

Are we being replaced by robots?

It is the dawn of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and it brings with it change at an unprecedented speed, scale and force. High-speed mobile internet, artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and cloud technology has fundamentally altered the way we live and work.



The First Industrial Revolution was underpinned by mechanical inventions such as the steam engine, telegraph and railroad; while the Second Industrial Revolution introduced mass production through assembly lines and electrification. The Third Industrial Revolution introduced mainframe computers, cellular communication and the internet. Today, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is characterised by a fusion of technologies that straddle the physical, digital and biological worlds.

Certainly, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is bringing significant disruptions to the employment landscape, due to the innovative use of information and communication technology. Some jobs will be automated and even become obsolete. It is, however, highly improbable that automation will wholly displace occupations.

Technology will not be used to substitute jobs in the health and social development sectors, but to augment them. It will mean though, that workers in the public health, social development and labour sectors must become agile learners. Workers won't be able to rely on their inaugural qualifications - the world of work requires lifelong learning, with high-level and future-proof skills relevant for the workplace of the future.

Furthermore, organisations must play a critical role in empowering employees through reskilling and upskilling. Government and employers alike must appreciate the importance of proactively investing in the development of human capital, creating an enabling environment that encourages lifelong learning, as envisaged in the National Qualifications Framework.

The education system must also adequately prepare graduates for the real world of work; including digital knowledge, technical skills and cognitive and non-cognitive, “soft” skills. The health and social development sectors are dominated by soft skills which necessarily require human interaction. Strategic thinking, empathy and emotional intelligence, will still be at the core of these services, while technology might assist in speeding up processes.

“It is evident that the Fourth Industrial Revolution creates both opportunities and threats. What is critical now, is how we, as the health and social development sector, position ourselves, to leverage on the potential opportunities and to alleviate the threats,” says Mpumelelo Sibiyi, General Secretary of the Public Health and Social Development Sectoral Bargaining Council (PHSDSBC).

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