

The time is now for South Africans to upskill for the digital economy

The World Economic Forum (WEF) Roundtable, which was hosted by President Cyril Ramaphosa, saw topic comprising skills development and job creation discussed; in relation to South Africa showing potential to lead Africa in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0). However, private business, government and educational institutions will need to work together to upskill in gearing toward this digital economy.



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Industries will need to upskill its workforce and reorganise its businesses, putting integrated IT systems in place to handle the increased speed of change, higher flow of data and new networking and communication needs. Attracting the right digital talent and (re)training and developing the existing workforce to understand and operate new and smart technologies will be equally important.

"South Africa must start to look at how best to skill the nation to adapt to a digital economy. Many jobs can be created with the increase in automation and creating the right skills for Industry 4.0 is critical. We need to deliver technology-focused education to ensure that we are not just consumers of Industry 4.0 technologies but also that we participate in the value chain," says Caspar Herzberg, Schneider Electric Middle East and Africa (MEA) President and WEF Roundtable participant.

According to the WEF, Industry 4.0 could prove disruptive to many occupations, but it also has the potential to create a wide range of new jobs in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), data analysis, computer science and engineering. There will also be strong demand for professionals who can blend digital and STEM skills with traditional subject expertise, such as digital-mechanical engineers and business operations data analysts.

"If businesses are going to respond to these radical new approaches of business succinctly, we must pay attention to how and when this learning will take place and when it comes to developing these critical skills, which will determine the future world of work," says Zanelle Dalglish, Schneider Electric Anglophone Africa head of sustainable development.

"This French South African Schneider Electric Education Centre (F'SASEC) network of training centres - established by Schneider Electric in conjunction with the Schneider Electric Foundation, and the French Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Research - forms part of our sustainability strategy to create access to education, with a focus on vocational training and preparing artisans for the working world. The students that graduate from the training centres in the F'SASEC network are highly skilled, with a focus on advanced practical skills, making them very desirable to potential employers. This is the biggest reward for us," adds Dalglish.

Electric education technology

Students studying at F'SASEC at both the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) and Vaal University of Technology (VUT) are already benefitting from a competitive edge in the workplace, thanks to the introduction of the newest Programmable Logic Control (PLC) in the respective automation labs.

The automation lab at F'SASEC on the VUT campus is equipped with the latest automation tools, including variable speed drives, instrumentation and robotics, and the aim is to empower students with interface abilities, programming and basic electronics.

"Not only do these labs highlight the latest Schneider Electric technology, but they also afford students the opportunity to benefit from new and advanced teaching methods on PLC, while using the latest PLC equipment.

"We cannot expect engineering students to learn Industry 4.0 skills, the industrial Internet of things (IoT), cloud computing and cognitive computing, when the relevant technology required for such tertiary education is unavailable. Through strategic collaboration with government and academia, we are able to address issues such as a lack of equipment or access to practical experience collectively," concludes Dalglish.

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