



BY EUGENE YIGA

The Future of Work: Part Two

Covid-19 is also changing the face of education and how we train for new jobs.

Earlier this year, research from Accenture warned that 35% of all jobs (totalling 500 million worldwide) were at risk of automation. Then the coronavirus came and made everything worse.

“What Accenture advised at the time was that by doubling the pace at which our workforce acquires relevant digital skills, South Africa could reduce the share of jobs at risk from 5.7 million to 2.5 million,” says Melody Xaba, a learning and development consultant who is also the co-founder of My Future Work. “Now, looking at the sectors that have been impacted by Covid-19, and because so many people have lost their jobs, we need to do more than double the pace.”

Before Covid-19, Xaba noticed that businesses were taking long to adapt to digital because people felt the old way worked best. Now, there’s been an instant rise in cloud computing, digital collaboration, virtual work and more.

“In the past couple of months, a lot of us have risen to the challenge and have learned how to use multiple new systems,” she says. “For example, event organisers found alternative ways

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to go to market with online conferences. If you’d proposed this a few months earlier, they would have said it’s so much better in person. But we found a way to make it work. It just shows that where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Similarly, schools and universities went from spending years talking about online learning to implementing it within weeks. As a mother of two, she admits that teaching her kids how to use a virtual classroom was “a nightmare for the first few weeks”. But then the youngsters adapted, as did she.

“I’m aware that this doesn’t apply to all the children in the country,” she says, adding that there is still a lot of work to be done for underprivileged schools so that everyone has equal access, not just the privileged few. “But this is the future,” she says.

Online learning must become the norm

While institutions eventually resumed limited face-to-face learning, Xaba believes that we should put more resources towards closing the digital divide, ensuring that everyone has access to digital platforms. Forcing the old ways to come back isn’t going to work.

“I know that there are still parts of our country that haven’t seen the rewards of the second industrial revolution [electricity], which poses a difficulty when it comes to online training,” she says. “And while I’m not saying we shouldn’t accommodate people that can’t access digital solutions, we need to be working harder to help institutions digitise so that they can offer their training anywhere. These are the solutions we need to move forward as a country instead of focusing on face-to-face education.”



Melody Xaba

For example, My Future Work built a digital academy during the initial hard lockdown. It provided training to over two dozen entrepreneurs across the country. It was about reworking their business models and innovating beyond Covid-19, rather than folding their hands and waiting for the pandemic to end.

“We can never address the issues of digital transformation without addressing the issues of infrastructure,” she says. “That being said, we have to address issues of connectivity in rural areas while implementing digital transformation in the parts of the country where we can. The world isn’t going to wait for South Africa to catch up, so we can’t put everything on hold.”

Learning is about transformation

Indeed, South Africa has a lot of catching up to do. Even before the pandemic, the country’s official unemployment rate was around 30%, which only became worse due to the extended lockdown. And with thousands of businesses facing insolvency, and just about every sector impacted in one way or another, Xaba calls this “a disaster for South Africa, especially because we were already struggling to promote more innovation through SMEs”.

“Before Covid-19, we had a big digital skills shortage,” she says. “The gap is still big, and it’s impacting our ability to compete and innovate. But when we have conversations about the skills of the future, it’s always at an organisational level. Now, more than ever, we need to help the individual, because this problem will take more than just leaders to solve. We need to bridge this skills gap and promote innovation through digital upskilling and reskilling of employees and entrepreneurs. And our solutions need to live beyond Covid-19.”

Organisations always ask how an investment affects the bottom line. So, when they provide money for training, it doesn’t often go to learning soft skills like social and emotional intelligence. But in this era of transition, Xaba believes it is important that we prioritise these. More than that, she believes we must encourage employers to look beyond formal degrees and see the value in practical self-learning. This speaks to culture more than anything else.

“I’ve seen and heard so many instances of businesses that recruit people based on degrees, or that send people for training only to have them come back unable to implement what they’ve learned,” she says. “We must move from just looking at an ROI based on the bottom line to looking at how we’re better able to compete. Companies must also move beyond a degree and see the value in taking on a person and upskilling them.”

Xaba believes that the most important thing for educational institutions is not just to sell information and knowledge, but to sell transformation. When a student has learned a particular skill, the evaluation should be based on what change has taken place.

“I’m not saying that degrees aren’t important – I’m an academic myself and continuous education is important to me,” she says. “But employers and organisations must look beyond the piece of paper. So, while graduation is nice, it’s more about what the person can do and what they can deliver. It’s about learning for transformation instead of learning for knowledge and information.”

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We need solutions that benefit everyone

One way to address the mismatch between the skills people have and the skills employers need is through apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning. But technical and vocational education, much like on-the-job training, is suffering massive disruption due to Covid-19.

“In a joint survey between the International Labour Organisation, UNESCO and the World Bank, 98% of respondents reported a complete or partial closure of technical and vocational schools and training centres,” says Nazrene Mannie, executive director of GAN Global, a Swiss-based specialist in the field of social policy focusing on employment and skills development. “Although over two-thirds of this training is now being provided online, few low-income countries have made that transition.”

When GAN Global started after the last financial crisis in 2013, it was aimed at the youth. The idea was to demonstrate that apprenticeships were a viable pathway into the labour market. While the organisation still believes this, it also acknowledges that it can’t just focus on one segment of the population. With growing disparity as millions of people are pushed into poverty due to Covid-19, the ambition now is for “a future that provides decent and sustainable work opportunities for all”.



Nazrene Mannie

“Apprenticeships and work-based learning will continue to be a bridge that transitions young people from education to the world of work,” Mannie says. “But we’ve also seen many models, particularly in the UK, where older workers are successfully delivering on apprenticeships. The key is to understand gaps in the labour market and ensure that training applies to relevant skills. It’s also important to plan for skills and not jobs because jobs will change, but skills can transfer.”

Higher learning needs to change

GAN Global aims to build knowledge and inspire action by sharing real-world examples of effective work-based learning approaches from different companies in different sectors. And while it is disturbing to consider that 30% of people who were in training before the pandemic may not come back, it is encouraging to see that at least 50% of employers have embraced hybrid solutions.

“There’s already been a shift to different learning methods with companies adopting virtual apprenticeships, virtual internships, and more,” Mannie says. “Perhaps it’s not ideal, but it shows that it can be done. And there’s nothing better than learning and sharing good practice. In fact, learning by sharing – this peer-to-peer influence and approach – is one of the strongest markers for change that will drive new skills and new jobs.”

Part of the hybrid model of formal training pathways involves a ‘credentialing’ approach. Mannie believes this “cannot be undervalued because it will allow people to respond to constantly changing demands in the labour market”. She also believes that there needs to be a massive disruption in education and training, with the understanding that “the more digital we are, the more open we are”.

“The shift to online learning is going to be a key differentiator for how people integrate into the labour market in future, with the economic impact of Covid-19 premised on how quickly governments respond,” she says. “Big business also has a responsibility to drive innovation and change and, through their value chains, influence small and medium businesses.”

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Competition is a key differentiator

Mannie believes that strong private sector partnerships require outreach and engagement. The goal is to design and implement work-based learning initiatives that fit within the framework of quality apprenticeships while providing skills for the future labour market and current personal needs. This depends on a robust regulatory framework with clear roles and responsibilities, equitable funding arrangements, sound labour market data, and meaningful social dialogue and inclusiveness.

“The last few months, although a short time in the grand scheme of things, have shifted how we look at the world and how we address education and training,” she says. “We have a unique opportunity to shake up the system. We need to find meaningful ways to work together. We need to put in place fundamental skills that people can use to become flexible and adaptable to different forms of work, and we need to move to something that’s better than it was before.”

SIX DRIVERS OF CHANGE FOR THE FUTURE WORKFORCE

1. **Extreme longevity.** Increasing global lifespans changes the nature of careers and learning.
2. **Rise of smart machines and systems.** Workplace automation nudges human workers out of repetitive tasks.
3. **Computational world.** Massive increases in sensors and processing power make the world a programmable system.
4. **New media ecology.** New communication tools require media literacies beyond text.
5. **Super-structured organisations.** Social technologies drive new forms of production and value creation.
6. **Globally connected world.** Increased global interconnectivity puts diversity and adaptability at the centre of organisational operations.

Source: Institute of the Future

TEN SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

- 1. Sense-making.** Determine the deeper meaning or significance of what is being expressed.
- 2. Social intelligence.** Connect to others in a deep and direct way to sense and stimulate reactions and desired interactions.
- 3. Novel adaptive thinking.** Create solutions and responses beyond what is rote or rule-based.
- 4. Cross-cultural competency.** Operate in different cultural settings.
- 5. Conceptual thinking.** Translate vast amounts of data into abstract concepts and understand data-based reasoning.
- 6. Virtual collaboration.** Work productively, drive engagement, and demonstrate presence as part of a virtual team.
- 7. Design mindset.** Represent and develop tasks and work processes for desired outcomes.
- 8. Cognitive load management.** Filter information for importance and understand how to maximise cognitive functioning using a variety of tools and techniques.
- 9. Transdisciplinary literacy.** Understand concepts across multiple fields.
- 10. New media literacy.** Critically assess and develop content that uses new media forms and leverage new media for persuasive communication.

Source: Institute of the Future

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MINING INDUSTRY CASE STUDY

With falling commodity prices negatively impacting profitability, mining in South Africa is risky and expensive. But even though the depletion of easy-to-reach minerals forces extraction to take place deeper underground, several new technologies show promise.

“Drone applications, proximity sensors, and improved communication systems are changing underground mining, while software applications are creating efficiencies across the operation,” Melody Xaba says. “In fact, by speeding up certain processes, improved methods of collecting and using data could increase efficiencies along the entire value chain. This allows for more informed decision-making, enabling more sustainable and safer operations.”

The industry’s declining roles include surveying/mapping technicians, freight/cargo agents, and rock splitters. But innovation leads to a rise in new jobs, including those for underground drone operators, application designers, autonomous truck/loader supervisors, and more.

“You don’t always have to start from scratch when hiring,” Xaba says. “You can upskill the employees you already have. In fact, it’s better to recruit from inside. Even though the job might be different, there are skills that they’ve acquired in their current roles that they can take to a new one.”

For example, payroll, timekeeping, or procurement clerks already have sense-making, cross-cultural competencies, and social intelligence skills. With a six-week short course on data literacy and analysis, they can gain new media literacy and conceptual thinking skills, making them qualified to take on roles such as data analysts.

“Digital upskilling isn’t the only solution, but it’s an important one for us to combat unemployment and positively impact our economy,” Xaba says. “Even large companies have to adopt an entrepreneurial culture to drive innovation and position the organisation to compete in the digital economy.” CISS