

Harnessing the skills of the future

 By Sharon Piehl

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Whitney Houston perhaps summed it up best when she crooned about the children being our future.

It's not just a catchy lyric either, especially in Africa: with an estimated 50 percent of people on the continent under the age of 25, it is home to the youngest population in the world and what will also be the world's largest workforce by 2040, 40 percent of which will be young people, according to [Absa](#).



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What this indicates is that it's no exaggeration that the youth are already playing an important role in the growth and development of their respective countries and the continent as a whole – and that they will continue to play a critical role moving forward. With this realisation comes the inevitable question of whether these young people are adequately prepared for the labour market they are entering and if they will possess the right skills to become part of the workforce of the future.

In questioning the readiness of our youth for the world of work – in the communications industry and more broadly – it is necessary to identify just what that world looks like. Today's workplace is dominated by millennials, who are probably the most studied and written about generation as they continue to challenge traditional thinking and change the face of the working world as we know it.

But even these pioneering young game changers can find themselves on the wrong end of the skills spectrum if they fail to

keep up with change driven by rapid advancements in technology and innovation.

In this way, I have identified five major themes or trends that will have a noticeable impact on the workplaces of the future and the skillsets of the people in them:

1. A need to look at how young people learn to bridge the skills gap

What has become increasingly acknowledged over the past few years is that young people who enter the workplace are little prepared for the realities of work. In essence, they have the theoretical knowledge but not the practical skills to match – illustrating a divergence between formal education and job-skill-specific education. It is therefore going to be critical going forward to focus on bridging theory and practical to help our young people better adapt to the working world; in its efforts to play its part in this regard, we have an internship programme in place that works to give young people in their final year of study vital real-world job experience. Organisations in both the public and private sectors have the responsibility to focus on providing that experience in order to better equip our young people for the world of work.

2. Embracing forward-thinking: the role of tech and innovations such as data analytics and AI

There can be no doubt that technology has revolutionised workplaces across industries and will carry on doing so as the rate of innovation speeds up – futurist Ray Kurzweil calls it the Law of Accelerating Returns and argues that technological change is exponential, with an expected 20,000 years of progress to take place in the 21st century if we continue at today's rate of innovation. Needless to say, that kind of change is sure to lead to a facelift of sorts to the way business is done. Advances in areas such as data analytics and AI will play a vital role in how companies operate and provide goods and services: "Within a few decades, machine intelligence will surpass human intelligence," says Kurzweil, so being an early adopter of these innovations and learning how to harness their value will be the differentiator that marks the master of the modern workplace.

3. The dawn of the new communications consultant

So we've all been warned that technology will throw us into the eye of a storm of unprecedented change, but what does it actually mean for our jobs? In communications, it presents an interesting conundrum. I have often said that PR is dead – but what is exciting is how the communications sector is evolving and how the industry is embracing that change by bringing together art and science to better equip the 'consultant of the future' with necessary skills across both disciplines.

4. Assessing where South Africa is going and what skills the country will need

Training in industry-specific skills as well as those that take into account the demands of the technology of the Fourth Industrial Revolution will not be enough to ensure that they are ready for the workplace of the future, though. Young people also need to be equipped with skills that will contribute to national development. South Africa has a number of socio-economic challenges that need to be addressed and, as such, there are critical skills required to begin to overcome these challenges. The youth are extremely cognizant of the challenges the country faces and committed to helping drive that change, and are looking to work at and for companies that share these values. More than ever, companies need to illustrate that they are working with purpose. For instance, we support a number of initiatives to create change in the areas that need it most, including education.

5. Fostering an entrepreneurial spirit to meet business objectives

It's not possible to achieve any form of business success without an entrepreneurial spirit – and the private sector has an important role to play in nurturing and incubating an entrepreneurial mind set in young talent in order to bring new thinking to the table and to facilitate the achievement of business objectives. As employers, it is important to create a space where new ideas and ways of thinking are welcomed and, in fact, encouraged to align with business imperatives.

While it is daunting that we are to set to see 20,000 years' worth of progress in only 100 years, it is equally exciting that we

are on the continent where much of that change will be taking place because of our young population – so to ensure that we are ready, companies and industries across the board are going to have to play their part in creating the workforce of the future.

ABOUT SHARON PIEHL

With over 20 years' experience in the communications industry, Sharon Piehl was appointed as managing director of FleishmanHillard Johannesburg in May 2016. Prior to her appointment, Sharon spent several years as the lead of many multi-national client accounts at FleishmanHillard. In addition, Sharon heads up the consumer practice sector for FleishmanHillard EMEA and runs the new business track for the Johannesburg office...

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