

The new world of work - trade unions will have to adapt



The World Economic Forum (WEF) presented its latest “Future of Jobs Report” in January at its annual meeting held in Davos, Switzerland. More than a thousand employers, spread across 55 countries (including South Africa) and 22 economic sectors, representing 14 million employees, participated in the study.

It comes as no surprise that the report indicates an increase in the demand for technology skills and technology literacy, and skills focusing on artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, software application and development, big data and network and cybersecurity are particularly sought-after. Half of the employers indicated that they have already adapted their businesses to take advantage of the benefits of technology and artificial intelligence, while two-thirds are engaged in recruiting and retaining employees who have AI skills.

The changing work environment and the new challenges it presents also create a demand for employees with analytical, creative, resilience and smart skills. In turn, demographic changes pertaining to an aging workforce and a decline in the entry of young workers create a demand for talent management, teaching and mentoring skills.

The study also shows that there is an increase in the demand for renewable energy and environmental engineers and electric and self-driving vehicle specialists as a result of climate change. However, it also points to a shortage of personnel in the so-called care professions which jobs typically cannot be taken over by a robot. For example, in health care there is a shortage of nursing staff, social workers and home

care staff, and the education-related sectors again experience a shortage of educators at school and tertiary level.

As a result of automation, 40% of the employers plan to reduce their workforce. Jobs that are particularly at risk of disappearing over time include clerical and secretarial jobs as well as jobs for personal assistants, cashiers and ticket sales jobs, administrative staff, post office clerks, telemarketers, graphic designers, legal officers, newspaper vendors, travel agents, accounting and payroll staff, bank cashiers, data capturers and printing-related jobs.

While approximately 92 million jobs will be lost worldwide over the next five years, approximately 170 million new jobs will fortunately be created.

The majority of the employers have also indicated that they will begin to link salary increases to productivity and performance which will certainly challenge trade unions. Trade unions must also take note of the increased use of contractors (independent and temporary), but also of the hybrid work environment where an increasing number of employees work part-time (in some cases on a full-time basis) from home.

To be relevant trade unions will have to adapt to the new world of work. While South Africa is lagging behind, compared to developed countries that are at the forefront of the wave of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the majority of trade unions must start to make the mind shift as they are still caught up in the era of the Third Industrial Revolution.

During salary negotiations the focus will have to shift to demands related to skills development, and trade unions will need to particularly apply themselves to ensure that their members can acquire scarce and critical skills. It must also be ensured that employers consult with trade unions and employees about the automation and modernisation of the workplace in order to thus prevent job losses.

The days of trade union recruitment of members outside the gates of a workplace and of convening mass meetings of members are gone. There has to be a shift to digital platforms and social media to communicate with members and to attract new members. The trade unions of choice will be those that offer online training opportunities to their members, especially in AI and technology-related skills. Trade unions will also have to shift their focus to employee well-being, particularly to mental health support, flexible working hours for single parents in particular, and work-life balance. There is also a need for policies that provide for injury on duty in instances where work is done from home, and for policies that make provision for the right not to have to be in touch with the workplace after hours and during holiday times.

Opportunities for member growth also lie in the recruitment of members in the gig economy, freelancers, contract workers and platform-based workers. In this way, unions can also offer protection to predominantly vulnerable employees and negotiate better conditions of service for them.

However, unions' main challenge will be to retain recognition in the workplace. Whereas recognition is

currently linked mainly to the percentage of employees a trade union represents, the focus will have to shift to the interests of the employees who are represented.

The new world of work is disruptive, and employees will have to see to it that robots and technology do not have the last say in a workplace. For this reason, it is important to possess skills that cannot be taken over by a machine. The trade unions that will survive are those whose own workplace and way of work make use of technology, digital platforms and AI of the new world of work. This will be a challenge to many.

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