

The future of work in adland



By [Ntombizamasala Hlophe](#)

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Enough has been said about the impending Fourth Industrial Revolution to leave most of us in two camps; nervously awaiting the changes or mildly panicking and signing up for every digital course available. The rest probably know enough to have built their bunkers and watch the rest of us lose our minds.



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The last time a conversation was had this widely about an impending change, it was the year 2000. Everything felt like it would cease to exist, as though life were down to the infamous Kwaito lyric “*Y2K or no Y2K*”. The truth is that very little changes immediately, but as we look to the end of yet another decade that has conceived more technological change than the previous three decades; we are obliged to pay careful attention to the predicted changes.

“Serve me where I am” and “do more with less”

Given that majority of the conversation about the future world of work is being driven by Europe and is not relevant within the African context, we wanted our conversation to be pragmatic to where we are as a continent.



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Yellowwood, in partnership with HDI Youth Consultancy, examined the future world of work, with emphasis on people and Africa, in the White paper: "Africa's opportunity in the Future World of Work". The primary message from the paper being that we can calm down to a slow panic and realise that we may be better equipped and have more time than we think.

It is not news to anyone working in, with and for advertising businesses that more and more clients are asking agencies to solve complex problems that require non-traditional agency skills. Clients are also asking agencies to be empathetic to their business, and in the same life cycle as them – and if not, then they are requesting agencies to create a division to serve them in the space that they are in. Simply put: *"Serve me where I am" and "do more with less"*.

So if this is not new, what is the pressure and concern about?

Africa is a task-based economy

The narrative about the scale and impact of broader trends around the future world of work, and how it will look like in a technologically transformed age can be terrifying. That somehow the structure of work will limit creativity, pressuring profitability and restrict specialisation.

The study found that in fact, globally we are seeing the structure and functioning of the future world economy moving to a task-based one (we see this in apps such as Uber, Kandua, SweepSouth already), that is innovations are largely task-based, people are paid for a task and when that task is complete, they move onto the next one.



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In Africa, this kind of work and skills dynamic is already happening in the informal sector - where 85% of the employment in Africa sits - which is largely entrepreneurial or task-based work. This means that for the first time we are seeing that the continent is best placed to respond to a global trend because we are doing it already. Africa is a task-based economy, just waiting to be digitised and formalised.

Employment shift

This description is quite simply an expanded definition of freelancing in advertising. The industry is so well equipped at many of the challenges that most industries are grappling with in this employment shift. How to source, guarantee quality, remunerate, ensure delivery, manage client expectations, shape company culture? These are questions that every executive in advertising has handled with finesse for the past two decades and still remained differentiated in an increasingly competitive market.

The work environment itself is changing from centralised and uniform to freelancing, where work is delivered by people who don't necessarily share the same philosophy and are not necessarily permanent employees coming to your office every day.



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The advertising industry is perfectly placed to assist corporates with this trend, as agencies have always been well placed to freelancing as a way of work, and therefore, for the first time, could be leading a trend and not following one. Together with this, recognition will shift from the employer to the employee, from the corporate or agency to the individual – again agencies lead the way here.

Already many corporates are adopting this modular setup. From the most corporate examples like Investec paying for output, not hours spent at work, to the willingness for remote working arrangement, allocating more effort to what employees deliver and less on the performance of that delivery.

Creativity requires empathy

While it may be encouraging to understand how well placed the industry is to deal with some of the more structured challenges; there is a blind spot that must be mentioned. Creativity. Given the number of changes coming and the requisite complexity that legacy systems and new capability will present; agencies ought to consider shifting their thinking from the notion that creativity is a product of work, but rather a way of thinking. A system through which many problems in business and society can be tackled.

Creativity requires empathy, which is expected to be one of the areas of impact as people begin to value jobs that are uniquely human and require empathy, and that Africa is a continent culturally anchored in empathy and humanity.



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It means that Africa, if it can develop the relevant skills, is well placed to meet the demands of the future, and so with it, it's businesses. To achieve this, they need employees who view the world in an unconventional way, who can cope with the changes with ease and dexterity.

An ease greater than how we have handled the generational gap in recent times in the world of work. It is anticipated that the volume of young employees will rise at a rate higher than current; while older employees can work for longer. So employees are no longer young or old as technology can bridge the gap between skills (needed by the older employees) and experience (needed by the younger person). The most important attribute is the ability to adapt to change.

Diversity

So how can businesses in advertising deal with these shifts and end the flurry of emails with links to every imaginable digital and technological trend and fad available?

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To rise to the occasion and deal with the area where agencies are lagging is the rate of change has been slow and unimaginative; that of diversity. Be it a diversity of background, skill, capability and point of view. The dexterity required to handle the change and the pace that we can expect it will lie greatly in accepting that much of what the world and clients will need must be taught to even the most experienced employee. There is no excuse for not hiring for talent and training for performance.

To pay attention to and close the gap between how people are educated and what is required in coming into the workforce, rather than use it as a reason for struggling to create diverse teams of varied socio-economic backgrounds.

Shifting how we work

There is much to gain in encouraging the willingness to adapt to recruiting from the traditional places, to focus rather on the skills needed; wherever they may come from. Within an African context more crucially as our ability to capitalise off the burgeoning opportunity that this revolution presents the continent and its industries rely greatly on our ability to include as many of its people as possible.

All this is likely to be more palpable as clients seek solutions to the Fourth Industrial Revolution challenges, that do not require a creative execution always but rather a creative solution; an understanding of humans and their psychology and the practical, commercial application of that solution. This is especially so because clients now expect partnerships with agencies and their ability to hold a conversation with them to achieve their commercial ambitions.

Our challenge is not to "*4IR or no 4IR*," but rather to place emphasis on shifting how we work and allowing it to be a pivotal part of our ability to live up to the readiness of our model and continent for the expected changes in the world of work.

ABOUT NTOMBIZAMASALA HLOPHE

Ntombizamasala, affectionately known as Zama, is Strategy Director at Yellowwood. Zama has 10 years experience in the field of marketing and has worked across the African continent on some of South Africa's most formidable FMCG companies; Unilever, SAB and YUM restaurants.

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