

Tech advances already impacting skilled white-collar and unskilled workers

September 28 2017, by Imraan Valodia

Tech advances are already impacting skilled white-collar and unskilled workers whereas the digital revolution affected mainly semi-skilled, blue-collar workers.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is here. Across the world, communities are adjusting to new ways of doing business, consuming goods, socialising and conducting research through [technology](#). The sheer speed and scope of continuous technological development probably mean that there is no stopping this new wave of development, but at the same time, it is crucial that we remain vigilant about the possible repercussions that may arise from introducing new technology. For our society, two issues – job security and [inequality](#) – are especially important.

As is the case with all new innovations, there are opportunities for interesting new developments that benefit humanity (technology could greatly assist in areas of health, conflict, and the environment for example) but also threats of bringing about significant negative consequences such as under-employment, large job losses, smaller proportions of the workforce having access to jobs, increased inequality and a rise in poverty.

The International Labour Organization has taken a particular interest in the labour market consequences of this revolution and has established a multi-year consultative project to focus on the Future of Work. This issue topped the agenda at a panel discussion in Geneva this year, where I raised the following points:

- It is important to acknowledge that the experiences of technology are very different for developing and developed nations. Rich countries are having discussions around work-life balance and using technology to ensure that workers have more leisure time because of the flexible work arrangements that technology allows. This is unlikely to be the case for most workers in South Africa and most other developing countries. Given our extremely high levels of unemployment and the extent of low-paid jobs (almost half of workers in South Africa earn less than R3 500), it is very unlikely, except for a very small number of workers with high earnings, that the trade-off is between work and leisure. Instead, our society needs to provide much more, better-paid jobs.
- Developments in society are controlled by us, through our policy and governance systems and by how we choose to use them. We cannot avoid technological advancements but we can decide how to maximise the benefits and minimise the drawbacks.
- We have to acknowledge that technology will be disruptive. New advances are likely to result in extra costs for businesses as they adjust. There is also a chance that some of the advancements (particularly in the artificial intelligence arena) are going to replace human endeavours. Many of our large firms in the financial, mining and other sectors are likely to change the composition of their workforces over the coming decades. The focus must be on looking at innovative ways to ensure technology serves to support, rather than replace, workers.
- We should carefully analyse what we mean by 'work'. We tend to focus on paid work and completely ignore [unpaid work](#), and the interactions between paid and unpaid work. The reality is that there is a gendered distribution of unpaid work, with a large number of women having to deal with the burdens of low-paid
- work and an unequal burden of unpaid care work.
- In most developing countries, most jobs, especially for women,

have over the last three decades been created in the informal economy. The conversation around technological advances must also look at work in the informal economy.

- Technological change has different impacts on different groups. We need to understand how these new technological changes will impact our already high levels of inequality and understand what policies and mechanisms can ameliorate the costs on the most vulnerable sections of our population (who are
- unable to absorb these 'shocks'), and how technology can lead to greater levels of equality.

This means that it is incumbent on us as academics, policymakers, and social partners to start urgently having conversations that talk to measures to protect and promote the Decent Work agenda. At the very least there should be measures to ensure that workers who are most vulnerable are protected by some basic standards. One of these is a national minimum wage that would guarantee an income which, although still below the living wage, is a significant increase for 47 percent of workers in the country in 2017. But there are other social measures such as a Basic Income Grant, which should be considered as protection mechanisms for the most vulnerable in society.

Wits has recently launched an interdisciplinary five-year project that focuses on inequality in South Africa. It seeks to:

- identify the key areas where inequality shapes the life chances of individuals across their lives, such as education, health, spatial geography, food security, and the economy,
- understand how power and inequality are produced and reproduced within these areas, as well as how power and inequality intersect across these areas,
- imagine an alternative configuration of power that generates affirmative state action, provides greater equality of access to

relevant resources, and fundamentally alters the structure of power in society, and

- develop an agenda for inclusive growth of productive forces.

A key component of this project will be to analyse technological developments in the country and their impact on the working class and the poor. Given South Africa's complex current labour market challenges, we as a society need to carefully consider this debate, engage with the research in the area, and develop plans for the future.

Technological change is not a process that is independent of social norms and regulations. Instead, these social norms and regulations fundamentally shape both the process of technological change and its outcomes.

The worst response would be to assume a one-size-fits-all approach that is based on how wealthy countries adjust to this new world [work](#) order. South Africa has a combination of serious structural and economic problems; massive inequality, high levels of poverty, and unemployment make us far more vulnerable to these inevitable changes. It also means that we need to start having these important conversations in order to ensure that we are the drivers, and not the responders, of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Provided by Wits University

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