

OPINION

Empowering youth with skills for the future of work

By Dr Sean Kruger, senior lecturer at the Centre for the Future of Work in the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

Unemployment, labour vulnerability and deteriorating working conditions present significant challenges across not only South Africa, but the entire African continent. These obstacles not only hinder economic growth but also affect the well-being of individuals in the workforce and those seeking employment, particularly young South Africans who are confronted with the harsh reality of staggering youth unemployment rates of late.

A myriad of factors is at play here: economic turbulence, cascading effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, limited employment opportunities and a lack of relevant skills to equip young people for the future world of work.

Amid these complexities, is the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), which has been associated with disruptive forces that are automating business operations and eliminating certain job roles. Consequently, it has been cited as one of the contributing factors to the youth unemployment crisis. Despite the existence of these challenges, the 4IR offers an opportunity to tackle the unemployment crisis due to its power and potential to steer transformative change. By embracing the 4IR and fostering a culture of innovation, we can empower our youth to create a bright future.

Many young unemployed South Africans, brimming with immense potential, find themselves in jeopardy of a bleak future due to a lacking skillset that is needed to unlock their potential for the future job opportunities. In a world where innovation is driving change, how can these young people be empowered to seize the opportunities presented by the future of work?

As a starting point, we need to ingrain a culture of innovation, and equip them with the requisite skills and mindset to thrive in the dynamic, evolving world of work. Several experts have argued that by embracing the 4IR and its abundant technologies, we can ensure that our youth have a brighter future.

A key avenue to embracing the 4IR is to nurture skills that will empower them to navigate its emerging opportunities and challenges. By equipping young minds with the right skill set, we can ensure their readiness to contribute to the evolving workforce and carve a prosperous future for them. As technology continues to shape the future of work, digital literacy and technological savviness are fundamental.

Consequently, today's youth must develop a solid understanding of digital tools, platforms and emerging technologies. This includes proficiency in data analysis, coding, artificial intelligence and automation. By harnessing these digital skills, young individuals can seize the opportunities presented by the 4IR. Moreover, they need to know how to innovate, as it is the driving force behind progress and success in the future of work. The ability to think creatively, generate original ideas and apply them in practical settings will be highly valued.

This is not to say that only technical skills are critical. Nurturing a mindset of curiosity and encouraging young individuals to explore new possibilities will aid in unlocking their creative potential, which will enable them to contribute to innovative solutions and drive positive change. At the basis of this will be their ability to communicate not only in the digital spheres such as the metaverse, but the physical one as well. Relationship building has and will remain critical for the future.

In order for South Africa's youth to seize opportunities in the future of work, collective action from multiple stakeholders is needed to cultivate essential proficiencies and skills that will enable youth to flourish in a rapidly changing business landscape. Educational institutions have to play a pivotal role in equipping young people with these skills to curb unemployment and promote the Sustainable Development Goals. For South Africa's economy, exploring mechanisms that facilitate co-learning and innovation development and technology transfer are key.

By empowering our youth with the necessary skills and fostering a culture of innovation, we can curb youth unemployment and foster a brighter future. It is crucial that we prioritise these areas of focus to foster economic growth, social well-being and to create a more inclusive society that embraces the potential of the 4IR. Together, we can harness the power of innovation and ensure that the future of work is brimming with young potential and talent.

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