

FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

# Artificial intelligence demands reimagining of workplaces

Kurt April

**R**evolution is a time of disruption, which typically means development and adjustment. The fourth industrial revolution will be no exception.

Game-changing developments can be expected and significant adjustments will need to be made. For companies and employees it offers immense possibility. A new wave of artificial intelligence (AI) technology is affecting workplaces. Gaming, particularly, is making its presence felt, with many companies gamifying experiences with online offerings in modular learning for employees or incentivising goals.

Some skills will be replaced. Companies such as Petronas in Malaysia have installed robots to complement humans in some key functions. Novartis uses robot technology at manufacturing sites globally for logistics and mobility.

MSN reported in 2017 that 30 companies – including Amazon, DHL, Uber, Tesla and Target – had installed robots in key functions and predicted that robots would take over a large proportion of employee roles within the next 30 years.

But AI will not only benefit robots, it will also help human employees. There are now more than 100,000 chatbots on the Facebook Messenger platform. Facebook vice-president David Marcus says:

There are productivity chatbots and those used for the digitisation of human resources processes. The advantages of chatbots include clean and quick processing of queries, cost-effective personal assistance and easy customer support.

In services, many customers use chatbots to book hotels or ask for technical support; some are using chatbots to job hunt. They will also be used for mentoring and coaching.

Using AI also helps companies to become employers of choice for a new generation of graduates by using technology to help write bias-free job descriptions and adverts.

As some jobs become redundant, others are created. The faster technology advances in the workplace, the greater the need for highly skilled employees who can manage these processes. Companies will need

to retrain staff to embrace these new ways of working.

New job roles such as conversational design, storyboarding, employee experience and customer interface will spring up as companies plot their technology road maps.

Gaming has been shown to increase motivation and productivity, encourage creativity, improve communication, increase engagement, improve innovative dynamics, grow specific skills and transmit corporate images.

Employees can use gaming to improve their ability to work with others. It can foster adeptness with failure, which comes with learning to try again; working in crosscultural teams or global virtual teams; collaboration; and working in stimulating or multisensory environments.

Gaming can be used to help employees reach their key performance indicators and for tapping into their psychological drivers – a fundamental shift in viewing productivity.

Companies operating online should consider safety and ethical aspects. Cyber breaches and lapses in data security should be guarded against.

Hierarchical structures and interpersonal relationships at workspaces will change considerably when not only human beings are employed.

Distributive leadership can be achieved between human and machine and traditional notions of time and space no longer apply as remote, flexible and constant work schedules become possible.

“Traditional” topics of leadership training must be examined through a new lens. How do we lead in virtual environments? How do we lead across cultures? How does technology

enable teamwork? Does the traditional notion of a team still exist? How do shared leadership roles work?

In the design of a chatbot, communication requires an entirely new angle. And social media, gaming and the control of personal data will have a considerable impact on privacy.

Leaders will need to balance the exciting possibilities of technology with the development of their employees.

The World Economic Forum points out that while everyone does not need to be a software engineer, what is needed is employees who can learn, share, connect the dots and build good relationships with people inside and outside the organisation. Companies will need employees who understand how technology and society interact to drive progress for all stakeholders.

Leaders will have to match such employees. They will need to find new ways of learning and develop their inner resources.

The digital age can help to build more inclusive, productive and creative workspaces. For that leaders are needed who balance the benefits of AI with a healthy dose of humanity.

As World Economic Forum executive chairman Klaus Schwab notes: “We need leaders who are emotionally intelligent and able to model and champion co-operative working. They’ll coach, rather than command; they’ll be driven by empathy, not ego. The digital revolution needs a different, more human kind of leadership.”

● April is a Sainsbury fellow and professor of leadership, diversity and inclusion at the University of Cape Town’s Graduate School of Business.



**Disruption:** A Baxter robot operates during a demonstration at the Asia Pacific Innovation Centre, operated by DHL. Large companies such as DHL have installed robots in key functions. / Bloomberg