

Jobs in SA at risk unless employees are reskilled

Instead of worrying that technology will soon eliminate countless low-tier jobs, companies should start reskilling their workers now to avoid large-scale retrenchments. Artificial intelligence, machine learning and other advancements will automate jobs across numerous industries, threatening a spike of retrenchments in a country already suffering an unemployment rate of 29%.



Eckart Zollner, head of business development for Jasco

The answer is to assess the aptitude of the workers in jeopardy now, and reskill them to lead their companies into previously untried directions, says Eckart Zollner, head of business development for Jasco, a JSE-listed technology developer.

“Routine jobs are going to be taken over by machines, so we need to identify those workers now and look at their skills and capabilities and reskill them for more fulfilling roles,” he says.

Time to map out the future

Zollner says because the process takes many years, programmes are needed now to identify and implement company-wide initiatives that map out the future direction for firms and their employee base.

Jobs most vulnerable to being usurped by a robot include manufacturing and mining, as well as call centre agents since artificial intelligence can already handle many interactions. Shop and cinema cashiers are also being replaced by self-service checkouts and ticket machines. Research by Accenture suggests that almost 5.7 million jobs in South Africa - or 35% - are at risk. But doubling the pace at which the workforce acquires skills relevant for human-machine collaboration could reduce that number at risk by millions, Accenture says.

Yet so far, most private and public sector organisations are wondering when the storm will hit rather than making plans to ride the wave. Companies need to assess upcoming technologies to determine where staff will no longer be needed.

For example, any meter reading organisation is in jeopardy because smart meters can report their own figures. But the field workers could be retrained as plumbers or electricians able to fix broken pipes and cables.

Jasco itself has multi-skilled its workers so they are no longer limited to specific business silos, Zollner says. If one business unit experiences a downturn, its staff can be redeployed in other units. Despite eliminating jobs, technology also makes it far easier to assess people's aptitudes for reskilling. Instead of consulting an industrial psychologist, employees can simply complete a 30-minute online survey to get immediate answers that accurately pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses.

Be more service oriented

Redeploying people whose jobs are automated gives companies a chance to devise new products and services, or to target new markets by upskilling them to be more service-oriented. They need to create a new unit to focus on innovation and growth by finding ways to retrain and redeploy threatened workers.

Such proactive steps could see the staff supporting this workplace tsunami rather than fighting it. While mass redundancies will create an army of enemies, retraining them could create an army of support.

"We often make the mistake of thinking that just because someone has a mundane job they don't aspire to anything else. Some people are very happy to spend 40 years as a supermarket cashier, but others have aspirations and a potential that needs to be unlocked," Zollner says.

Technology has the potential to create an entirely new range of high-quality jobs and opportunities, says the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac). But success depends on the availability of a motivated, agile and suitably skilled workforce. "This can only be achieved through proactive retraining and upskilling," it says in a document called Futures of Work in South Africa.

That can only succeed if the government comes on board, Zollner believes.

"The government needs to step in with tax breaks and other incentives to encourage upskilling. Right now, many people will be left behind because we haven't got the programmes and incentives we need," he warns. One essential step is for the government to provide a platform for widespread adult education and retraining that the private sector can use. He's opposed to another training levy being imposed, however, unless companies can control how it is spent and the process is far more transparent and efficient than the current skills levy system.

A worldwide problem

Technology-led job losses are a worldwide problem, but other countries are putting far more resources into it. Many European countries have set up government-sponsored adult education and retraining courses that companies can tap into.

Online learning is another option, but government inertia has hindered that, too, Zollner says. “Half our population can’t afford to connect to the internet because data is too expensive, so the majority of the population don’t get the benefit of online education.” South Africa also needs more flexible labour laws to make it easier to hire and fire, so people could try several different roles to see where they fit best, without creating legal tangles as they job-hop to find their new niche.

Overall, South Africa can only turn the technology turmoil threat into an opportunity if the government quickly and decisively engages with the private sector, Zollner says.

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