

How 4IR could boost public service delivery and rein in costs

Robotics, artificial intelligence and other technologies of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) could provide a welcome boost to government service delivery and help reduce the ever-escalating costs of running the public service.



Lusanda Raphulu, partner at African law firm Bowmans.

The difficulty of course, would be dealing effectively and sensitively with the fears of trade unions and public servants that job losses could result, suggests Lusanda Raphulu, partner at African law firm Bowmans.

The 4IR has been making its presence felt in the private sector for quite some time, from retailing, manufacturing and mining to the practice of law. Now it is also attracting increasing attention in the public service.

Just recently, on 9 April 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the membership of the new 30-person Presidential Commission on the 4IR, which he himself will chair. The role of the commission is to 'assist government in taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the digital industrial revolution', according to a brief statement from the Presidency.



Taxpayers will be watching the work of the commission with interest - the public sector wage bill, accounting for around 35% of public spending, is one of the highest in the world, proportionately.

Further, given the recent spate of service delivery protests, and the fact that public service delivery in South Africa is widely regarded as below par, the advances brought by the 4IR could be just what South Africa needs.

The new digital technologies associated with the 4IR have enormous efficiency-boosting and cost-cutting potential for the public service.

Is there a place for gig workers in public service?

The gig economy, where the labour market is characterised by freelance, flexible, on-demand work, is seldom equated with the public service, where fixed monthly salaries and benefits seem cast in stone. In fact, gig work is already happening in the South African public sector. Think of the upcoming elections and other national initiatives such as the Census, where government hires workers for specific jobs of limited duration at a set rate – that's 'gig work' by any other name.

As government seeks to bring more young people into public service (while offering older public servants the opportunity to take early retirement), it is not unlikely that gig work will become more attractive to a new generation of public servants – or perhaps a way to offer some employment, even if temporary, to the growing ranks of unemployed youth.

If public sector organisations are to succeed in attracting skilled young talent, it is indeed time for government to think about how to adapt its employment practices to the 4IR era.

However, just as private sector employers are grappling with the legal status of gig workers, government also has to. Are gig workers employees or independent contractors? Or neither? Is it time for new definitions altogether?

While pondering these and other questions around the bigger picture of the changing world of work, there are many other ways that the 4IR could be harnessed in the public sector.

Taking human bias out of decisions

One innovation that could be expected to meet little resistance, given government's commitment to clean administration, would be the use of algorithms for supply chain decisions, especially in the awarding of tenders. Algorithms, which are a set of rules followed by a computer to arrive at an outcome, could introduce a new level of objectivity and consistency to decisions on tenders, removing human bias and reducing the potential for unethical decision-making.

Analysis based on algorithms – one of the building blocks of artificial intelligence (AI) – could also be helpful in improving the efficiency and objectivity of human resources processes such as recruitment – which is in fact already being revisited. A new digital job application process for public service jobs is being phased in

spearheaded by the Minister of Public Service and Administration. And on 1 April 2018, government's new 'no experience needed' rule for entry-level jobs in the public service came into effect.

Considering our sky-high youth unemployment rate, this new rule will inevitably result in an inundation of job applications from desperate young people. Sifting through them would be a task that AI could make immeasurably easier, quicker and more cost-effective. At the same time, it will be critical to ensure that the algorithms used are properly configured to guard against conscious and unconscious human bias, and to ensure compliance with the anti-unfair discrimination requirements of the Employment Equity Act.

Efficiency vs. employment

Automation and AI, which can perform routine, repetitive, dangerous or just plain dull tasks far faster and more efficiently than humans can, could also be put to good use in a host of other areas of public service, particularly those involving masses of paperwork and long queues of citizens waiting for service. That would almost certainly result in at least some of the public servants doing these jobs today becoming superfluous.

This is where the discussion becomes sensitive, involving two seemingly conflicting objectives: better service delivery and cost-cutting on the one hand, and on the other, the need to avoid further exacerbating high unemployment and antagonising organised labour.

However, government does not appear to believe this is an either-or situation. The Minister of Public Service and Administration recently said that one of government's strategies to reduce costs would be to replace retiring public servants with young recruits who would come in at lower levels, leading to a lower wage bill. This, coupled with cost-savings from digital technologies and other avenues, should obviate the need for retrenchments, the thinking seems to be.

Government and the Presidential Commission on the 4IR are onto something good with exploiting how the 4IR can be of benefit to South Africa. The challenge is in balancing the pros with the (real or feared) cons. 4IR technology could significantly reshape the South African public service. Questions about how best to approach reskilling, retraining, redeployment, restructuring and yes, possible retrenchments, are crucial in this exciting and encouraging direction that is being taken.

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