

Collaboration is key to driving SA's 4IR progress

Collaboration across industry, public and private sector and among civil society will be crucial for driving Fourth Industrial Revolution progress, according to speakers at the Africa Automation Fair and the Connected Industries Conference.

Assessing South Africa's state of readiness for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, experts said that while South Africa currently lagged the world, there were significant opportunities to transform the industrial sector and move into a globally competitive space.

However, collaboration would be crucial to transforming industry, government and civil society to position South Africa to capitalise on the opportunities the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Industry 4.0 offered, they said.

Dr. Ilse Karg, chief director: Future Industrial Production Technologies in the Department of Trade and Industry, said, "Industry 4.0 is about partnerships. We aim to partner with business, and to collaborate with education to transform industry and develop the skills we will need to move into the Industry 4.0 era."

Dr. Karg said that in order to create the enabling environment necessary to support Fourth Industrial Revolution progress, at least 12 government departments were currently aligning their policies and plans.



Dr. Ilse Karg, chief director: Future Industrial Production Technologies in the Department of Trade and Industry



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"It's not easy, but to make progress, we will need integrated planning across national departments and all spheres of government," she said. She also highlighted the DTI's work on developing a digital industrial policy framework focusing on building capability and capacity, a supportive legal and regulatory framework and digital industrial transformation.

Karg noted that South Africa had been de-industrialising in recent years. "Manufacturing output volume has increased marginally since 2004, while retail volume has boomed by more than 60% in the same period. Therefore, we are importing more and making less."

In the face of growing unemployment, she said South Africa had to focus on growing manufacturing capability, particularly as each job directly created by manufacturing indirectly creates a further three to five jobs.

South Africa is an innovative nation

While the country faced challenges, she believed its strengths and opportunities lay in the fact that South Africa is an innovative nation, its cultural dynamics, a good economic infrastructure, the potential for incremental change, potential for investment in the education system and development of the country's young talent base and a fast-growing small and informal business sector.



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Dr. Daniel Visser, group manager: Planning & Knowledge Management at the CSIR, said South Africa was making strides in some areas of IIoT and 4IR innovation, with multiple programmes underway to stimulate progress. “South Africa is developing innovation platforms and there is a lot going on in this space,” he said, highlighting initiatives such as the African Centre for 4IR, to be launched later this year and hosted at CSIR, as well as new learning factories – mock production environments for testing and training, and regional collaboration networks.

He said South Africa needed to focus on areas such as policy regulation, the ethics of AI and 5G, state support instruments to develop new technologies and an enabling environment for innovation. To achieve this, public-private partnerships would be key. The CSIR itself was taking a more industry-facing focus in line with this, he said.

Echoing these sentiments, Prof Mandla Makhanya, Unisa's principal and vice-chancellor, said: “When you talk automation, you are talking the future. The future is bright, but collaboration will be key.” With this in mind, Unisa was collaborating with SAIMC to introduce a new automation programme, to address the skills that would be necessary in a 4IR era.

SAIMC's Annemarie van Coller and IIG's Barend Niemand also noted that industry role players had to work more closely together to drive 4IR progress.

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