

# Embrace the opportunities 4IR ushers in

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is already having a hugely disruptive effect on all aspects of our lives, but will arguably have the most profound impact on how we work, where we work from and the type of work we do.



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The 4IR is characterised by the rising capabilities of technology and its resultant effect on work automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI), greater global connectivity, wearable tech and the Internet of Things.

Like any revolution or disruptive change, the 4IR has been met with some degree of fear and trepidation, especially among those who believe that technological advancement will eliminate jobs and tasks that require low-level professional qualifications. However, Andre Schoeman, Executive for Lines of Business at Jasco, points out that while new technologies can create new jobs, they can also nullify and replace existing jobs – but it is not all doom and gloom.

“Instead of fearing the 4IR, people should rather embrace it, and they will begin to see more opportunities than threats emerging in the next few years. Digital transformation is ushering in the need to upskill and reskill employees to ensure they remain relevant in the workplace and lifelong learning will become crucial for all people, regardless of age,” says Schoeman.

According to the World Economic Forum's The Future of Jobs Report 2018, nearly 50% of companies expect that automation will lead to some reduction in their full-time workforce by 2022, based on the job profiles of their employee base today.

However, 38% of businesses surveyed expect to extend their workforce to new productivity-enhancing roles, and more than a quarter expect automation to lead to the creation of new roles in their enterprise.

In addition, the report states that businesses are set to expand their use of contractors doing task-specialised work, with many respondents highlighting their intention to engage workers in a more flexible manner, utilising remote staffing beyond physical offices and decentralisation of operations.

It is this new way of working, known as gig work, that will give rise to many new opportunities, in the digital transformation age, presenting numerous benefits to both employers and employees, says Schoeman.

He explains that gig work, coupled with technological advancements and improvements in connectivity, such as the rollout of 5G networks in South Africa, have the potential to revolutionise the contact centre agent's role.

5G is the latest evolution of wireless data standards and is expected to be about 10 times faster than the current state-of-the-art 4G used by cellphone networks, while also being more reliable.

South Africa's first 5G network was rolled out in parts of Johannesburg and Tshwane earlier this year, and coverage should be extended to Durban and Cape Town by next year. While South Africa is on the cusp of internet connectivity for all citizens, infrastructure complications and the rising costs of data means that the country is still playing catch-up with the developed world.

"It is imperative for South Africa to begin implementing the steps needed to be taken to become a fully-fledged connected country," says Schoeman.

*“ As 5G will enable better connectivity, it will make it significantly easier for people who work in contact centres to become free agents. This means that instead of working from an office and only for one specific call centre company, the contact centre agents can become contractors to various call centre operators, making it easy for the agent to work from anywhere in the country, at any time of the day. ”*

### **New operating models**

He explains that, for the employer, it introduces a new operating model that allows them to downscale and upscale at a moment's notice, without having to worry about the labour issues that comes with reducing head-count.

"This is also a model that will allow the economy to absorb a lot of millennials who are not very keen on 9-5 working hours. Flexibility in terms of the workforce means that contact centre operators are also able to become a bit more profitable and this will potentially mean better pay for the agents," says Schoeman.

"At the same time, this model will also provide workers with the flexibility to acquire wide-ranging skills and exposure to various roles, without being tied down to traditional HR processes."

Research by Gartner shows that gig or contingent workers represent approximately 15-25% of the global workforce today. By 2025, gig workers will account for 35-40% of the workforce. On the hand, Schoeman says that when contact centre agents are able to work off-site, it will bring down the overall operating costs for the employer, as they will no longer need to have physical structures to house contact centre agents, as they will be working from remote areas.

In addition, 5G will also allow for AI to assist in monitoring the performance of each call centre agent, wherever they may be based in the country. "The Fourth Industrial Revolution forces us to think and act in new ways, particularly in terms of

how we approach work. People must embrace flexibility and on-the-job learning, as well as the reality of automation,” says Schoeman.

The 4IR will essentially create a new employer-employee relationship – one that works for both parties, introducing flexibility for both the employer and employee and also making work more attractive to people who seek a better life-work balance

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