

Workplace of the future - new rules, new roles

A number of new senior leadership roles are emerging as companies start preparing for the workplace of the future enabled by new tech and progressive thinking.



Advaita Naidoo, COO at Jack Hammer

“Top teams no longer merely comprise the chief, the finance guru, the operations head and the IT boss. Companies now need excellent leaders who can understand, interpret, and respond to a host of new information metrics, many of which are changing exponentially,” says Advaita Naidoo, COO at Jack Hammer.

Naidoo notes that a major global shift is currently taking place, with some leading multinationals increasingly announcing that the lack of a formal university degree will no longer necessarily be a deal-breaker for aspirant young leaders. For example, rigorous tech expertise and training, in some disciplines, are gaining greater credibility than a formal degree.

Four critical C-skills

While technical mastery of a field will certainly still remain of value, development of the four critical C-skills - communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity – should solidly share the focus for current and aspiring leaders, and companies serious about future growth.

“The days are gone where bright and ambitious young people have only a handful of careers - think doctors, lawyers, chartered accountants - to pursue. In a world where even our current generation will start living into our 100s and where technology is changing the way almost everything was done in the past, the need to redefine our roles as humans in the workplace is obvious and urgent,” Naidoo says.

“And, in South Africa, we shouldn’t make the mistake of assuming that this is a global phenomenon that still needs to take root locally. We heard in October that Singularity University - a global community with a mission to educate, inspire, and empower leaders to apply exponential technologies to help solve humanity’s grand challenges – joined hands with SingularityU South Africa, its first African country partner,” Naidoo says.

She says although there will be countless new roles emerging in coming years – many of which one won’t even be able to predict right now – there are already a few previously unheard-of positions that companies have started sourcing in the past year.

New roles emerging in the past year include:

Chief digital officer (CDO): The CDO is a cross-functional leadership role that interfaces with and influences every area of an organisation. Digital leaders need well-developed EQ and relationship skills in order to be successful in achieving the anticipated outcomes. The CDO definitely needs to be a technical whizz with brilliant ideas, but technical proficiency without the social and influencing skills to get things done is a non-starter, explains Naidoo.

Data science executive: Companies must ensure they have a highly skilled technical expert who can work with millions of lines of data in order to draw meaningful insights for the business. A far cry from business analysis or business intelligence, which tends to look at the historical picture, data science is predictive in nature, and the executive in question needs to marry technical skills with the commercial acumen needed to translate data-driven insights into business strategy.

Innovation officer: This is an operational expert who knows how to see an idea through, or pull the plug when necessary. Rooted in technology-related improvements, this person needs to determine whether something is a good proposition, whether it fits with a company’s ultimate business goals, whether it is worth the investment, and whether it will radically improve the company’s bottom line and image.

Agility coach: Agile ways of working is more than just a catchy phrase, it’s a fundamental shift in the way projects are executed, where roadblocks or problems are identified and controlled for iteratively, and processes improved as the project evolves. An agile coach is a management consultant / trainer / project manager / therapist who is there to help teams break bad habits to reach business goals much quicker.

Customer experience executive (CXO): With customer-centricity now overtaking product-push as a means of growth, customer experience has evolved from a soft focus to a core strategic one, requiring analytical prowess underpinned by high-level business and process improvement skills. The role that CXOs now play, or should be playing, is to be able to understand the market based on the right metrics and analytics and, most importantly, to respond rapidly where action is required.

Impact investment executives: Professionals who can successfully lead and grow companies with a dual mandate of economic and social returns are in high demand throughout Africa. Private equity, venture capital and debt funds who invest in Africa seek deal-makers and fund managers who can achieve more than just the financial bottom line, but also a positive social impact combined with sustainable growth.

“So as a starting point, companies should consider right now whether appointing a leader in one or more of these roles will help them grow and remain competitive. At the very least, they should be contemplating the potential value of these kinds of resources. To stick your head in the sand and ignore the inevitable changes is just not an option,” Naidoo says.

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