

Will a robot take your job?

 By Louise Marsland

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Yes, a robot may take your job and remaining relevant in your chosen profession or 'career of the moment' will require continuous education and upskilling every few years. And the rest of the 'good news' - we may never retire.

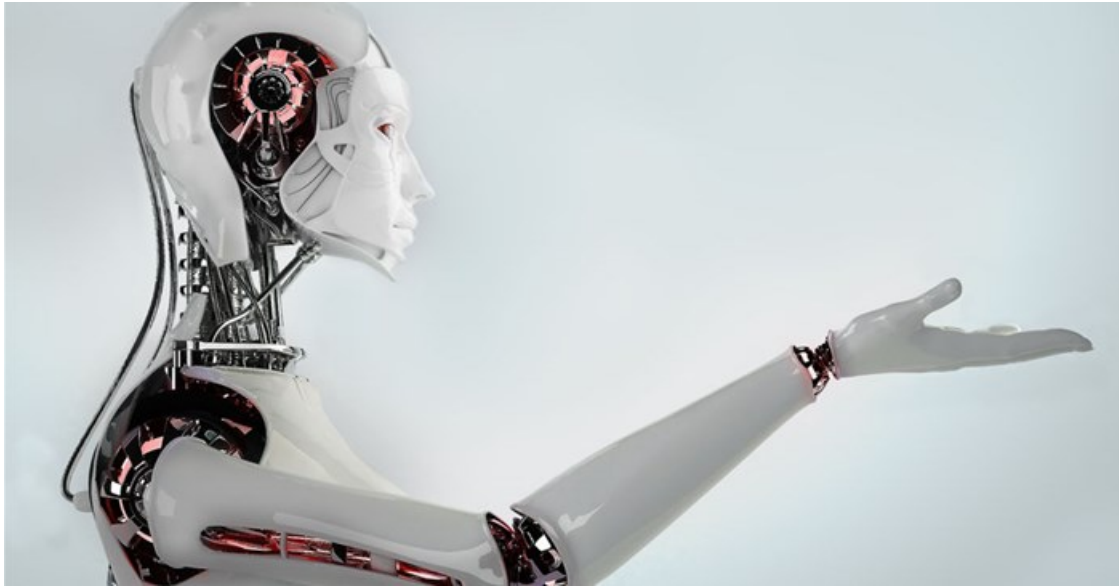


Image by 123RF

The world as you know it and trained for, no longer exists. It's just taking a little longer to filter down through stultifying and traditional corporate structures and our educational institutions. Change is desperately needed though, because of the mammoth skills shortage looming across industry sectors as education and work experience fail to meet the needs of the digital economy.

If you keep up with trends or work in the digital economy, you will have an inkling of what is coming. Futurist Dion Chang, the founder of South African trend consultancy Flux Trends, gave one of his jaw-dropping presentations last week in Cape Town (this week in Joburg) on the future of work and the impact on the human resources industry, education and corporate culture.

His presentation, entitled 'Now Hiring, but Differently', focussed on the new industries and new skills that will be required to drive these industries. Here's a newsflash: your degree is becoming less relevant than your personality. Whether you fit in with the culture of the organisation and have a wider range of skills (particularly digital) and have a more flexible mind-set, will count for more than your original degree. In some cases, companies are hiring talent and then deciding which job they will be best suited for after they have spent some time at the company.

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Here's an outtake from Flux Trends: "Nothing is going to be the same as before. The tectonic plates of business have shifted and game changing technologies have spawned new industries and agile, start-up companies. Traditional value chains have collapsed and the new way of doing business is by disrupting, but that requires a unique skill set. The HR goal posts have moved and the ripple effect will impact across all industries and, more importantly, education."

Chang emphasised that companies need a different operating model, they need to be "responsive organisations" and become learning organisations. The death of "legacy companies" impacts company culture; company structure; the future

of work; how we want to work; and the future of education.

The last job on earth

“We are starting to see the death of legacy companies... from a 65-year legacy to a 15-year lifespan...” Chang says traditional, legacy companies find it hard to move with the times and as disruption keeps hitting in waves, many industries simply cannot transform fast enough.

This is illustrated graphically, Chang recounts, in the music and automotive industries right now: car companies are busying transforming, focussing on building apps for the new generation of driverless cars and share schemes; and what's left for the music industry when Beyoncé only has to whisper to her millions of fans that there will be something from her on Tidal, her family music streaming service, and drops an entire visual album for her fans to stream directly from her?

There's a myriad of reasons for this radical change, not least is that we are living longer and will not be able to afford to retire in our 60s. The other key reason is that there is no such thing as a corporate career anymore, that the old model of studying for a profession, getting a degree, and then working your way up through the corporate ranks to bonuses, shares, pension and other perks, is failing. Those of us in the 'Gig Economy' (freelancing/collaborating/consulting) already know this, as our industries have downsized, transformed, or disappeared over the past decade. Print media is a case in point, so is music, photography, motor-manufacturing, etc... and the list is growing.

Scientists predict that machines could take 50% of our jobs in the next 30 years. Chang screened a short animated film from Guardian Animations on '[The last job on earth: imagining a fully automated world](#)'. It shows long queues for a 'Food Bank' and an 'Over-30s Retirement Home'...

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So if your company is not going to aid your retirement; your union can't save your job as it is automated and handed over to robots, or ceases to exist as your industry ceases to exist; or you do not want to retire and sit around doing nothing for another 20-40 years; what will you do next?

This is what Chang focussed on in this presentation:

- New industries, unique operating models, as seen from a company perspective. Chang said the conversation at motoring shows is already changing to apps and algorithms for cars. “Ford is already considering transforming to a ‘mobility provider’; and Toyota is considering transforming its business to personal robotics.”
- The future of work and the death of a career, from a worker's perspective. Chang explained that the old “template” of “school, university, work, retire, death”, is now: “school, university, work, mini-retirement, further education, mini-retirement, work, further education, work, never retire”!
- The new skills needed to run new industries, and the (inevitable) need for education disruption: the ‘On-demand Economy’ where everyone wants everything right now, the ‘Gig Economy’ where 40% of US workers will be by 2020

in a freelance or contract capacity, either forced there by retrenchment, automation or second careers; and the 'Sharing Economy' which is transforming many service industries. Chang said The Hyatt Hotel is giving Airbnb rental properties a corporate nod of approval, marketed under the Hyatt brand as an 'anti-hotel experience'; and BMW in Seattle in the US, is releasing 300 cars in a trial floating share scheme with other drivers.

- Education and the physiology of the (digitised) human mind; the need for re-skilling and the boom in adult education. People are starting to look for hybrid skills. Hard skills are database technology and soft skills are flexibility, collaborative, EQ and doing things differently, said Chang.
- A look ahead: jobs and careers of the future. Telecommuting (working virtually from another geographical location) is already here; job-sharing is on the horizon, when two people share a job for less hours; or work sharing, whereby companies try keep talent by reducing their hours instead of retrenching them or losing them, Chang explained.

Many of us will become nomadic workers, within or contracting to virtual companies where work is outsourced in "work swarms", said Chang. "The more talented an individual is, the more work flexibility they can demand."

Many people will also move to where they want to live, working virtually as "techno hippies" rich in location and time. "The fear of leadership is that they are going to slack off, but stats are showing that nomadic workers/those in the gig economy are more focussed on deadlines, productivity, deliverables... Flexible work programmes are bubbling up in HR," Chang observed.

No degrees needed

The failure rate of people who do get a job is 40% in the first 18 months - and the reason in 89% of cases was attitude, not skills. They simply didn't fit in. So companies are recalculating hiring procedures, saying they don't have time for such disruption. Chang elaborated: "Any skill can be retrained, but personality and temperament have a huge effect on the rest of the organisation, teams need to be agile."

Crippling student debt, a factor in South Africa as we have seen with the #Feesmustfall movement and well documented in the United States too; as well as more emphasis on life skills, not just degrees; degrees becoming wide-spread or not meeting the needs of the new digital-led economy; as well as a shift to a "Maker Economy" and corporate culture where management is evolving into leadership and halocracy leads to flatter leadership structures - all means that broader life skills are needed, your training and education will never stop, and degrees aren't the ultimate work qualification when our current education systems don't necessarily encourage the creativity, skills and critical thinking needed in the new workplace.

"Businesses should be retraining, not just acquiring new people. And people need to upskill and retrain throughout their lives and career," said Chang.

He is adamant that education needs to change. "The education system is not geared for the 'Knowledge Economy'. We have become more like librarians. We know about information via Google, but we need to know what to do with that knowledge... The Knowledge Age worker needs to locate, access and grab information, communicate it, and work collaboratively to work out ways to create new information. We need to understand big things like systems... We need adaptive learning."

These are the jobs of the near future, Chang reported:

- Drone industry: 14 drone pilots just graduated in Cape Town.
- Coding: Coding is the new procedural literacy.
- Virtual reality content: Education, travel, real estate, architecture, journalism will be transformed by this.
- UX Designer: Today's graphic designers are tomorrow's UX designers as everything will be about user experience.

And in the possible distant future, new jobs could include:

- Animal migration engineer as humans encroach further on natural habitats globally.
- Organ designers – bio/3D printing of human body parts.
- Thought readers for advanced brain scanners.
- Forecasters of anything (because of the abundant data to sift through).
- Human and robot integration specialist and artificial intelligence.

Think I'll stick with being a "techno hippie" for now!

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