

THE FUTURE WON'T WAIT: WHY SOUTH AFRICA'S YOUTH MUST ADAPT IN THE AGE OF AI

Category: IT Law

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Last week, I had the pleasure of joining the [It's Topical](#) team on SABC News to talk about something I believe is one of the most important conversations we need to be having as a country. The impact of Artificial Intelligence (**"AI"**) on South Africa's youth and their future employment.

Fifty years ago, the youth of Soweto took to the streets and changed the course of history. They didn't wait for permission. They didn't wait for the world to be ready. They acted, and the world shifted around them.

Today, I believe South Africa's youth face a different kind of revolution. One that can't be tackled by marching in the streets but is quietly running in data centres. It's called AI, and it is infiltrating almost every industry. The question is not whether AI will change the world of work. It already has. It's whether the class of 2026 and those that follow will be passengers or pilots.

I'm not going to sugarcoat this. AI will eliminate jobs. Lots of them. Routine administrative work, basic data capturing, call centre scripting, entry-level accounting, and paralegal research are all roles where AI is already demonstrating it can do the work faster, cheaper, and without a lunch break. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 projects that 92 million roles will be displaced globally by 2030.^[1] The International Monetary Fund estimates that roughly 40% of jobs worldwide face meaningful exposure to AI.^[2] Closer to home, research indicates that a significant portion of South African jobs could be affected by AI and automation. In a country already grappling with persistently high levels of youth unemployment, this is a reality that should capture the attention of every young person, parent, educator, and policymaker.

But AI does not simply destroy jobs. It transforms them. And it creates entirely new ones that didn't exist before. When ATMs arrived, people predicted the end of bank tellers. Instead, banks opened

more branches, tellers shifted to relationship-driven work, and the financial services industry grew. The same patterns play out across every major technological shift in history. The industrial revolution, the personal computer, and the internet have each created more jobs than they displaced, even if they fundamentally changed what those jobs looked like. AI will be no different.

But there's a catch. The workers who lost their jobs to the ATM were the ones who never learned to do anything the ATM couldn't. The workers who thrived were the ones who developed skills that complemented the machine's interpersonal skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, and complex judgment calls. All these skills cannot be replaced by a machine.

The same logic applies now, and the urgency cannot be overstated. South Africa's youth cannot afford to be trained for the economy of 2010 while AI is reshaping the economy of 2030. The real crisis is not AI itself, but our readiness for it. A SAP survey found that 100% of African organisations reported an increase in demand for AI skills in 2025, yet nearly 90% say AI skills shortages are already causing delays, failed innovation, and loss of clients. We are already behind.^[3]

AI fluency is fast becoming as essential as literacy itself. AI fluency doesn't mean every young person needs to become a software engineer or a machine learning expert. It means understanding enough about how AI tools work to use them effectively, critically, and ethically. It means knowing when to trust the output of an AI system and when to interrogate it. It means being the person in the room who can work with the tool, rather than the person the tool replaces. Beyond AI fluency, these are the skills that will make South Africa's young people highly employable in an AI-augmented economy.

On June 16th, we celebrated a generation that refused to accept the world as it was handed to them. They saw a system designed to limit them and said: Not us, not today. The youth of 2026 face a system that is changing faster than any generation before them has experienced.

AI is not a distant threat; it is already being used in hospitals, law firms, media houses, government departments, and small businesses across South Africa right now. The students sitting in classrooms today will enter a workforce where AI tools are as standard as a computer or a cellphone. Those who learn to work alongside these tools, rather than compete against them, will not just survive, but lead.

The June 16, 1976, generation didn't have a roadmap. They had conviction, courage, and the clarity to know that the future belonged to those brave enough to claim it. South Africa's youth still have all of that. They just need to add the willingness to acquire the skills that will make them indispensable in a world where machines are getting smarter every day. The "robots" are here. But they still need humans to ask the right questions, solve the right problems, and lead with humanity.

Make sure you're that human.

[1] <https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/>

[2] <https://www.imf.org/en/blogs/articles/2024/01/14/ai-will-transform-the-global-economy-lets-make-sure-it-benefits-humanity>

[3] <https://news.sap.com/africa/2025/06/africa-has-an-ai-skills-problem-that-is-forcing-a-youth-empowerment-rethink/>

