4IR: How to properly reskill your workforce post-Covid-19

By Lerato Matabola   5 Nov 2020

Reskilling the workforce has been unsurprisingly identified as a strategic priority to achieve long term growth and sustainability in the aftermath of the pandemic. Organisations in recent years have also been keenly aware that they need to embrace the many new opportunities presented by 4IR and rapid digitisation.

Source: Supplied | Lerato Matabola, director at Basalt Team Finder

Notably, McKinsey has forecast that by 2030 over 30% of the working population will need to change occupations or upgrade their skills. But how do businesses get started on this reskilling initiative when the pressure is on? Arguably, the first step is to identify the key trends and shifts in the market.

Virtual working – a permanent shift

Remote working was becoming more popular before the pandemic, but the crisis has now shown that virtual working is here to stay and has more benefits for a business than previously recognised. Reskilling can therefore assist in aligning closely with the general move towards a virtual environment.

Moreover, post-Covid-19, organisations need to adapt their training to reality: standard, off-the-shelf training material often lacks the nuances and context relevant to an individual or an organisation. In addition, the move to virtual learning and working means that people need to make allowances for informal training. Organisations should begin to look at learning options that are not location dependent, for example.

Importantly, in the new virtual world, there needs to be a conscious move from the traditional physical approach to a value-based model of learning. The opportunity for re-skilling clearly extends beyond the technical, but the pressure is heightened for tech companies whose processes outdate more quickly than others.

With regards to the tech sector more specifically, new roles are emerging every day. This means that more traditional learning frameworks need to be adapted to modern learning systems.

For example, organisations and individuals alike need to embrace continuous on-the-job learning, both formal and informal, supported by e-learning, game-based learning, job shadowing, boot camps and micro-learning.

Also, not only has reskilling become necessary in terms of business objectives, employees are now looking to their companies to build their skills and their qualifications along the way, so there is now a social implication.

The McKinsey report on the future of work suggests a three-phase approach to re-skilling:

1. Identify the skills gaps between the current status, and what will be needed in the new digital future.
2. Look at how work will need to change for the digital future.
3. Plan how to implement training at scale, focusing not just on the training itself but on how internal policies and practices will have to be changed.

Without doubt, reskilling and development initiatives can stimulate innovation within a company and bolster employee engagement in the post-Covid-19 energy slump.

Through these programmes, employees have shown to develop their creativity, enhance agility, improve flexibility and their reactions to change. Furthermore, organisations which train their employees notice a marked decrease in staff turnover as the apathetic approach of some organisations has left a bad taste in the mouths of their workforce.

In addition, executives need to repeatedly and clearly state that it's okay to take time to learn new skills and that employees have explicit permission and encouragement to do so. Further, leaders should ensure that managers connect employees with opportunities to learn and set aside designated 'development days' or scheduled times for training modules.

Key areas for reskilling consideration in the tech industry

In the new virtually driven business environment, critical soft skills need to be developed, including problem-solving and emotional intelligence:

- **Problem-solving** - Critical thinking and problem-solving are among the top soft skills that can give the workforce an advantage. Organisations which display out of the box critical thinking and find solutions to business problems are the ones which have a competitive edge.

  In terms of reskilling to improve problem-solving abilities, organisations can look at creative thinking exercises, research courses, risk management courses and teamwork dynamic coaching.

- **Emotional intelligence** - Successful teams have members who consistently display and possess emotional intelligence, or the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. This soft skill allows the workforce to relate to others, recognise their own strengths and weaknesses.

  Emotional intelligence can be upskilled through team assessment, improved collaboration exercises and stress management activities/courses.
  Tech skills for concentrated reskilling include security and data protection, digital transformation, cloud computing, data science and robotic process automation.

- **Security and data protection** - As organisations have been increasingly reliant on remote access technology since the lockdown and effects of the pandemic have taken hold, security and data protection are essential.

In addition, as online business and e-commerce accelerate, cybercrime is on the rise. Unfortunately, traditional schooling is way too rigid to effectively solve this problem. Constant changes in technology come with constant cyber threats that need agile teams.

Businesses need to invest more in security-focused training and constant trend researching to stay one step ahead. Additionally, as the status quo is disrupted and more employees are be required to work with technologies they are not familiar with, security risks become more problematic.

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