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Setting HR standards

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FACT SHEET

FUTURE WORLD OF WORK SERIES:

FUTURE READINESS, EMPLOYABILITY, AND ACTIVISM

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INTRODUCTION

This factsheet is the third instalment in the series exploring the Future World of Work, serving as a prelude to the HR community engagements that the SABPP is planning for on the **'HR Standards in the Future World of Work'**. The previous two factsheets explored the future forms of organisations and the evolving definition of employees in the future world of organisations and work. The future, though, is already presenting itself and confronting us. The HR practitioner needs to begin grappling with it without delay– and this has been a prescient warning sounded by many people. For example, consider the recent UK Supreme Court ruling that Uber drivers are employees rather than independent contractors.

While the previous factsheets discussed the nature of the employment relationship and the definition of employee as it is evolving, the present factsheet explores the debates on the employee in and of the future. It focuses on three themes: employees' future readiness, employability, and activism. The first theme, that of future readiness, comprises three subthemes, namely, 'reskilling revolution', capabilities, and future literacy.

FUTURE READINESS

The debates on future readiness have seemed to be anchored mainly on the Fourth Industrial Revolution, particularly the effect and impact of technological changes on employees and whether they will have the necessary skills for the new world of work shaped by these changes. Implicit in this conception of future readiness is a one-way causal pathway (4IR technologies → future world of work), although there is the acknowledgement that it may be more complex and contextualised (see the factsheet on ***HR's place in 4IR for the different framings of technology and 4IR***).

RE-SKILLING REVOLUTION

The focus in the debates is on future-proofing workers/employees from the above changes and thereby assisting with the sustainability of enterprises and economies. A key reference point on the debates on future readiness and a platform for organising national, industry, and enterprise-level interventions to future proof the workforce is the World Economic Forum (WEF). The WEF (2021) argues for making "skills the currency of the labour market" and utilising a skills-based system:

> "Current systems of learning and signalling job-fit do not provide the agility that lifelong learners will require, and we find ourselves at a defining moment to make skills the currency of the labour market. Shifting to a skills-based system can not only provide more efficient mechanisms by which employers can identify the talent they need for business to flourish but can also create fairer labour markets where individuals are able to rapidly transition between roles; have greater access to learning opportunities; and be matched to employment through unbiased and skills-based evaluation. Yet many learning providers and employers use their own definitions and standards for skills, creating additional challenges for connecting workers to learning opportunities" (p2)

Given the above argument for skills currency and system, the WEF suggests the need for a reskilling revolution to prepare for the 4IR and related technology changes on the new world of work and the potential of automation and augmentation[1]. The focus is on upskilling and reskilling. A third has emerged in the debate as well - that of multi-skilling. The WEF definition of upskilling and reskilling is detailed below. Note that the WEF points to the importance of shared definitions and standards for skills. In the South African context, the OFO may play this role, as discussed below.

UPSKILLING

learning new competencies to stay in current role, due to the change in skills required, or adding certain competencies for career progression.

RESKILLING

learning new sets of competencies to transition to a completely new role.

Source: WEF (2019)

Drawing on its own and other partner and collaborator surveys, the WEF has published an analysis of the shifting demands in skills due to technological change. As technologies and their

1. See the previous factsheet on ***workforce transitions*** for a discussion on automation and augmentation.

impact on work and the organisation of work in the form of jobs evolve, so do the skills demands at the global, national, industry, and enterprise-level evolve. Below is an example of the WEF findings as published in the 2019 report, *Towards a Reskilling Revolution:*

TODAY, 2018	INCREASING, 2022	DECLINING, 2022
Analytical thinking and innovation	Analytical thinking and innovation	Manual dexterity, endurance and precision
Complex problem-solving	Active learning and learning strategies	Memory, verbal, auditory and spatial abilities
Critical thinking and analysis	Creativity, originality and initiative	Management of financial, material resources
Active learning and learning strategies	Technology design and programming	Technology installation and maintenance
Creativity, originality and initiative	Critical thinking and analysis	Reading, writing, math and active listening
Attention to detail, trustworthiness	Complex problem-solving	Management of personnel
Emotional intelligence	Emotional intelligence	Quality control and safety awareness
Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation	Leadership and social influence	Coordination and time management
Leadership and social influence	Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation	Visual, auditory and speech abilities
Coordination and time management	Systems analysis and evaluation	Technology use, monitoring and control

Source: WEF (2019)

Drawing on the US data and surveys by LinkedIn and Burning Glass Technologies (who used the US Occupational Information Network (O*NET) categorisation system), the WEF (2020) also aims to identify the "emergence of new, in-demand *professions*, as well as their accompanying *skills* requirements" (italics added, p7). That is, professions that have seen growth in the last five years. These are clustered as illustrated in the below table. See also the WEF's Future of Jobs Report, which explores these further.

	NUMBER OF OPPORTUNITIES (PER 10,000)	
Professional Cluster	**2020**	**2022**
figures extrapolated from data for 20 economies (LinkedIn)		
Data and AI	78	123
Engineering and Cloud Computing	60	91
People and Culture	47	58
Product Development	32	44
Sales, Marketing and Content	87	125
figures extrapolated from data for the United States (Burning Glass)		
Care Economy	193	260
Green Economy	9	14
ALL CLUSTERS	**506**	**715**

Source: WEF (2019)

Notes
Number of opportunities refers to the number of new opportunities for every 10,000 opportunities in the labour market and is calculated as a compound average annual growth rate.

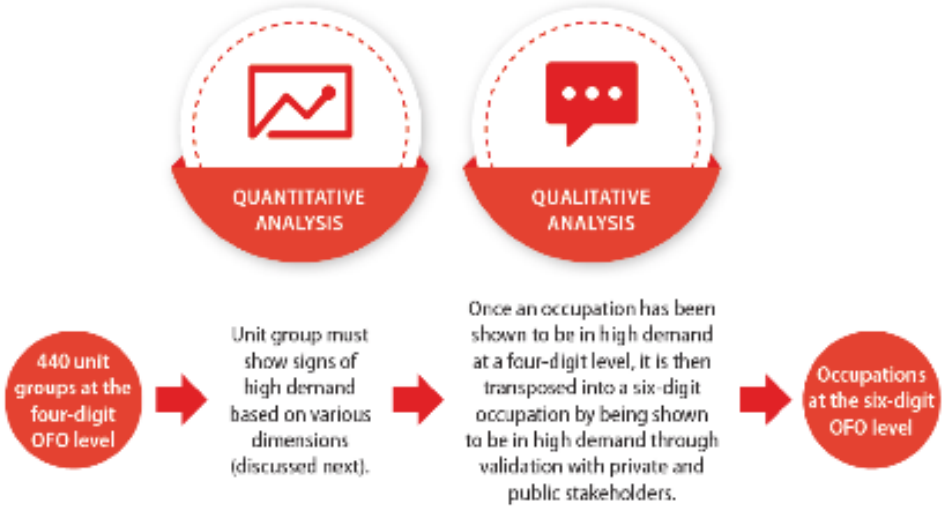
Sources
LinkedIn and Burning Glass Technologies.

In the South African context, there are various sources of labour market data and intelligence for the analysis of, and forecasting for, the futureproofing of the workforce. These range from the state departments and institutional bodies, non-state institutional bodies, and enterprises to online platforms such as Career Junction. For example, the List of Occupations in High Demand, Critical Skills list, and Job Opportunity Index published by the state; Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) professional, vocational, technical, and academic learning (PIVOTAL) lists and Sector Skills Plans (SSPs); as well as the Career Junction Index. The reports by state institutions are based on the Organising Framework of Occupations (OFO), which in its latest iteration draws on the International Labour Organization's International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08).

The OFO is similarly skill-based and in this way is somewhat similar the WEF methodology and reports. However, the WEF reports are based on the O*NET, but there is the possibility of conversion from O*NET to ISCO-08.

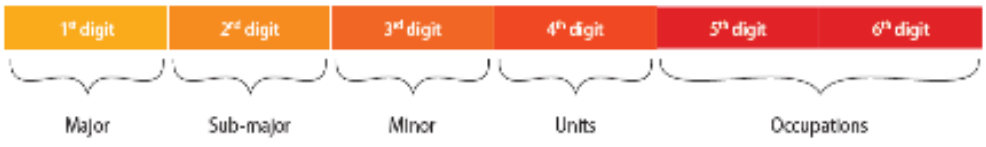
The OFO is a "skill-based, coded classification system of occupations which is used by the DHET for "identifying, reporting and monitoring skills demand and supply" in the labour market. It captures almost all occupations in the country and classifies them by skill level and skill specialisation" (Reddy, Rogan, Mncwango, & Chabane, 2018, p. 10).

The methodology for developing the List of Occupations in High Demand (OHID) is illustrated below. It is a multi-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data and analysis. As with the WEF report drawing on surveys of demand by LinkedIn and Burning Glass Technologies, the OHID focuses – as the name implies – on the demand for occupations.



Source: Capazario and Venter (2020)

The OHID begins at the OFO's fourth level of abstraction, that of unit grouping of occupations, and then delves to the more detailed sixth level of occupations. The different levels of abstraction are illustrated below. The findings and tabulation of occupations in the OHID cannot be replicated here given the length thereof. The table of OHID can be found in the ***2020 published report***.



Source: Capazario and Venter (2020)

CAPABILITIES

The discussion of the reskilling revolution focuses in on the specific skills that are and will be in demand and that the workforce will need to be equipped for. However, this may be a narrow lens on the future preparation and readiness of the workforce. It also does not focus in on the human capabilities that are required to learn, develop, and master skills and for developing the expertise to use these skills together and appropriately in context. And, thus, it does not focus on the development and harnessing of these capabilities. For example, the development of capabilities such as learning to learn, creativity, empathy, and resilience as well as the development of mental models and mindsets that underpin future readiness[2]. The reskilling revolution, then, could be said to be focused on the tactical level as a Deloitte (2019) report suggests.

> We define skills as the tactical knowledge or expertise needed to achieve work outcomes within a specific context. Skills are specific to a particular function, tool, or outcome, and they are applied by an individual to accomplish a given task" (p3).

Navigating the debates and reports on future readiness can be challenging given the different definitions and uses of terms such as skills, competency, competence, capability, ability, and aptitudes. However, as we negotiate these and attempt to develop consensus, we need to guard against losing perspective that we are discussing (and in fact talking for) holistic human beings who make up the workforce.

FUTURE LITERACY

Related to the above discussion of capabilities, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is promoting the development of future literacy. Note the use of the terms, capability and skill, in the description of future literacy in the textbox below. UNESCO's promotion of 'using-the-future' shifts perspective from seeing the workforce as *reacting* to the shifting skills demands caused by technological changes. It is human beings (as citizens, agents, and members of the workforce) that *shape* and *develop* technologies. This was also noted in the previous factsheet on ***HR's place in 4IR for the different framings of technology and 4IR*** on the framing of technology and its agency.

> FL is a capability. It is the skill that allows people to better understand the role of the future in what they see and do. Being futures literate empowers the imagination, enhances our ability to prepare, recover and invent as changes occur.
>
> The term Futures Literacy mimics the idea of reading and writing literacy because it is a skill that everyone can and should acquire. And it is a skill that is within everyone's reach. People can become more skilled at 'using-the-future', more 'futures literate', because of two facts. One is that the future does not yet exist, it can only be imagined. Two is that humans have the ability to imagine. As a result, humans are able to learn to imagine the future for different reasons and in different ways. Thereby becoming more 'futures literate'.
>
> Source: UNESCO

2. See the previous factsheet on ***innovation and disruption dilemmas.***

FUTURE EMPLOYABILITY

The above discussion on the reskilling revolution suggests that there is a need for constant upskilling and reskilling for the transition of roles caused by 4IR technologies. This *state of transitioning* and the *continuous changes* to tasks, work, and jobs are now the status quo. There is no permanence and thus no permanent or fixed jobs, roles, occupations, and professions . Thus, lifelong upskilling, reskilling, and multiskilling is required to remain employable in the future.

However, as the discussion on capabilities suggests, this may be a narrow lens. Future employability may be seen more broadly as the interrelation and dynamic between *capabilities, careers, and contexts*. That is, the individual's capabilities that have been developed and can be developed through his/her lifespan; the individual's career drive, journey, and related development through successive career transitions and/or portfolio of career positions/roles held concurrently; and the labour market and broader socio-economic and political landscapes.

The key question is: who is responsible for and funds the future employability if there is an interrelation and dynamic between capabilities, careers, and contexts. The below example from the University of Edinburgh can be illustrative. The table elaborates how the University is framing employability for the university staff and it seems to suggest co-responsibility for employability.

Employability is not:	Employability is:
• simply getting a job	• ongoing success for now and in the future, whatever career or career(s) a student chooses
• a list of skills that can be 'taught'	• drawing on a range of skills, abilities and attributes that are developed in a whole range of settings and that vary from individual to individual
• the sole responsibility of the Careers Service and the Employability Consultancy	• a University-wide responsibility
• the same as Personal Development Planning (PDP)	• an ongoing developmental process that benefits from active reflection
• something new	• more important now than ever before in light of the world graduates are entering

Source: University of Edinburgh

3. See the previous factsheet on the ***new forms of organisations*** for a discussion on this.

EMPLOYEE AND INVESTOR ACTIVISM

Related to the above discussions on individual agency and shaping the future, is the debate on employee activism. In fact, one article in Forbes is titled, "Employee Activism is the New Normal" (Wingard, 2020). The very technologies that the reskilling revolution refers to are being used by employees to hold their employers accountable in relation to work practices and broader socio-economic issues. There are many examples of employees of Silicon Valley tech giants using social media platforms and social protests to publicly speak out and take action against these companies. This again reinforces the point that reskilling may be important, but it may be a narrow lens for the HR practitioner. The practitioner needs to take a broader and holistic perspective – as illustrated, for example, by the SABPP HR Management System Model – to understand HR's place and role in 4IR.

Employee activism in relation to new technologies can be seen at two levels – organised labour activism for a 'just transition' and 'knowledge worker' activism against perceived ethical failures of their 'big tech' employers.

The recent examples of WallStreetBets and the Gamestop stock show the potential impact of individual retail investors on company stock valuations. This may also be considered another form of activism or, at the very least, groups of middle-class workers using technologies to coordinate and scale to influence hedging and market valuations. The WallStreetBets phenomenon, however, illustrates the negative effects and perverse incentives of supposed free platforms, and the power differential between retail and institutional investors.

CONCLUSION

The debates on, and interventions for, future readiness and employability require the participation of many stakeholders at different levels. The example of the WEF is cited as a global platform. However, these debates, interventions, and platforms need to critically examine the tacit assumptions on, and ways of, framing employability, voice, and agency as well as the framing of technology, its agency, and the impact thereof. The HR practitioner needs to navigate the complexities of the future world of work, in particular the reskilling, capabilities, and literacies of the workforce, including the development thereof.

EARN 1 CPD POINT

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July	CREATING A SPEAK UP CULTURE AT WORK
August	JOB PROFILES
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May	WORKFORCE TRANSITION ISSUES FOR THE DIGITAL, GREEN AND CRISIS-LED TRANSFORMATIONS
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