels have the opportunity to find new ways to improve care through the use of modern marvels such as digital medical records, remote diagnostics and health-related smartphone apps.

There have always been conceptualizers who see opportunities more clearly than others, but such distinctive skills are becoming far more important as machines increasingly take jobs from humans. The most vulnerable jobs are those that involve repetitive, predictable tasks and not a lot of cognitive insight. Conceptualizers, by contrast, use machines to become more productive instead of competing with them.

"They figure out how the process is going to work," says economist Tara Sinclair of job-search site Indeed.com. "They figure out what the robots are going to do." The skill is valuable because so many workers simply follow instructions or do things the way they always have, instead of thinking up ways to deliver packages by drone, if, say, you're Amazon ([AMZN](#)), or generate addictive new types of programming, if you're Netflix ([NFLX](#)).

Most employers would love to hire good conceptualizers throughout the ranks—but there's no reliable way to tell who they are until you've worked with them for a while. "It's hard to get from a resume," says Baily, "but if you work with them you can tell fairly quickly."

Conceptualizers cut to the core of a problem quickly rather than dithering on the edges. They adapt well to teams and can manage different personalities well, whether they're the boss or just a colleague. And while they don't always have a trophy education, they outperform their peers by combining street smarts with soft skills such as the ability to read people.

Since "conceptualization" isn't a college major and "conceptualizer" isn't a job description, those familiar lists of [best jobs for the 21st century](#) will continue to overlook the importance of this universal skill. But employers won't, even if they aren't exactly sure how to describe what they're looking for.

Rick Newman's latest book is [Rebounders: How Winners Pivot From Setback To Success](#). Follow him on Twitter: [@rickjnewman](#).