

6 trends shaping the future of work

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Even before 2020, it was clear that rapid advances in digital technology and an evolving social landscape would dramatically change the nature of work by 2030. But the impact of the global pandemic, a growing sense of climate crisis and black swans like the war in Ukraine have helped to speed up the pace of change.



Image: Supplied

In South Africa, companies face the challenge of reinventing the workplace to meet the demands of a young, agile workforce and to remain globally competitive. Given the challenges of high unemployment and slow growth, they need to carefully balance automation with social responsibility and inclusion.

Here are some trends shaping the future of work:

1. Generation Z resets expectations

In a young country like South Africa, we can expect Generation Z (born 1997 – 2012) to rapidly fill out the ranks in the workplace. As they do so, they will reshape the working environment. Many of them will join work after completing school or university under lockdown and they are all digital natives who grew up with tech.

Members of this generation are often highly conscientised about social and environmental justice. These experiences mean they have a higher focus on wellness, purpose and balanced lives. Employers that want to recruit top talent from this demographic will be challenged to create workplaces.

2. Humans and machines: Better together

As the hype about and rapid adoption of the ChatGPT conversational artificial intelligence (AI) shows, AI has moved from science-fiction to real-world application at a rapid pace. AI and machine learning are already pervasive in many

tools we use every day, like Siri or the Google Assistant.

Many employees and regulators are understandably anxious about AI and robots replacing human jobs. Employers will thus need to look at how they can reskill people to work efficiently in a more automated workplace. But the good news is that AI and robots will actually help people to get more done and free time for more creative, strategic work.

McKinsey estimates that more than 50% of user touches will be augmented by AI-driven speech, written word, or computer-vision algorithms by 2024. The technology will become an almost invisible presence that takes care of boring and routine tasks, doing it quicker and more accurately than people.



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3. Millennials take the wheel

As boomers retire, millennials (born 1981 – 1996) are rapidly moving up the ranks in the workplace. As middle managers and senior leaders, millennials bring a different set of values to the workplace. They've had exposure to technology from a young age and are more diverse than Generation X and boomer leadership cohorts.

Millennials also share many of Generation Z's values around social justice, diversity and inclusion, and the search for meaningful work. They can be expected to lead workplaces towards more collaborative, tech-driven and purpose-driven business models. Older hierarchies can be expected to crumble as organisation structures continue to flatten.

4. The commute-worthy workplace

While some South African employers are calling their teams back to the office, many will struggle to put a complete end to remote, hybrid and flexible work.

Top talent with rare skills will gravitate towards employers that can meet their expectations in terms of flexibility. Forward-thinking companies will look at how they can reinvent their office spaces as places where people come to collaborate and bond. This will include focusing on ambience and ergonomics to create an office people actually want to visit.



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5. Data-driven employee experiences

With more decentralised organisational structures and more flexibility for the workplace, digital technology has become even more central to the employee experience. Leading companies are becoming more data-driven in how they make decisions about the workplace, using people analytics and AI to drive better outcomes.

This ranges from using data to deliver personalised messaging, career development and training offerings to employees, to using data about employee absenteeism attrition and retention to understand workplace engagement and satisfaction as well as employee wellness.

6. Collaborating in virtual spaces

Collaboration tools from messaging platforms to videoconferencing have come a long way in the past few years. But collaborating online still feels flat and static compared to meeting in the real world. We can expect advances in the metaverse to help change that over the next five to 10 years.

The metaverse is an immersive, three-dimensional virtual world built on technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and the blockchain. As it matures, it will offer realistic training experiences and simulations and remote meetings with a more true-to-life sense of shared presence in the years to come.

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