



Disrupting the workplace

Talent in the digital age

Soula Courlas

Partner & National Leader, People & Change Advisory Services,
KPMG in Canada

Girish Ganesan

Vice President, Enterprise HR Solutions and Enablement, TD Bank

With technology having the potential to dramatically reshape the workplace, today's employers are challenged to recruit and retain a workforce that can enable the nature of this transformation. Here to discuss is Girish Ganesan, VP of Enterprise HR Solutions, TD Bank, and Soula Courlas, National Leader, People & Change Advisory Services at KPMG in Canada.

? With automation, machine learning, and other technologies becoming more commonplace, what does the future of work look like?

Girish: We're in the midst of the next industrial revolution powered by artificial intelligence, robotics, and other breakthroughs that are shaking the very foundation of our economies. This will fundamentally change what the workplace of the future looks like. As it has already, technology will continue to promote new efficiencies, higher productivity, and collaboration; while also embedding an experimental mindset. It will also enable the ability for people to work virtually.

Automation, like every technology advancement, will change the definition of what it means to be 'human' in the workplace. 'Human' work won't go away, but it will evolve into jobs that require more complex judgment and perspective. As much as there is a focus on whether or not there will be a reduction in jobs giving way to robotics that may take over, the new capabilities required will emphasize higher-order thinking, problem-solving, conflict management and interactions which won't be replaced by machines anytime soon.

Soula: Building on that point, I believe there will be a growing emphasis on mastering capabilities required for interacting with people and navigating

complex problems and issues. Working alongside machines, organizations will need talent who can tackle not just the tactical work, but the intangible obstacles. You'll need people who possess the critical thinking and judgment to deal with data, communicate effectively with colleagues from different generations in the workplace, and know how to navigate challenging conversations.

? What technologies are driving digital disruption in the workplace?

Girish: There are so many tools out there one can leverage, but it does vary by industry and the business you're in. Ultimately, technology is going to come along and continue to automate, streamline, and refine; it's going to force us to be better versions of ourselves and use more of the capabilities that we sometimes don't use.

? How important is it for employers to recognize this transformation?

Girish: Digital transformation isn't optional for most organizations; it's a foundational shift that's making the business world much more competitive and agile. The risk of struggling in that move to digital is too high, so it's time for organizations to invest in a cultural shift that will enable transformation.

That shift can be intimidating, but let's remember that the net impact of new technologies on employment can also be strongly positive. Embedding machine knowledge, for example, will result in a new category of knowledge-enabled jobs that will require new human skills and capabilities. Additionally, today's employees are drawn to workplace cultures where new technology ideas are encouraged and integrated.

Soula: I absolutely agree. If you don't go digital and don't implement technology that's going to streamline the connection from your organization to the customer, you'll be left behind. There's no hope for differentiation, innovation, or advancement. But to start that journey, you need to understand what it's going to take for your employees to deliver on those needs while upholding the organization's values.

Digital transformation is less about technology and more about people. For this cultural shift to occur, you need to define your company values, understand how digital disruption fits within those values, and then align employees to those values. Your team needs a sense of purpose, of what they're trying to do, where they're going, what their customers are expecting, and how digital transformation is going to make the company more effective and successful moving forward.

? How do you approach that organizational change?

Girish: Digital transformation is everyone's job. You can't simply push disruption from the top down. That said, there is no single blueprint that works for everyone. Determining the way forward depends very much on your organization's values, its industry's traits, client expectations, and your internal strengths and weaknesses. When you can frame those, you can begin making subtle shifts in your technological foundation and start getting your people to work in unison towards planned goals and emerging opportunities. Then, it's about evolving and learning from your experiences.

Soula: When you think about it, this isn't necessarily a new transformation for many employees. There aren't going to be many who haven't been impacted by digital transformation because they're already well versed in leveraging smartphones to do everything from banking to planning their night out. Digital transformation is already embedded in our culture, which is why it's incumbent on everyone in an organization to understand how they can bring these digital disruptors into their jobs.

? Would you say this type of change takes some adapting on the part of employees?

Soula: Absolutely it does. That's why employers need to help their teams understand how new technology will impact their work, how it will change their role, and how they will be acknowledged and rewarded in this new way of working.

Girish: Digital disruption requires experimentation. Planning will always be important, but organizations need to think in shorter project cycles. They need to take small risks to test the waters, measure the results, and make improvements as they go. Digital transformation isn't "one and done," it's a journey.

? How do you do all this in an increasingly multi-generational workforce?

Girish: Different generations have different needs. You need to understand and cater to those differences when it comes to digitization. Fortunately, the flexibility that digitization and technology will provide will help in that regard.

Soula: I've seen the value and benefit of embracing the diversity that comes with each generational cohort. It's about not only understanding the diversity and differences, but figuring out how to make everyone feel included.

Take Millennials, for example. A common stereotype is that they can seem fickle and get bored easily, but in reality, who doesn't that apply to? From my perspective, what this really means is the need to continuously learn, seek new and relevant channels of 'information', and opportunities to continually raise their personal 'bar'. If they're in a work environment where they cannot learn, and feel as if they don't have a path to continue to grow and evolve, they're going to feel stagnant and look for somewhere else to go. It's about feeding that need for knowledge they've grown up with.

Girish: It's true. And Millennials are so ingrained in the digital culture that this disruption is all part of the natural landscape for them. For the first time in the history, you have professionals in the workplace who are in some regards more knowledgeable and literate than their parents because they were born in a digital culture with boundless access to information.

Soula: Then you have ‘post-millennials’ often referred to as Gen Z or iGeneration who’ve grown up in a decade of intense unrest, global transformation, terrorism, Fourth Industrial Revolution advancements, etc. As a result, a very important element for this cohort is stability. History is repeating itself in a sense with the return to more loyal workforces. When you accept that Millennial and Gen Z will make up two-thirds of the workforce in the next decade, it will be critical to feed the mindset and create a workplace foundation that provides meaning, growth and stability.

? What about new recruits? What talent should employers be looking for to help drive this digital transformation?

Girish: We’re at a point in time in the workplace where you have to value agility. As much as we’re looking for the right capabilities and skills, they’ll get outdated pretty quickly because technology is changing so rapidly. That’s why something has to be said about the power of collective intelligence. We need to support more peer and social learning in a highly effective way which allows mixed generations to learn from each other. At the end of the day no single generation is going to pull an organization forward.

Soula: That’s why, no matter the generation, there needs to be a focus on leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and other abilities that aren’t necessarily related to technology but on that human interaction. Those are going to become that much more important.

? You’ve mentioned a “skills revolution” in the past. What do you mean by that?

Girish: When I say ‘skills revolution’ I mean that we’re in an era where helping people upscale and adapt to a fast-changing world of work will be the defining challenge of our time. Talent plans should be directly linked to the digital strategy of the organization, and it’s the responsibility of HR professionals to fill the gaps between what current and future competences will be required.

Let’s also remember that there will be certain skills you require as an organization to sustain core capabilities that you need to either build or buy. There will be others which you can borrow to augment your capabilities for a period of time to get you through a phase. That may mean hiring someone with specific skills in AI or machine learning, or doing a knowledge transfer after they’ve brought you to a certain point. Your talent strategy has to really parse out what core capabilities are required to take you to the next level and stay ahead of the competition.

? What advice do you offer HR professionals approaching digital transformation?

Girish: HR has a very crucial role to play in building a culture that encourages collaboration in a multi-generational workforce, including the next generation of digital citizens. HR professionals need to understand how transformation will change the organization’s digital identity and what future capabilities it will need to thrive. They’ll also have to integrate the right people and help existing employees and leaders at the same time to gain those digital competencies. The good news is that it’s never been a more exciting time to be in HR.