

4IR: Even with machines, humans will always be irreplaceable

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The fourth industrial revolution (4IR) is an evolution of efficiency and not a singular event. Much like the first, second and third industrial revolutions, it already has - and will continue to - make some jobs redundant while triggering new jobs that haven't yet been imagined.



Insaaf Daniels, human capital business partner at redPanda Software | image supplied

How do we future-proof our workforce and what should we be teaching young people to prepare them for this brave, new world? Instinctively, most people reading this will think about computer coding and other highly specialised information technology (IT) skills. This makes sense because of the rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence, machine learning and cloud computing.

However, when it comes to the types of skills that will be most valued as we adapt to the modern workplace, there's another list of skills and attributes that will be in high demand – spelling good news for those who are not inclined to become IT specialists and providing a blueprint for those that are, to make themselves, as computer specialists, even more employable.

Ironically, the more businesses embrace technology, the more core human skills become valued. This is because of the interface between people and technology, and because of where the human jobs will fit in as machines take on menial, repetitive tasks with far more accuracy and predictability than any person.

Creativity

Workers of the future will need to be able to harness creativity to fully reap the benefits of the new workplace. They'll need to be creative in their ideas and the way they do work. This is a beautifully human characteristic. This is what gave birth to all the great inventions – next time you give Alexa an instruction, take a moment to appreciate the creativity that went into designing that piece of technology.

Judgement and decision-making

Like creativity, two other human traits that will become increasingly important as we navigate the 4IR are judgement and decision-making. While these are often referred to as soft skills, they are vital in the automated workplace.

Technology is superior to humans when it comes to calculations and processing, but humans are and will continue to be, integral to deciding what to do with all the data, and how they want it processed. One of the most important considerations for businesses, as they move into the 4IR, is that they are generating huge amounts of data, but what are they going to do with it, and what decisions are going to be made when anomalies surface, for instance? They'll hire people to make those calls.

Leadership

As new technology emerges at breakneck speed, leadership is vital. Specialists working in project teams need to have people leading them, but importantly, the actual teams themselves will need to be made up of people with the attributes of leaders who are able to solve problems on the go. Beyond that, there will always be the need to deal with issues unique to people, such as politics and productivity.

Active learning

An active learning attitude and growth mindset is probably the most important attribute as it futureproofs careers.

On a practical point, consider an organisation that needs to switch from one technology or platform to another. This company is obviously going to identify those people who have a growth mindset to lead this transition.

Looking ahead and replacing fear with opportunity

Rather than be afraid that machines will take their jobs, workers should consider how they can add value as humans – because that remains invaluable.

It is glaringly clear that the employee of the future does not need to be the person developing the technology. The developers and data scientists will drive this part of the evolution. The rest of the new, relevant workforce will be able to understand technology, understand why it is being implemented and know how to work with it and interpret insights from it. This worker will be creative, comfortable making decisions, show leadership and willing to continually learn.

Organisations should be focused on upskilling and reskilling. With an eye on the future and to prevent further brain drain, they would do well to partner with educational institutions to actively build their talent pools, both with hard technology skills and the types of people they need in their organisations.



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Government has publicised its plans for supporting skills of the 4IR and now it needs to ensure they are followed through, while education institutions need to ask, are they teaching the skills of yesterday and today, or have they pivoted to teach the skills of tomorrow?

While no one can predict the exact shape of the future workplace, a good first step in trying to understand what this future will look like is for organisations to keep pace with developments and, very importantly, listen to those in their workforce who are hungry to learn. Take note of the skills they are asking for and consider programmes to allow this upskilling to take place.

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