Blog: Work, Technology and the Future of Skills

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Opinion by Paul Comyn, ILO Senior Skills Specialist The world of work is undergoing major change, and some observers believe that current shifts are fundamentally different from historical patterns, making the current wave of technological change unique – a Fourth Industrial Revolution. One of the arguments for this is that the prevailing cycle builds on the achievements of previous waves of technological change and brings them together in an unprecedented way. Developments in previously disjointed fields such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, robotics, nanotechnology, 3D printing and genetics and biotechnology are all building on and amplifying one another like never before.

Compounding these technological developments are other trends evident in global systems of production and employment such as the growth of global value chains, new business models of distributed production and forms of work organisation that will increase the use of contractors in the 'gig economy'. Coupled with supply side issues such as demographic trends, increasing migration and youth unemployment, labour markets of the future are going to look very different to how they are today. Amongst these ideas, commentators seem to be divided between those that argue there will be increasing and persistent technological unemployment due to the disruptive effects of technology, and those that hold a more nuanced view that future automation is unlikely to completely destroy many jobs. This perspective argues that automation will replace some tasks that will fundamentally change the nature of jobs workers will perform, but that except for a minority of jobs, the job itself will not be at risk. There is also recognition that whilst the direct impact of productivity enhancing process innovations will redesign and remove some jobs; these innovations also have the potential to trigger new economic activities that will create jobs. This technological

spill over effect involves innovations that displace workers in one industry creating demand for workers in another industry. Given all this, it's almost impossible to predict the exact nature of technological change nor the type and location of skills required as a result. Regardless, it's clear that to successfully manage this transition, more investment in skills and training will be required to prepare workers for the jobs of the future. In such a rapidly changing employment landscape, the ability of skills systems to anticipate and prepare for future skill requirements, job content and employment trends will become increasingly critical for businesses, governments and individuals. In this context, the importance of active labour market programs and community and adult education and training will need to be reinforced to complement learning opportunities that currently exist in formal education and training systems. **To continue reading the rest of this Blog, download the PDF found immediately below.**

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