

What is the ideal training ground for 4IR?

By [Zain Patel](#)

5 Feb 2021

As South Africa moves swiftly towards embracing the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR), it becomes more necessary for both businesses and individuals to focus on building the necessary skills to successfully work alongside future-ready technology, such as AI and machine learning. However, many of the soft skills in question are not taught through educational curricula, and rather need to be honed through the right type of experience.



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While technical and technology-based skills, like coding, will be important to remain relevant and employable during the 4IR, soft skills – those that make us intrinsically human – will be key to success. The WEF's Future of Jobs report, for example, looked at the most important skills for the 4IR based on the insights of executives from top global businesses.

These skills were identified as:

- Complex problem solving
- Critical thinking
- Creativity
- People management
- Coordinating with others
- Emotional intelligence
- Judgement and decision making
- Service orientation
- Negotiation
- Cognitive flexibility

Interestingly, the above-mentioned skills are all seen as critical for those working as contact centre agents and are highlighted as part of agent training and experience programmes. As many South African businesses move toward the use of technology like AI and chatbots in their contact centre operations, there has been much debate around the importance of the human element in the contact centre and whether this will remain relevant going forward.

In my experience, human connection is what makes customers feel understood – and is specifically important when it comes to problem-solving – as was demonstrated by the findings of a 2020 Merchants survey, where 62% of respondents said they preferred speaking to an agent, and 72% of satisfied customers said their good experience was due to the agent solving their problem quickly and effectively.

Will contact centre agents remain relevant?

South Africa, as a key market for business process outsourcing (BPO) services, due to its world-class facility builds, infrastructure and cost-effectiveness also has a diverse talent pool of individuals with the right profiles to become successful contact centre agents – and through this experience, these individuals can acquire future-ready skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, service orientation, negotiation and people management; setting them up for success in the digitally-driven world of tomorrow.

As BPO providers have mobilised their workforces to work from home, the profile of individuals suited for work as an agent has now grown to include differently-abled individuals, students and graduates without transport, and stay-at-home parents, for example – giving more South Africans the opportunity to build future-ready skills today.

Today's customers are looking for fast and effective resolution of problems and queries, and they are looking to connect with a knowledgeable person to assist with this.



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While digital channels like chat and social media are effective in completing simple, linear processes, and certainly have a role to play in providing positive customer experience; first contact resolution is the order of the day, and this puts South African contact centre agents in the spotlight as effective problem-solvers and decision-makers.

The job of the contact centre agent, rather than being replaced by technology, is being highlighted, as consumers look to spend the least amount of time possible in sorting out queries – which are often complex.

What's more, South Africa is positioned to continue growing as a BPO destination of choice – with McKinsey predicting that the market has the potential to create 775,000 jobs by 2030.

The role of a contact centre agent will certainly remain relevant as we move toward the 4IR in South Africa – and should not be underestimated for its ability to foster tomorrow's skills today.

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