

Enter stage left: New world of work realities in a post-Coronavirus world



Introduction

The evolution of technologies associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) have created a disruption in terms of the ways in which humans live and work and how organisations operate. Working in the 4IR space presents massive challenges to organisations. This is especially pertinent in the context of a developing country, like South Africa, which experiences major skill deficits and thus noticeable challenges in adopting new technologies.

As the world was grappling with these challenges, enter the coronavirus. The outbreak of the coronavirus in early 2020 has led to a so-called 'lock down' of economies and businesses on a global scale, due to fears of the rapid spreading of the disease. The full implications of the virus and its economic implications are still to fully emerge. However, the prevalence of 4IR coupled with the challenges associated with the coronavirus pandemic have pertinent implications for the world of work.

New world of work realities

The new world of work, which has evolved mainly due to globalisation, the internet, and the evolution of 4IR technologies, have generated an altered reality for both organisations and employees. Broad trends that have emerged in the new world of work include increased virtualisation and digitalisation, more part-time employment (or gig work), people working from home or any other location and employees being more frequently connected to their jobs than ever before. The advent of the coronavirus is likely to entrench these trends to a greater extent.

The Gartner poll surveyed 145 CFO's and senior financial managers during April 2020 and found that most (51% of respondents) were expecting up to 30% decline in revenue. The respondents also showed caution in contemplating long-term investments. The findings further indicate that 55% of organisations intend to redesign roles, supply chains and workflows and that geographic diversification and investment in secondary markets were envisioned in order to mitigate and manage risk in times of disruption. This means a more complex business environment is likely to evolve that will impact on the operational models of organisations (Cheremond, 2020).

Results of the Gartner poll further indicate that 32% companies were contemplating the replacement of full-time workers with contingency workers (van der Meulen, 2020). This will obviously place more emphasis on the prevalence of gig workers that is already a trend in the new world of work. Gig employment is thus likely to increase in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Organisations might also opt to appoint employees on a part-time basis, as opposed to fix-term employment.

Although the notion of 'working from home' has started to emerge in recent years the advent of the coronavirus is likely to make this a more permanent arrangement for many employees (Bashinsky, 2020). The Gartner poll indicates the likelihood of more employees working full time and/or part time from home. According to Lavelle (2020) 74% of CEO's interviewed plan on shifting at least 5% of employees to remote working. Amazon also announced its intention to create 3 000 work-from-home positions in South Africa (BusinessTech, 2020). Amazon is experiencing a boom due to increased online shopping which has led to the creation of work-from-home jobs on a global scale. This shows that companies are contemplating remote working to a greater extent than before the outbreak.

Working remotely requires integrated and customised information technology (IT) systems to enable companies to not only enable remote working but also to track the work employees are performing. In this sense, the Gartner poll also shows that companies are increasingly using technologies to assist them – 16% of employers indicated that they have increased the use of technology to track work, computer usage, and the emails and internal communication of employees. This is likely to increase as the full extent of the coronavirus emerges.

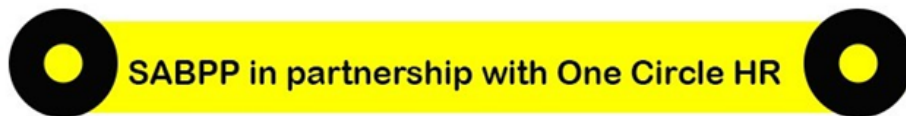
This notion is supporting the central role of IT in organisations – which is likely to become more pronounced given that organisations require customised IT systems to run their operations (Anderson, 2020). This can involve enabling AI driven applications, robotics, Internet of Things, etc. Also, the IT and engineering professions are propelling the new world of work. Engineers are devising technologies on various platforms, e.g. nanotechnology, building rockers and spaceships for galactic travel (notably Virgin Galactic and SpaceX), autonomous vehicles (e.g. Tesla) including the planned Mars expedition of 2022 spearheaded by the tech entrepreneur, Elon Musk (Etherington, 2020; Fernholz, 2020). These engineering advances need IT professionals to programme the systems. In fact, the programming of smart and integrated systems drives innovation on a global scale (e.g. Amazon) and programming is a key

skill.

Remote work has implications for managers. Apart from the people skills required from managers, they would need to be flexible and have the necessary soft skills to motivate and support staff. Managers also need to have digital skills to comprehend the systems involved in remotely managing and supporting staff. Employees also demand increased transparency – this was already apparent prior to the coronavirus (Cheremond, 2020). In fact, the ways in which managers and organisations treated employees during the coronavirus can have implications for the employer of choice strategy of organisations and ultimately talent management.



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According to the research of Bersin (2019) deep layoffs, especially in time of crises, have dire consequences for the future sustainability of organisations. This is mainly due to the loss of critical skills. A loss of critical skills impacts negatively on customer and stakeholder relationships, thus impacting on the future viability of organisations. In addition to this, employees that were not retrenched go through a ‘survivor syndrome’ where they contemplate whether they will be next. This creates a less than conducive work environment where employees experience psychological stress that can have a significant impact on the engagement, motivation and commitment of staff. It is thus pertinent that leaders show that they care for their employees. Digital transformation driven by the various 4IR technologies are the future and organisations do not have any other option but to adapt to its demands, thus necessitating leaders and managers that are able to act as change agents spearheading this new reality.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to reflect on new world of work realities brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. This, together with the challenges posed by 4IR, is likely to have significant implications for organisations. The post-coronavirus world is likely to generate more gig work, as well as more employees working from home. Gig work is based on skills and individuals that work from home need to have the proper systems in place to perform their jobs, notably internet connectivity, laptops, etc. This is likely to exacerbate already existing inequalities, especially in the South African context. Custom-made IT systems and those with programming skills are in high demand – this is a trend that is likely to continue. There is also a more pronounced emphasis on leadership skills and leaders need to be emphatic, flexible and people oriented.

Deseré Koko, MHRP is an Associate Professor: Human Resource Management at the Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein, Free State

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