

Chemicals sector reshaping towards innovation as a necessity

By [Yershen Pillay](#)

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In the modern age, 'disruption' has been defined as 'radical change to an existing industry or market due to technological innovation'. With the advent of Industry 4.0, we have seen this termed 'digital disruption'. However, the dawn of the Covid-19 pandemic has turned disruption on its head. We are not just innovating for competitive advantage, we are innovating for survival. This latest disruption, which necessitates technological innovation, has given us the opportunity to reshape the chemicals sector.



Yershen Pillay, CEO, Chieta

Across industries, we have seen new ways to coordinate, collaborate and communicate which have been dominated by technology. Innovation today is characterised by the collaboration between increasingly powerful machinery and digital technology and the unique creative potential of the human being.

And while the rat race has been focusing on investing in the latest and greatest technological innovation, it is our investment in the human being which must now be our focus.

The silver lining of disruption

The chemicals industry, like any other, has seen a re-imagining of work, workforces and workplaces. It has been the fifth hardest hit industry globally due to supply chain challenges, oil price fluctuations, and deglobalisation, amongst others. However, this disruption has also primed us for new business models, new partnerships, and a new approach to problem-solving. What this means is that there is a silver lining to this disruption.

We have the chance to renew our focus on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, such as economic growth (goal 8), responsible consumption and production (goal 12), climate action (goal 13), and industry, innovation, and infrastructure (goal 9). To achieve these goals, we need to ensure we have the skills to take advantage of new opportunities, to continue driving innovation, and to be truly globally competitive.



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At the heart of innovation is education

We cannot expect to meet the demands of the new world order without investing in our people. Sector education training authorities such as Chieta have the responsibility to assess the rising skills demands and set plans into action to address these demands. I believe that filling tomorrow's skills deficit starts with Stem education, today.

At Chieta, we have increased our focus on Stem education initiatives with the goal of developing the next generation of problem solvers, critical thinkers, and innovative leaders for the chemical industries. For example, we have plans to ensure

that every corner of the country has a fully automated Smart Skills Centre by 2025. These centres will include spaces for training to be conducted in augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). The first of these is already in the works in the Saldanha Bay Industrial Development Zone. The centre, which will focus on basic digital skills, is aimed at addressing the digital skills divide in the district and at helping surrounding businesses and rural community members to learn technology-related skills.

We are also leading the way with new and innovative skills programmes such as our recently launched robotics programme in partnership with the South West Gauteng TVET College. For school-level youth, our 'Beyond 4.0 Stem' initiative is designed to ignite curiosity, foster innovation, and create a climate in which the youth can see themselves as future leaders.

By partnering with our skills development providers (SDPs), we want to equip South Africans with the important skills they will need to take advantage of our rapidly changing landscape. If we see disruption through the lens of opportunity, we have the power to reshape the industry towards sustainable economic development.

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