

Future of HR | 10 ways we need to prepare ourselves for the future of work

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On 2 and 3 September, Topco Media and Simplify hosted the digital Future of HR Summit. An annual innovation-focused initiative that aimed to help delegates prepare for the hyper-digitised workplace of tomorrow.



The Summit gathered business leaders and HR thought leaders in an environment where they shared their challenges and successes and advance strategic HR within their organisations and across the economy. In response to the global pandemic, the summit took place virtually on the platform Hopin.

The conference comprised of case studies from award-winning organisations, discussions and networking sessions. Sponsoring this event were some of the country's leading experts in their field: Simplify, Alexander Forbes, Sanlam, NHFC, PPS, LexisNexis and Excel Academy. Many of the topics that were discussed were around the new world of work and how organisations are learning to adapt to new ways of doing things: how to foster positive workplace culture in this new world of work, employee wellness during challenging times, ways to motivate employees while working from home, and navigating diversity and including as things are changing. In addition, upskilling through digital training, Artificial Intelligence, and employer/employee relationships were all discussed in-depth.

Speakers at this year's summit included David Whelan: Head of LinkedIn Talent Solutions Africa and UK; Professor Shirley Zinn: author and Non-Executive Director of Sanlam, Spur and MTN, Luc-Olivier Marquet; Executive Vice President of Unilever South Africa, and Rapelang Rabana: Founder and CEO of Rekindle Learning. In addition, Discovery's Guy Chennells discussed the impact of Covid-19 on financial wellbeing and Integral Coach, Janine Ahlers opened up a discussion around the notion that employees are human to

After each talk, delegates were given the opportunity to ask any burning questions during the live Q&A's. There were also various polls running throughout the two-day event which showed some very interesting

results and insights. When asked how they ensure a positive workplace culture and employee wellness, 80% of respondents noted that open communication way key; 94% said that they saw remote working hav a positive effect on productivity and 65% said they have seen an increase in employee moral since adopti remote working.

Synthesised from the exciting insights at the Future of HR Summit, here are 10 ways we need to prepare ourselves for the future of work:

1. The future of work is very much HUMAN

The conference highlighted the very important notion that the future of work is, above all, human. From an HR perspective, key takeaways were that those working in HR need to look after themselves too, while als taking care of the rest of the organisation. Professor Shirley Zinn; author of "Swimming Upstream", and Nc Executive Director of Sanlam, Spur & MTN, perfectly captured this point when she said that "We need to p our own oxygen masks on first" during her session. She discussed how putting the human factor first will b the key differentiator in capitalising on new forms of innovation into the future and firmly believes that the human element should be at the centre of what we do in organisations. Integral coach Janine Ahlers, who spoke on "Your Employees are human too" gave insights on how we enable people to be more coherent and whole, allowing them to be more motivated and productive. This talk taught us that everyone is experiencing their world in a fundamentally unique way right now and that coping mechanisms take work. A Ahlers stated, "You can't think yourself into a new pattern or behaviour - you have to practice.

2. Diversity and inclusion is front and centre on the agenda

There were many discussions around diversity and inclusion in the workplace, especially during the time o Covid-19. The panel discussion on navigating diversity and inclusion in the new world of work taught us the Covid-19 has highlighted the inequalities and socio-economic divide in society. Something discussed that was particularly relevant was how important it is that diversity and inclusion is not side-lined while business enter survival and adaption modes during this time. Diversity and inclusion is not a luxury for when businesses are running smoothly ? it should be a non-negotiable necessity all the time. Donald Khumalo, I Director at the JSE discussed the JSE's new gender-neutral parity leave policy which was implemented in July as an example of what businesses are doing to make sure diversity and inclusion are at the forefront o organisations' minds. We learned that the onus falls on each and every one of us to make sure we are cultivating an inclusive and diverse working environment. Both employers and employees need to stand up and fight for it. Renita Moonsamy, MD at Ntiyiso, noted that "We have to overcome fear in order to have a sense of belonging".

3. DIGITAL DIGITAL DIGITAL - wash rinse and repeat

There was not one presentation/ talk/ Q&A session that didn't discuss the importance of digital transformation. HR is at the forefront of the pandemic and needs to ensure a digital mind-set, digital skills the future as automation and AI will become central to HR roles.

This makes tackling the fear around digitisation through breaking stigmas and providing information and resources for people to learn an absolute priority and will lead to digital transformation being seen as an opportunity and not a threat. Key to this is the urgency around upskilling and digital training so no one is left behind. Technology has enabled the pendulum to swing in completely the opposite direction of the isolatic which was imposed during lockdown. Through digital transformation, people around the globe have been able to interact and communicate in real time - and summits like this, where presenters and delegates are able to engage one-on-one in live Q&A sessions have been made possible in the "new normal".

4. It's all about balance

Work-life balance and mental care were among the very important topics that were discussed. Employers should be taking care of themselves and their employees emotionally and mentally - This needs to be done through organisational restructuring, support systems, and general care and compassion. Kershini Govender from Nedbank reminded us that empowerment is not only about funding; it is also about the softer things - and we need more human-centred leadership - which includes AQ - the adaptability quotient. She quoted Mahatma Gandhi - "Live as if you were to die tomorrow and learn as if you were to live forever".

5. The new normal - the workplace beyond Covid-19

This session was hosted by PPS, moderated by Dr Kevin Lubbe, Director, GroKlub with panellists:

- Masenyane Molefe, Group Executive: HR, PPS
- Avanthi Maharaj, MarketHR Cluster Lead, Google EMEA
- Sharmantha Valjee, CEO, DesignTech Training Academy

Covid-19 was described as a "national trauma" by Masenyane and employers need to be understanding in how it can impact one's productivity. The panellists agreed that there's no playbook on how to adapt to the pandemic and it has been a big learning curve with a lot of trial and error. What continues to be of great importance is open, transparent communication and to continually learn and stay relevant.

6. Financial planning - are you covered?

In this session, brought to us by Sanlam with panellists:

- Viresh Maharaj, Managing Executive, Sanlam Corporate: Distribution
- Anna Siwiak, Head: Product Development, Sanlam Corporate: Umbrella Solutions
- Shaun Biggs, Branch Manager: Sanlam Key Solutions
- Ayanda Ndimande, Development Manager: Retail Credit: Sanlam

and moderated by Dr Jerry Gule, we looked at empowering people and employees to make better decisions around money, and understanding and utilising financial statements. Of crucial importance is education on retirement funds and financial planning which should start at school. Core financial planning needs to become part of the business culture.

HR plays a meaningful role in impacting the financial outcomes of their employees and human capital specialists need to understand their role in employee engagement and how an individual's personal financial situation can impact their ability in the workplace.

7. The importance of leading from the front.

The leadership capital index session was hosted by Alexander Forbes with panellists:

- Marge Mantjie, Human Capital Head, Human Resources, Alexander Forbes
- Xolani Mawande, CEO, SABPP
- Nicola Tager, Head of Careers, Investec
- Jasmin Pillay, HR Director, Microsoft South Africa

How do you ensure impactful leadership? This timely discussion looked at what are the mission critical leadership skills required today and what role HR plays in leadership development. They dived into what the

benefits are of effective leadership as well as the challenges leaders are facing in this current market climate.

8. Success requires a clear strategy from the top.

Marc Privett GM at Simplify emphasised that success requires a clear strategy from the top - which includes the ability to mobilise a team in challenging times as well as the ability to adapt and embrace digital transformation.

Covid has accelerated the digitisation of our workforces, driven by the need to work from home and HR Simplify leverages the power of online platforms to uplift audiences in meaningful ways. The session on Digital HR transformation from a South African perspective was hosted by Simplify, moderated by Dylan Piatti, Managing Director Africa: Advantage Group International, with panelists:

- Prof Shirley Zinn, Author of "Swimming Upstream", and Non-Executive Director of Sanlam, Spur & MTN
- Henneri Crous, Head of Commercial at Simplify
- Shelagh Goodwin, GM: Human Resources at Media24

The panellists looked at both workforce digital transformation and HR process digitisation.

9. Get your Insta on.

Social media is all important. The power of social media was covered in depth by Dave Whelan who noted that social media will help you build stronger relationships with employees and customers, boost your credibility and amplify your visibility - it is the lens people use to gauge your role and the expertise you bring to the companies you represent.

Engagement is key - and 4 out of 5 (80%) employees prefer to work for 'socially active' leaders and its power lies in its ability to connect with employees and customers in a more authentic way. This means talking about things that matter, interact authentically, focus on topics that your audience cares about and make it part of your routine (small amounts on a regular basis).

10. The youth are our tomorrow.

And if the future is now, are we investing in young talent? This important topic was addressed in the session on "Developing, employing and investing in young talent: a case study from South Africa's top employer in the public sector, NHFC, with panellists:

- Dr Nomsa Ntshingila- Executive Manager: HR, NHFC.
- Mr Morongwa Mawela- Payroll Administrator. Former student of the NHFC learnership programme.
- Waseem Carrim - CEO, National Youth Development Agency.

The far-ranging discussion looked at whether indeed South Africa is investing in young talent in a meaningful way and focussed on the reality in South Africa today - are our educated youth being employed and what effects has Covid-19 had on unemployment. The panellists also looked at the importance of preparing young talent for the workplace - through theory as well as practical training.

We are looking forward to the next Summit in 2021!

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▫ **Designing Africa's digital future: Sentech Africa Tech Week 2026 returns to Cape Town** 14 Apr 2026

Apr 2026

▫ **Nedbank returns to lead as Platinum Partner for the 2026 Nedbank Top Empowerment Conference and Awards** 14 Apr 2026

▫ **Innovative Green Township Circular Economy Pilot launched in Itsoseng at Future of Sustainability Conference** 19 Mar 2026

▫ **8 days to South Africa's premier sustainability forum: Engage directly with ministers and industry leaders** 17 Mar 2026

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