

COPING essential to THRIVING in the 4IR

“As AI-powered robotics and automation continue to transform workplaces, there is an increasing fear that jobs will be extinguished – that we just won’t be needed anymore. So how can we continue to thrive, connect and contribute when it feels like our working lives are so much at risk?”

- Dr Timothy Hsi (2021) ⁽¹⁾

Counsellor and Career Development Coach on future-proofing ourselves and our wellbeing during the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Automation is an element of social change that impacts society, vested interests, personal values, beliefs and uninformed opinion ⁽²⁻⁴⁾.

While it has given rise to an unprecedented pace of innovation that is disrupting every mentionable industry, it is also transforming the ‘way’ people work.

One of the challenges that organisations are facing is to safeguard employees, as one of an organisation’s most valuable assets, to cope with the increasing ambiguities arising in the 4IR ^(4,5).

“Industry 4.0 is the biggest structural change of the past 250 years — a transformation of scale, scope and complexity unlike anything humankind has experienced before.”

- Henrik von Scheel (2020),

Management thinker and ‘father of Industry 4.0’

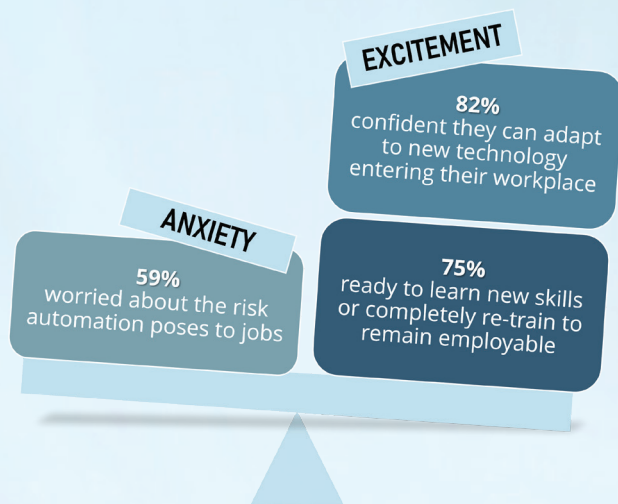


Figure 1. Australians' opinion of 4IR jobs (Source: PWC 2020).

Part of successfully future-proofing ourselves will be preparing for opportunities, not just challenges ⁽¹⁾.

If individuals are unsuccessful in their transitions, not embracing change, and learn new ways of working and perceptions of an insecure future, ongoing changes are associated with anxiety and the employee's lack of trust and employee's withdrawal ^(2,10).

Distress and anxieties in organisations relating to the negative impacts of the 4IR could interfere with the objective of organisations to transform and grow. Becoming redundant is an understandable fear amongst members of the employed and unemployed workforce as new digital technologies are displacing people in the workplace. They also fear that technology may eliminate their current roles or future job opportunities.

By integrating **hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism** – called the **psychological capital approach** ⁽³⁾ – positive, rather than negative emotions, can be created which complements the adoption and transitioning into the 4IR.

“All industrial revolutions are ultimately driven by the individual and collective choices of people.

And it is not just the choices of the researchers, inventors and designers developing the underlying technologies that matter, but even more importantly those of investors, consumers, regulators and citizens who adopt and employ these technologies in daily life.”

- Nicholas Davis (2016) ⁽⁶⁾

Attention must be paid not only to performance, but also to individual's general wellbeing at work and home in times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity ⁽³⁾.

We need to understand how the 4IR transformations affect feelings of anxiety and excitement ⁽⁷⁾.

For some, digitalization and automation have taken the drudgery out of work and released them to enjoy qualitative improvements at work and higher salaries (excitement).

For others, the stress and threats of job loss have generated negative workplace behavior and workplace outcomes (anxiety) ⁽⁸⁾.

According to the World Economic Forum's Future Jobs Report 2020 ⁽⁹⁾, by 2025 it is estimated that 85 million jobs may be displaced, but 97 million new roles are likely to emerge that are more adapted to the division of labour between humans and machines.

As such, it is less about an Armageddon scenario and more about whether we are ready to adapt to a new world of work.

Such an approach can support individuals and organisations to create meaning and a new, transformed, integrated and interconnected outlook to meaning in life and at work.

Being positive about the transition could create a higher degree of resilience and happiness and contribute to structural changes on social and political levels ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Basic psychology explains that both positive and negative emotions are vital in human interactions and in particular during times of change and when transitions are in progress.

Emotions influence thoughts and behaviour as well as organisational and individual life ^(5,11) and impact mental health and well-being. Just as negative emotions can lead to ill-health or psychological problems, positive emotions can contribute to increased mental health and well-being that can support individuals coping with disruptive times ⁽⁵⁾.

“Coping behaviour is shown to be logically compatible with rationality and well suited to dealing with the fear of joblessness. Disruptions of the 4IR should be managed by individuals and workforces and the ability of these individuals and groups to cope with transitioning is essential for success.”

- Dr Rudolph M. Oosthuizen (2021) ⁽⁹⁾

Associate Professor, Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, University of South Africa.

COPING

Coping can be described as the extent to which an individual can handle an unpleasant occasion.

It is believed to be of basic significance in deciding whether an unsettling occasion, such as being confronted with job changes, results in adaptable or maladaptive outcomes.

Emotions train individuals for action in response to stimuli ⁽⁴⁾, however only if the challenges of the 4IR evoke a significant emotion within an individual, will they find it necessary to cope.

For *example*, the fear of unemployment due to automation could elicit the emotion to motivate individuals to improve their digital skills, thereby ensuring that they have a competitive edge in knowledge-intensive economies.

Although upskilling might reduce their fear, it could also potentially maintain or even aggravate their fear as people respond differently to emotions ⁽⁴⁾.

RESILIENCE

A positive internal resource that employees can use to navigate disruptive change, strong uncertainty and a stressful workplace in the 4IR context, is **employee resilience - the attitudes and abilities of employees to cope with the challenges of the changing workplace** ⁽⁴⁾.

A resilient workforce that is well managed and supported will not only survive but thrive in the 4IR workplace ^(4,12) as they will be capable of responding positively and competently in the face of uncertainty which will benefit the prosperity of the organisation ⁽¹³⁾.

Resilient employees can learn from adversity and uncertainty and these are becoming increasingly important skills as individuals hold more jobs throughout their work life and have more flexible work schedules ⁽⁴⁾.

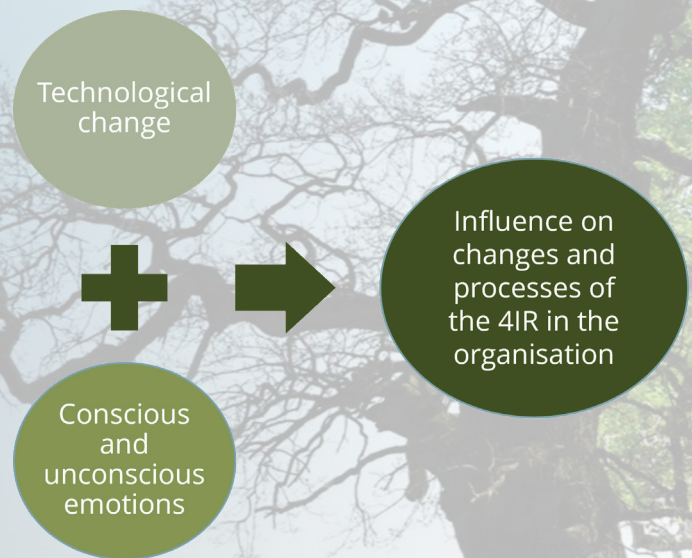


Figure 2. Technological change and emotions
(Source: Mayer & Oosthuizen 2021) ⁽⁷⁾.

Employee resilience should therefore be seen as a set of skills and abilities that can be developed through appropriate human resources interventions with an emphasis on the behaviour and engagement of managers and leaders that encourage the development of supportive behaviours in employees ⁽¹²⁾.

The key resource on which employees and organisations rely for this resilience is their imagination and creativity.

This may be displayed at the individual or collective level, whether as a narrow community or a wider society ⁽⁴⁾.

“You cannot stop the Fourth Industrial Revolution, but you can influence its direction and impact in your life.”

- Nicky Verd (2021) · DX Innovation Institute.

CHANGE



① Read up on change

Know about change and the emotions associated with transitioning during change.



② Know your rights

Ask questions about the change and know your rights as an employee. Refer to your contract.



③ Turn to a Detective

Be clear about what is changing, why it is changing, how will it change, by when, how the change is going to affect you and what you do at work. Help with the change.



④ Focus on what you can control

Focus on what will yield results for you, take the right actions and make it happen. Do you need a new skill or re-train?



⑤ Take care of yourself

Recognise the emotions caused by change and don't ignore signs and symptoms of stress and depression. Look after your mental and physical health – enjoy your hobbies and relax.



⑥ See change as a fresh start

Consider what it is you want to achieve. Don't get caught up in day-to-day issues instead thinking ahead. Make plans, set goals, break tasks down into chunks and set timelines. Share for encouragement.



⑦ Be flexible, positive and find balance

In order to cope, change requires flexibility on your part. The better able you are to adapt to change, the greater your chances of being successful. Find balance in how you approach change – accept a certain amount of compromise that comes from changes happening at work.



⑧ Take control of your life

Your reaction to change governs the outcome. Take charge of your thoughts and actions. With the right attitude and actions, you will find opportunities (chances) in any change. Enjoy a new beginning by embracing change and manage the outcomes and opportunities.

Figure 3. 8 Ways to thrive at work during change
(Source: catherinescareercorner.com).

OPINION

Coping with the impact of the 4IR and dealing with employees, work and management within the digital realm, requires different mindsets and new approaches in innovative workplaces. This includes :

- a strong revision of the traditional managerial function and required skills to attaining new competencies and tools for changing and aligning strategies and activities to these new labour features;
- identifying and developing the skills necessary for the workforce of the future;
- a strong and diffused learning culture that allows constant updating of the skills of the employees;
- exploring new learning opportunities and tools;
- and developing the “soft skills” as human abilities, which represent the central qualitative difference between man and machine. ^(13, 14)

The implication for practice is that the micro-, meso- and macro-levels should be considered for coping with the disruptive changes brought about by the 4IR ⁽⁴⁾.

Figure 4. Individuals, organisations and government coping with 4IR
(Source: Oosthuizen 2021) ⁽⁴⁾.



The key strategy for the 4IR and previous industrial revolutions is to retrain and reskill and transform the workforce to transition to the new world of work ⁽¹⁵⁾. History has proven that more jobs are created in new fields and areas, and humans and machines need to work together - a challenge, but doable.

“ With the support of government and organisations, individuals can, instead of wasting time worrying about technological unemployment, choose a new role to take advantage of the 4IR. “

- Chair in Automation and Future Work Skills, CQUniversity.

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The purpose of the partnership is to bring people and resources together to unlock and accelerate skills, training and educational outcomes for the future in their communities.

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