

The rise of the digital workforce

Across the globe, Smart Cities are sprouting at exponential rates. With this comes increased automation which will inevitably put stress on a country's labour force.

The reality is that technology can, and will, eliminate jobs. Even though machines cannot think, they now have the growing ability to do things that only humans were able to do – eventually, humans will only be needed in the last mile to make judgements. This will enable organisations to do more with fewer employees – and in some situations, fully replace jobs with automation.

Contrary to popular sentiment, lower-skilled workers are not the only ones at risk. As technology advances, we will see an expansion in the range of tasks that can be broken down into smaller, well-defined tasks through automation.

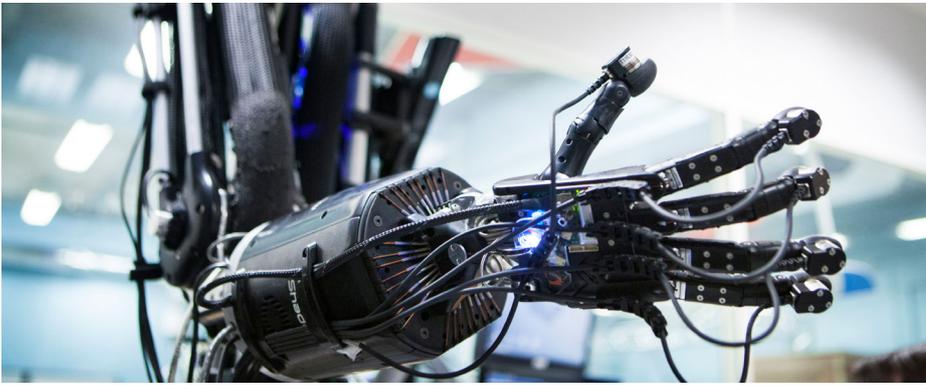
For instance, a 2015 study conducted by Deloitte Southeast Asia on Singapore's F&B sector showed that a number of fairly high-skilled jobs such as executive and assistant roles within the finance and operations functions also face high probabilities of automation.

There is a silver lining. Technology will also create new jobs, and give rise to the possibility of redesigning work, and creating growth opportunities and greater value for businesses.

Certain automation processes can help free up employees to upskill and pursue higher value work. These include RPA (Robotic Process Automation), a proven and effective tool that can take over previously manual administrative tasks such as transferring an email to an application system, and robots that can be used to take over the more physically demanding tasks.

However, some job displacement will still be inevitable as new technologies will likely continue to impact work, workers and organisations in profound ways. It is therefore essential for countries to adopt a pre-emptive approach towards improving the long-term employability of workers.

For individual workers, rather than look for a new job only after being made redundant, they should seek to understand their job profiles and job automation probabilities, benchmark themselves against other occupations, and move towards more secure and rewarding jobs. With rising life expectancies, particularly in smaller countries with lower population numbers, there is also a need to plan for longer working lives that meet the needs for self-fulfilment and social inclusion.



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More importantly, governments and businesses alike should actively work to identify vulnerable individuals based on their job automation probabilities, and equip them with the necessary tools and skills to succeed in new roles.

Perhaps then, the right question for us to ask is not whether workers affected by technology and automation will still have jobs, but whether they will have the appropriate set of skills to perform the better, higher value-added jobs in tandem with the changes in adjacent job disciplines. In order to gain these skills, employees must think beyond formal education, and embrace lifelong learning to remain relevant and employable. There are several measures governments can consider to enhance the employability of their workforce. Schemes can be put in place to help employers adopt progressive workplace age management practices, facilitate job redesign and improve workplace practices. The government can play the role of a catalyst and partner with select employers to push these schemes.

The efficacy of such schemes can be further enhanced with deeper knowledge of the types of jobs that will face the highest risk of replacement. Initiatives can then be more targeted. The knowledge can also help government agencies plan tertiary education curriculums to prepare the future workforce for tomorrow's challenges.

Knowing which segments of the workforce to target also means that initiatives can be customised for fit. Older workers, for instance, have different learning needs and may require different delivery methods. As we move into an era where individuals have longer working lives, formal qualifications to recognise the skills of adult workers that have been acquired through work and experience will be necessary.

Efforts should also be made to encourage businesses to recruit and retain back-to-work locals and mature workers, promote longer working lives and invest in training of workers.

Richer life experiences aside, there may be a good business case for retaining and training seasoned employees: with lower turnover costs and fewer absences from work, they could prove to be more cost-effective than the younger counterparts in the long haul.

Ultimately, beyond all the hardware, there must be a focus on the "heartware" – the culture, mindsets and attitudes of the government, businesses and society should embrace lifelong learning and lifelong employability. A country should aim towards an ageless workforce in order to remain relevant in the changing competitive landscape. Indeed, with longer working lives, governments and organisations will need to look towards the future to prepare for the next generation because where, when and how people obtain an education, enter the workforce and upgrade their skills will evolve constantly. This transition will be complex, maybe even difficult, but it is an essential part of any governments' agenda to thrive in the increasingly digital world.

For further discussion, please contact:



Lee Chew Chiat
Consulting Leader, Deloitte Brunei
chewlee@deloitte.com

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