

The future of work isn't only about tech

 By [Robin Fisher](#)

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When you think about reskilling the workforce, what comes to mind? Learning to code? Analysing data? Operating technology? Yes, these hard skills are undoubtedly going to be important, but an area I don't see people talking about is the importance of soft skills.



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Things like leadership, communication, and creativity. It doesn't matter how much automation your business deploys, these skills are always going to be key.

In fact, soft skills are growing in importance. According to a [LinkedIn survey](#) published earlier this year, the critical skills that workers need to take on in 2020 include leadership and management; creative problem-solving and design thinking; and communication.

But why are these skills growing in importance? And what effect will Covid-19 have on the workforce of tomorrow? Let's take a closer look.

The history of automation

To understand the surge towards soft skills, it's useful to understand the effect automation has had on the workforce over the years. There is, understandably, nervousness about machines taking jobs. And this anxiety can be traced back as far as the 1920s. Tractors, ATMs, spreadsheets – all of these technologies were supposed to shrink employment in their respective industries. But of course, this didn't happen. Jobs didn't decrease – they merely changed.

Tractors didn't lead to the mass layoff of farm hands. ATMs didn't devastate banking jobs. And spreadsheets certainly didn't replace accountants. Instead, these technologies took care of the parts of jobs no one enjoyed: the arduous, the mundane, the manual; leaving business to refocus their employees' efforts on more stimulating and value add challenges.

Today, the same is happening – only on a much larger scale. Across the globe, automation is sweeping up manual roles, freeing up people's time to concentrate on jobs that require human intelligence. And the word 'human' really is key here. Because it's almost a synonym for the soft skills I listed above. Creativity, insight, leadership, emotional intelligence – these can't be replicated by technology. And in an automated future, they'll be vital for organisations' to hone their competitive edge.

Adaptability is another soft skill that's growing in importance. Gone are the days of two- to five-year system life cycles. Against an agile backdrop, businesses can deploy new systems every month. Being able to adapt to change – and to quickly learn multiple hard skills – will be a key trait going forward.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

Another factor to bear in mind is Covid-19. Workplace flexibility has been on global businesses' radars for some time. But the pandemic has dramatically raised it in priority. Although organisations will slowly carry on opening their office doors in the coming months, remote working is set to be a staple of office culture going forward.

This brings a new challenge for employees: not only must they hone their soft skills, but they must also do it remotely. You can imagine the implications. Not only must teams collaborate, but they must do so with colleagues littered across different locations. Colleagues might be at home, at a coffee shop, or even at an airport. Considering the scale of modern projects, they may even be located in an international office – introducing the complexities of working with different cultures and time zones.

There are many small-but-important challenges to overcome. How can line managers nurture talent remotely? How can the creativity and spontaneity of a workshop be replicated via conference call? How can businesses keep their employees and partners motivated, enthusiastic, and plugged into office culture when many are working from home?

And then, linking back to adaptability, how can businesses reskill, retool, and redeploy employees working in a hybrid workforce? Covid-19 has taken a business landscape that was already quickly evolving, and turned it up to top gear. While the immediate problem facing employers is how to pivot to a flexible culture, soft skills will stay high on the boardroom agenda.

Today, transformation isn't just a digital arms race – it's a human race too, particularly in emerging markets such as South Africa. Inevitably, the real winners will be those that invest in their people just as much as their technology.

ABOUT ROBIN FISHER

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