



TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Technology & AI – in the workplace and beyond

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The rapid integration and adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) across various industries and sectors is transforming the way businesses operate, driving efficiency, innovation and cost savings and with its prolific progress, AI is reshaping the workplace at an unprecedented pace, both from streamlining administrative tasks to optimising complex processes. However, as organisations increasingly prioritise AI investments over expanding their human workforce, concerns are mounting about the potential for workforce reductions. This shift raises critical questions about the balance between technological progress and maintaining employment opportunities, as businesses navigate the challenges and ethical considerations of a future where machines may replace a significant portion of human labour.

As examples of the rapidly changing face of the workplace, a survey by KPMG revealed that 68% of business leaders are under investor pressure to demonstrate returns on AI investments and this raises concerns about potential unemployment impacts and workforce reductions, particularly among white-collar workers. In the UK one survey suggests that 51% of businesses plan to prioritise AI investment over hiring new staff, influenced by rising employment costs and economic pressures where cost-cutting measures may be achieved using technology.

AI is not doom and gloom however as there is a growing demand for AI-related skills in the job market. At the same time, there is an acknowledged drive to "do more with existing infrastructure" while maintaining existing staffing levels. Some companies are using AI technologies to grow their business reach by, for example, integrating AP solutions into their services and product offerings. Another example is how generative AI is transforming the consulting industry by reducing employee workloads and increasing efficiency, where many have developed AI tools to automate tasks such as email drafting and data formatting. Target CEO Brian Cornell stated that AI would create more jobs rather than replace them, urging people to embrace technological advancements. In the US, Target plans to open 300 new stores over the next decade, focusing on enhancing customer experience with services like same-day delivery, supported by AI-driven efficiencies.

Although there may be shifts in the labour landscape, the introduction of AI into the workplace should not necessarily be seen as the death knell of employment, and rather as a re-alignment of employee functions and priorities, to enhance and capitalise on the productivity of functions that only employees can perform. The labour legislative environment in South Africa, built around pivotal statutes such as the Labour Relations Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, and the Employment Equity Act, have more than proven themselves to be adaptive and flexible enough to accommodate changing workplace requirements.

Provided that employers consider the various opportunities provided by AI to innovate, enhance service delivery and focus employees on higher level tasks not suited for AI while freeing them from the tedium of the more administrative parts of their workload, the future workplace could be a transformative and positive space. This will continue to be a balancing act, especially as technologies advance at breakneck speed. We have only just gotten our heads around AI's broader impact and utility and we already have to contend with preparing for future technologies such as quantum computing and in particular, quantum computing with AI (Quantum AI) which when readily available will have the capability to use artificial intelligence for unprecedented complex computation. Again, this technology could have many benefits for transforming workplaces and creating dynamic workplace efficiencies and improving productivity as well as creating many new job roles in this space. Businesses will continue to have to balance use of such technologies for its business with the potential negative impacts and risks that come with using such technology, on data privacy, data management and cybersecurity as well as ensuring that the business remains compliant with all laws that apply to it, all of which for the time being, at least, means that human workers will not be replaced by robots in the workplace – as they are vital maintain that this balance remains in place.



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