Context
This year’s World Economic Forum meeting has been centred around “the Fourth Industrial Revolution”, characterized by the fusion of technologies that are believed to fundamentally alter the way we live, work and relate to one another. Since a series of discussions and thought leadership content produced for the WEF is highly relevant to our Skills to Succeed practitioner network, we are pleased to make this Insight Byte available to you, which captures the key takeaways relevant to workforce development practitioners. These takeaways also inform our Skills to Succeed Insight and Learning agenda by offering meaningful responses to the following questions:

• How will the changing nature of work alter the skills needed to be resilient in the next generation workforce? How can we predict/adapt to these inevitable shifts?

• What skills will be required to transition jobseekers and entrepreneurs to experience sustained employment outcomes at scale in the 21st century?

• What digital technologies and other innovations can improve program design and outcomes?

Key Takeaways

People at the heart of digital disruption

While technology is the driver of digital disruption, it is the people, not just technology that will transform the organizations of the future. This is the key message in Accenture’s 2016 Technology Vision. The recently released report mirrors the Davos conversations around human beings relationships with technology innovations. The theme of “People First: The Primacy of People in a Digital Age” looks at the competitive advantage that awaits companies that move beyond the digital culture shock to create a thriving digital culture. The critical message is counterintuitive and powerful. For workforce development practitioners, understanding how organizations are striving to build a vibrant and successful culture is key, since they are potential employers of their beneficiaries. The four pillars of what Accenture calls the “Corporate Cultural Shift” can also help workforce development practitioners adopt their own change in the new digital era. For this reason, we equally encourage you to:

• Be built for change—develop new skills, new processes and new products. Employees need to expect change, understand its impact and keep pace with it by evolving and adding to their skills

• Be data-driven—Instead of relying on gut instinct, traditional experience, or even the HiPPO principle (i.e., the highest-paid person’s opinion is paramount), what’s needed is for data to become so pervasive and readily available that it supports insight-driven decision-making throughout your enterprise

• Embrace change—inspire your people with a vision for how technology enables processes to be done differently—to be done better—so that your organization can follow a completely new direction

• Have digital risk awareness—change also creates new areas of risk (e.g. questions around the ethical use of data). Take digital trust into consideration in everything you do: security, privacy and digital ethics must be integral to the development process from the beginning.

“It is all about digital disruption but humans are at the heart of the digital disruption. If you think about what machines can do, humans and the behaviors that humans have around emotions and creativity are not things that are going to be replaced by machines.”

Ellyn Shook, Chief Leadership and Human Resources Officer, Accenture at WEF 2016
The impact of disruptive change on employment

The debate on the digital transformation is often polarized between those who foresee limitless new opportunities and those that foresee massive dislocation of jobs.

“If the largely ‘jobless’ future is ever going to come, it’s not going to come next year or in the near future. Let’s reconfigure education and skills to help people when it comes. We do a bad job at that now.”
Andrew McAfee, Co-Director of the Initiative on the Digital Economy, MIT at WEF 2016

This debate is often presented from the perspective of technology visionaries, employment and labor experts and organization leaders. Recent Accenture research provides the employee perspective which is quite promising. Specifically:

• 62% of employees surveyed say their organization has the workforce skills and capabilities to adapt to digital
• 57% of employees believe digital will improve their job prospects.
• Less than 10% believe digital will worsen their ability to find a job

According to the Future of Jobs report, there is a modestly positive outlook for employment across most industries, with jobs growth expected in several sectors. However, it is also clear that this need for more talent in certain job categories is accompanied by high skills instability across all job categories. Combined together, net job growth and skills instability result in most businesses currently facing major recruitment challenges and talent shortages, a pattern set to get worse over the next five years. Needless to say, the implications of accelerating disruptive change to business models are far-reaching for employment and skills. However, rapid adjustment to the new reality and the opportunities it offers is possible, provided there is concerted effort by all stakeholders and particularly workforce development practitioners and employers. Knowing the direction that businesses will need to take is key, as it will allow workforce development practitioners to be ready to create a convincing value proposition and support employers’ needs. Specifically, employers will need to:

• Reinvent their HR function by making use of new kinds of analytical tools to spot talent trends and skills
• Make use of data analytics to build a new approach to workforce planning and talent management, where better forecasting data and planning metrics will be key
• Make a fundamental change in how talent diversity issues are perceived and well-known barriers tackled
• Offer flexible working arrangements and leverage online talent platforms.

The skills required in the 21st century

Clearly, to thrive in today’s innovation-driven economy, workers need a different mix of skills than in the past. To uncover the skills that meet the needs of a 21st-century marketplace, a meta-analysis of research has been conducted on the 21st-century skills in primary and secondary education (full analysis can be found here). The 16 identified skills have been distilled in three broad categories:

• Foundational literacies (i.e. how students apply core skills to everyday tasks). These include: literacy, numeracy, scientific literacy, cultural and civic literacy
• Competencies (i.e. how students approach complex challenges). These include: critical thinking/problem-solving, creativity, communication and collaboration
• Character qualities (i.e. how students approach their changing environment). These include: curiosity, initiative, persistence/grit, adaptability, leadership, social and cultural awareness

What technology resources can be leveraged to teach 21st-century skills such as communication, creativity, persistence and collaboration?

• Instructional resources—personalized and adaptive content and curricula, open educational resources, communication and collaboration tools and interactive simulations and games
• Institutional resources, such as digital professional development resources for teachers/trainers and student information and learning management systems

“For more details on these resources, please refer to the full report

“High performers of the future won’t merely consume more technology. They will enable their people to accomplish more with technology.”
Paul Daugherty, Chief Technology Officer, Accenture at WEF 2016

Taking Action: What can you do next with this knowledge?

• Use Accenture’s Technology Vision, 2016 to reflect on how you can accomplish more with technology. Create a new organizational culture that uses technology to enable people to constantly adapt and learn, create new solutions, drive change and disrupt the status quo
• Be agile and flexible with curriculum and teaching approaches in workforce development programs to stay in step with the rapid pace of changes in skill demand. More insights are available in the New Vision for Education report
• Be aware of the differences in skill demand by industry and by geography, and the current and future impact of key disruptions on employment levels, skill sets and recruitment patterns across industries and countries (available in the Future of Jobs report). Help employers to create effective reskilling strategies within their companies, by making use of the in-depth analysis on industries, countries, occupations and skills provided in the report.
Recommended Resources


• The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means and how to respond: http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond


• What happens when robots take our jobs: http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/what-happens-when-robots-take-our-jobs

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