

Technological enablement, not human displacement

There is every reason to be hopeful and optimistic about the digital future. Within the last ten years alone, huge strides in innovation has helped invent many new industries and opportunities. It is becoming clearer that rather than human displacement, what we are experiencing is actually a surge of technological enablement with incredible speed, agility and flexibility.

It will of course be inevitable to revise current job designs and create new ones. Around 50% of jobs today can already be automated – but not yet completely. Existing technologies can replace only 5% of the activities in these jobs. But the breakneck speed of technological advancements could definitely increase that to 15% by 2030. This also means that up to 14% of the global workforce (or 375 million employees) may need to change their occupational category within the next decade.^{1 2}

So how does digitalisation truly enable humans at work if it means an enormous amount of adjustment? This is how: the digital revolution has disrupted the idea of 'work' itself. Even now, it no longer has to be a rigid 9-to-5 job that occupies us for an average of 40 hours per week. As more and more analytical, transactional and manual jobs are offloaded to technology, a lot of people will be more inclined towards work that is more creative, intuitive and interactive. It could certainly force many to get out of their comfort zone and restart their career, but the good thing is, these types of work can be much more difficult to automate.

This shift could make the labour market more competitive as the 'war on talent' gains new targets, in addition to high tech talents who can support the digital transformation. It won't be farfetched to expect that among the hottest jobs will require 'soft' skills like critical thinking, complex problem solving,

creativity, people management, emotional intelligence and negotiation.³

Work will also become malleable and democratic. The volatility of the Fourth Industrial Revolution will enable people to evolve their careers repeatedly throughout their professional lifetime. This would move many employees towards wanting to design their work and compensation around how they need to live their life and find satisfaction. They will call for a high level of flexibility and trust concerning where, how, when they work, and what they choose to work on. They will also prefer engagement on a freelance or contractual basis. Currently, 22% of the global workforce is contingent. This could grow to at least 50% in 2018, especially as 54% of large companies around the world plan to engage more non-traditional talent over the next three years.^{4 5}

These inevitable changes in future workplaces could prove challenging to embrace in developing and emerging economies that have culturally and traditionally been more focused on technical jobs and skillsets. But between now and 2021, the growing population of young people entering the workforce in these regions will create a talent surplus.⁶ Slow transformation could actually risk losing more talents and opportunities to talent-deficit developed economies or new centres of innovation. So among the best things we can do is to, first and foremost, embrace change. It's true that historically, every industrial revolution has displaced jobs and upended business models. But history also teaches us that change is inevitable and, ultimately, good and beneficial for the society at large.

Organisations should prioritise upskilling their workforce today and to stay abreast of developments in the digital revolution. Continuous learning and job design improvement will ensure that we will remain relevant and competent in the new landscape. A key

factor is also the traditional educational system that is still being followed today. Students are still being equipped with skills and knowledge that will no longer be relevant by the time they enter the workforce. Just as organisations need to rethink job design, so should educators rethink their curriculum. Digital leaders need to partner with relevant government and educational institutions to develop and train the future workforce in order to better meet future demands and challenges.

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Footnotes:

¹ What the future of work will mean for jobs, skills, and wages <https://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/future-of-organizations-and-work/what-the-future-of-work-will-mean-for-jobs-skills-and-wages?cid=eml-web>

² Digital Media & Society, World Economic Forum in collaboration with Willis Towers Watson; 2016-2017 http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEFUSA_DigitalMediaAndSociety_Report2016.pdf

³ The 10 skills you need to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-10-skills-you-need-to-thrive-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/>

⁴ 2016 Global Talent Management and Rewards Study <https://www.willistowerswatson.com/en/insights/2016/09/employers-look-to-modernize-the-employee-value-proposition>

⁵ 'The world is changing:' Why the contingent workforce isn't going away <http://www.hrdiver.com/news/the-world-is-changing-why-the-contractual-workforce-isnt-going-away/442231/>

⁶ Global Talent 2021 <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/Media/Default/Thought%20Leadership/global-talent-2021.pdf>