

Innovation and HR in the context of the 4th industrial revolution



Much of what we know and use in the world today is a result of some form of innovation. From as early as the stone age with stone tools, through to the discovery of writing around 2600BC, to the invention of the steam engine, mankind has been discovering and innovating to improve its way of life. The speed of change in the early ages was slow and innovations came in far and in-between, which created conditions for a relatively stable environment. The speed of change in the modern age, however, is rapid and innovation at the centre of it all has created an environment of instability and change.

Organisations operating in the 21st century must operate in a constant state of readiness to change as forces from the external environment such as the economy, technology, social-political issues, and workforce put pressure on organisations to change. Martins and Geldenhuys (2016, p 8) make note of this, stating, "The economy is trending toward more concentrated wealth, globalization and ecological concern. The workforce is becoming more diverse, more educated. Technology is driving productivity within organisations; e-commerce is affecting both the supply chain and sales and organisations are becoming more networked and knowledge-based". The excerpt shows that organisations are facing a variety of forces for change that all require attention and creative solutions to deal with as organisations strive to reach maximum productivity. To deal with these modern complexities, organisations have the task of igniting their employees to innovate and come up with creative and unique solutions to gain a competitive advantage

Peter Drucker, who is known to some as the founder of modern management, once famously said "The

enterprise that does not innovate ages and declines, and in a period of rapid change such as the present, the decline will be fast” (Ditkoff, 2012). Odetunde and Ufodiama (2017) state that employees in organisations use creativity and innovation to modify and enhance their work processes to gain some benefits they value for themselves or for the organisation. As a consequence of the current economic climate, organisations are paying more attention to their human resources to produce innovative ideas and consequently innovations (Yesil & Sozbilir, 2013). Furthermore, organisations recognize that their innovation potential rests in the knowledge, skills, and abilities of their employees (Patterson, Kerrin, & Gatto-Roissard, 2009). Putting everything into context, Thompson (2004) notes that ideas have little real value until something is done with them. Innovation, therefore, goes beyond just the generation of ideas but requires individuals with an ability to see the value and to implement these ideas into products, processes, or services.

When one typically thinks of innovation, one might immediately think of technological products such as a new apps, programs, or even the latest phone or gadget. The socially-oriented will think of social media and new interactive platforms e.g. the virtual world. Innovation encompasses all of this and more. Nielson (2006) speaks of another type of innovation that is process innovation, which involves the creation or addition of new forms of business processes or technology which improves the efficiency and effectiveness with which work is done. This type of innovation is the most relevant for HR as we strive to improve how we manage and organise employees in the 21st-century organisation with its new complexities.

Millennials, who according to certain reports compose most of the workforce, have different needs, and are motivated by different things to previous generations of employees. HR practices from a decade ago may therefore not necessarily be as effective with the current generation of employees. HR departments and practitioners need to invest and investigate new methods of operating that are relevant to the times but also adaptable to the future. HR innovations include new methods of recruiting, training and development, performance management as well as new forms of compensation and rewards.

In conclusion, if South African organisations want to compete in the global marketplace, they may do well to consider and place innovation as one of the core competencies and values fundamental to survival and ultimate success.