

Digital Workforce: What you need to know

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Many times in the rich annals of our history humanity faced technological changes and cultural and natural revolutions that sought to annihilate us, but unlike other extinct species, we are still here due to our ability to adapt to change. When automation was first introduced at a mass scale in the industries and workplaces, the majority of alarmists and doomsayers predicted a massive job loss and mass redundancy, the same happened when the computer entered the workplace. However, in every case, more new and better quality jobs that fulfilled our needs were created. The hot issue of this decade is the digital transformation of the workplace and its implication.

Digital workforce refers to the application of various technologies for automation working alongside the human workforce. It evolved from car manufacturing robots and can now be seen in our day-to-day life in the form of things like digital assistance, Siri for example. It includes technologies like driverless cars, software robots, and robot process automation. Automated team members are capable of carrying out business processes like any employee but much faster and with no mistakes. Digital workers are the frontline of intelligent automation.

Most organizations are faced with the key task of transforming from their current operating processes in digital ways. This is a concept that experts sum up as the digital transformation of the workforce. This entails a striking balance and establishing a synergy between human workers and various workspace technologies. The key challenge facing businesses is the lack of skills amongst the current crop of workers to fully interact and integrate with the digital workspace. Solving this requires investment in upskilling and reskilling, hiring expensive skilled staff, or using freelancers.

The digital workforce is a concept that is still in its infancy albeit showing immense potential to change the workspace and work world. It is a combination of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and robotic process automation. It makes use of a variety of technologies that automates working alongside the human workforce. The digital workforce seeks to improve productivity by combining both machine and human qualities. The concept of a digital workforce is about creating a synergy between various automation tools to augment human efforts. Many various automation tools work fine individually, but there is more value in combining these disconnected tools and utilizing them to add to human characteristics.

The digital workforce stands as a key component of the future of the workforce. It is giving us a preview of what the work world will be looking like in the next few years. The seamless blend of human and virtual employees is the future of work. The future human worker shall be relieved of the mundane task that can be carried out by virtual tools and shall need to focus on innovation, adding value, and pursuing new skills. Since digital workers or virtual workers enhance human workers by combining AI, machine learning, and Robot Process Automation, routine tasks are easily completed at an accelerated pace. This allows human unique qualities like ingenuity, empathy, and collaboration to come to the fore.

Key Characteristics.

1. Matching Workforce Demand and Supply.

Owing to the fluctuating and changing nature of the business cycle, the demand and supply for labor are rarely at equilibrium. Balancing the two has been a difficult phenomenon that eluded many HR practitioners and managers alike. The use of the digital workforce seems to have solved this problem. Leveraging on people outside the organization and a distributed workforce, organizations' needs to contractually bound workers have decreased. Digital platforms like Fiver and Gig work gives an organization a chance to engage and access millions of workers from around the world, for the completion of support activities and more routine task like data entry, typing, digital sites management, etc. Furthermore, companies benefit immensely through the reduction in cost which is achieved in two ways. Firstly digital employees are engaged on a need to have basis hence no need for year-round salaries. Secondly, the digital workforce increases labor supply thereby reducing the price that companies pay for each labor unit.

2. Leveraging on Communities.

Connecting and bringing together people from various walks of life remains the single most important demonstration of the internet's majestic powers. Ideas can be discussed, information shared and innovation spurred by different and diverse people from various corners of the world. The digital workforce enables the companies to leverage the ideas and innovative inputs from the most diverse groups through communities like Hackathons, innovative clubs, etc. Companies like LEGO, Amazon, and PepsiCo are utilizing crowdsourcing and techniques to get the best ideas and innovations from the most diverse groups. For example, LEGO established an Ideas platform, whereby people submit ideas and consumers vote for the ideas. An idea that receives more than 10,000 votes is reviewed by LEGO and if it is good the submitter gets to work with the LEGO team and gets royalties on sales. Through digital means, LEGO is utilizing the wisdom of the crowd in winnowing ideas and come up with customer-endorsed ideas. This reduces R&D cost, product introduction cost, and the risk of product failure.

3. Extensive and Productive use of Algorithms.

Digital workforce implies the use of algorithms in simplifying work and enhancing the output. Our everyday communication, entertainment, transportation, and other civilized life activities are made simpler by algorithms even though sometimes we don't credit them because we don't see them and they chose not to clamor for attention and credit. Tools like Grammarly have enhanced our writing by taking over predictable and routine activities like spelling and grammar checks. We shall be seeing more and more collaboration between human workers and algorithms that seek to simplify work and improving its quality. Overall algorithms increase the speed and improve the employee experience.

4. Automation of Task.

Automation helps the organization in saving costs and allows the deployment of employees to other

pressing and more productive areas. It makes work effortless. According to the McKinsey Group Industry Report, 23% of work hours in the US may be automated by 2030. Routine and repetitive tasks are being taken over by machines and other technological tools.

Digital Workforce Transformation

The Covid19 pandemic hastened the need for organizations of whatever size and level to utilize different forms of digital working and workforce. It assumed the catalytic role of bringing virtual working to the conscience of many including tech-skeptics. According to Milliner (2020), the subject of digital transformation is dominating various boardrooms, and strategies for adaptation are seriously being considered.

Firstly, workers need to be prepared for the digital transformation in terms of skills and competencies. Lack of critical digital skills amongst the workforce and the inability of most higher education institutions to produce digitally ready employees coupled with a faster rate of technology change has become key obstacles in the transformation to the digital workforce. There is a need for knowledgeable, strategically adept, and proficient workers who can command AI, analyze data, generate quick solutions and effortlessly fit into new roles. In the PWC 22ND Annual CEO survey, 79% of CEOs lamented the lack of key skills as an obstacle to growth. Digital transformation can be carried out through the following ways:

1. Upskilling and Reskilling Current Workers.

With some of the mundane and repetitive tasks being taken over by machines, it's imperative to teach workers new skills, build and expand their skill set. Today's workplace has unique requirements and demands that call for certain skills. Some of the skills that people were hired for some 5 or 10 years ago have become obsolete or taken over by technology hence the employees need reskilling. The advent of AI and machine learning in the workplace demand workers that have know-how on managing these tools and collaborating with them for the greater good, hence the need for upskilling. Due to the pace and rate of technology change, upskilling and training must be a continuous process in any business.

2. Hiring Experts on next-generation of skills.

The most ideal thing that can smoothen the digital workforce transformation process will be the hiring of digitally competent workers with the right and required skills. However, this is difficult because of the scarcity nature of top skills across industries. Most of the employees with top skills are difficult to get and expensive to have to make it nearly impossible for average and small organizations to access talent.

3. Hiring freelancers.

Being contractually bound to a single employer is viewed as prejudice to the top skilled workers hence they opt to operate as freelancers. Organizations can rely on skilled freelancers to digitally transform and revolutionize the workplace. Most organizations are sourcing for skills from prominent platform like Fiverr and Upwork, where they have huge access to skills that may not be available in their

organizations. Since freelancers are hired when there is a need and there is no need for an extra employee package, their use reduces cost for the business.

Managing the Digital Workforce.

Management of the digital workforce and transformation requires the utilization of transformational leaders rather than task-oriented leaders. Managing change has always been a difficult endeavour, digital workforce brings a lot of changes that necessitate the use of the right leadership that knows how to manage change. Here are other management issues around the digital workforce:

1. Improved Efficiency

According to Deloitte report of 2017, robots work 5 to 15 times faster than their human counterparts. They don't tire, get bored, or sick, this improves efficiency in the workspace. They also make a 24*7 execution cycle possible in most organizations. This calls for capacitating leaders and training managers for them to adapt to the needs of these newer realities. The most important task of managers shall be the ability to enhance collaboration between various tools and adapting to changes in the workplace.

2. Caution in Hiring.

Business leaders need to exercise caution when filling in roles in the organization. Before hiring new employees organizations must make sure that all roles that can be automated, have certainly been automated. Hiring employees with an uncanny ability to adapt shall be the biggest challenge for managers considering the pace and rate of change. Ability to adapt to change and learn new skills is likely to be a valuable skill for the future.

3. Continuous Improvement

The Kaizen philosophy developed by the Japanese is more important in this age of digital workforce than ever. Continuous improvement needs to be applied to all the areas that cannot be immediately automated, this allows them to keep pace with the automated ones and contribute to the overall improvement in performance. Managers need to be adept at spotting improvement needs and instituting improvements.

Conclusion.

With technologies like AI and Blockchain reaching the mature stage and becoming more affordable, businesses no longer afford to ignore automation and digital transformation of the workspace for competitive and survival reasons. Companies like Nokia and Kodak ignored promising innovations and they were both overtaken by upstarts and never recovered. Business leaders around the world have embraced the digital workforce and more are making investments in enhancing them. The integration of people and technology and science by extension which seems improbable and was fiercely opposed for time immemorial is being made possible by the digital workforce. The first step for every business is embracing digital change and accept it as a truer reality.

Secondly, after embracing digital change, organizations must be prepared to digitally transform. One way to ensure success in transformation is through support and buy-in from top leadership and key executives. Digital transformation must not be relegated to junior officers or IT departments but must be a leader from the top echelons of the organization. Workers need to be prepared through upskilling and reskilling of workers. The digital workforce is presenting businesses with new management challenges like the need to continuously improve and hiring the right staff.

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