

Workplace 2025 - where humans and machines coexist

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The world is undergoing its biggest transformation ever. As emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) enter workplaces, human talent is grappling with an existential crisis.



Generations, new and old, are losing sleep over what and how human beings will stay relevant in a world of disruptions. Unfortunately, this is not only a concern in North America and Western Europe but will impact South Africa and the rest of Africa as well.

Augmented humanity – a world where machines and humans coexist and enhance each other's capability, is creating a new world of work. A world where traditional ways must be replaced by new paradigms for driving workplace efficiencies and effectiveness – both for humans as well as for machines.

The workplace, and workforce, of 2025 will have the following four characteristics that will form the core of socio-commercial enterprises:

1. **Augmentation over automation:** People and processes will get replaced by applications that enhance the doer's capabilities. The traditional application of technology for automating work processes will be irrelevant. More and more emphasis will be on making the 'human talent' redundant for anything and everything that can be done by machines. Consequently, it is no longer just manual routine functions that will be taken over by machines but new technologies such as Machine Learning (ML), the Internet of Things (IoT) and robotics (digital assistants) will replace even high-level roles such as lawyers and financial advisors with the ability to rapidly sift through data lakes of information to find solutions to problems. Organisations in South Africa are starting to use chatbots to filter through thousands of applicants for vacancies to find best-fit candidates and IoT to monitor health and safety issues in mines and for construction organisations.

2. **Irrelevant generational differences:** Rapid learning and global exposure will nullify the generational differences. Diversity will be of passions and skills rather than demographics. The world will just have two types of people – employable in the augmented workplace or unemployable. Age, gender, ethnicity and other demographical data will be irrelevant for deciding role fitment of individuals. Millennials and Generations A to Z will all display similar socio-psychological behaviours, moulded by digitalisation.
3. **Perpetually evolving business models:** There will be no such thing as a stable period for any business. Product life cycles will be shorter and will often be cut before peak optimisation is achieved. Organisations will therefore need to achieve operational efficiencies with just 'work in progress'.
4. **Inverted Maslow's hierarchy of needs:** Self-actualisation will be the single most important human need that will drive productive endeavours. Taking care of the so-called 'basic needs' will be so effortless that their mention itself is likely to disappear. Therefore, individuals and organisations will need to transform themselves, embracing the new world of individual and cultural competencies.

In addition to these four characteristics, there will also be the rise of the '4Ms'; these will lead organisational transition:

1. Meaning

- a. Individuals will choose opportunities that make their work more meaningful in their context and purpose. People would want to work lesser number of hours, create greater impact and earn much more. In South Africa, this will be exacerbated by the fact that many people see the only opportunity left for them is to work for themselves in an entrepreneurial role, which will impact businesses trying to attract talent.
- b. Organisations, therefore will need to relook at creating a whole new set of roles and jobs, replacing the current ones. Ironical as it may sound, the jobs will need to be such that even the mundane 'essentials' are excluded. This will need smart transformation using advanced technologies like ML, AI and others.

2. Mastery

- a. In the augmented age, the desire to develop a deep mastery that is unique will be the critical driver of contentment.
- b. Organisations, therefore, will need to understand what mastery means for each individual in the context of work. They will also need to invest in tools and a culture that nurtures mastery in individuals. Like the arcane redundant concept of employee engagement, mastery will need to be developed one person at a time, and one topic at a time. Organisational enablers of learning, such as Chief Learning Officers (CLOs) will need to change their approach completely from an enablement as well as a cultural standpoint. CLOs have a daunting task ahead of them.

3. Mobility

- a. While PWC predicts a 50% increase in global mobility by 2020, mobility will be much more than relocations. Work itself will be mobile. Individuals will choose to work on parts, in parts. What it means is that complex tasks will be broken down into enjoyable creative pursuits that humans will attend to and algorithmic tasks will be taken over by bots. Work will be done from anywhere and anytime.

The other interesting factor of mobility will be that people will not be sector specialists anymore. They will be like

artisans who use their specific mastery across industries, geographies and tasks. Lastly, humans will have short-lived interests, therefore they will be moving around careers and not just jobs.

- b. Organisations, therefore, will need to create an ecosystem that enables and leverages the above stated mobility vantage.

4. **Mindfulness**

- a. Humans will need a completely new neurological network to be able to focus and create meaningful human contribution in a highly distracting, augmented digital world. Mindfulness and connecting with the greater consciousness will be the only tools to outsmart machines. Practice of mindfulness will not just be an option but a survival imperative.
- b. Organisations, therefore, will go back in time to embrace a more spiritual way of talent development. The focus of workplace ergonomics will need to evolve from physical to spiritual well-being. Leaders will need a completely new set of competencies to lead a largely contended mindful workforce.

The above 4Ms are the panacea for all seen and unseen challenges that the transforming workplace of the future brings.

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