

Shaping the future

THE FACTORY OF THE FUTURE WILL HERALD IMPORTANT CHANGES IN THE WAY WE WORK. MANUFACTURERS LARGE AND SMALL ARE LIKELY TO NEED MORE PEOPLE WITH TECHNOLOGICAL EXPERTISE, AND FEWER WITH BASIC SHOP-FLOOR KNOWLEDGE. REXROTH PRESIDENT, ROLF NAJORK, CONSIDERS THE IMPLICATIONS

The Factory of the Future is not a new phenomenon. There are parallels with the 1990s. Back then, people were concerned about the advent of automation, such as robotic welding in the automotive industry. But what happened was not that jobs disappeared, rather that competences began to change. Once again, we're going to see a greater need for a shift towards digital skills in the workforce.

In a report published in December 2017 and quoted in the Wall Street Journal (WSJ), research firm Gartner said that by 2022, one in five employees engaged in "mostly non-routine" work will rely in some way on artificial intelligence (AI). Gartner expects AI to quickly create 2.3 million jobs, while eliminating 1.8 million, and also to account for a net two million new jobs by 2025.

In addition, the WSJ cited Infosys, the technology outsourcing and services organisation, which published its own report at Davos in January this year. This, too, pointed to a net employment gain from AI over time. "AI technologies will ultimately create more opportunity for employees than they will eliminate," it says.

Time to upskill and invest

We've discussed this topic with Lina Huertas, head of technology strategy for digital manufacturing at the Manufacturing Technology Centre (MTC). She sees the coming transformation to the world of work as a

challenge – but says, if we do the right things, it could make a genuinely positive impact on society.

She points to the bottom-up thinking that the MTC is seeing in some emerging markets: "They're looking at these developments in terms not just of technology but of society, of their implications for social prosperity and cohesion.

"These markets recognise, that in order to pursue these developments they need to make preparations, and in particular to ensure not just that they develop new skills, but that they retain vital older ones. They see that upskilling and training need to happen alongside technological investment. It's a good rule for everyone, really."

A shared commitment to skills

We have already seen how the 'Factory of the Future' is creating new business models. We are now being asked not to sell our products to our customers, but to lease them, or to provide them on an as-a-service basis. To sustain this model, we need also to sustain our levels of expertise – not just in the new technologies that are transforming industry, but in the more traditional ones for which we are best known.

It's incumbent on us, on all manufacturing industry, on national governments, and indeed on everyone reading this, to ensure that we retain and extend the skills we need to take us into the future.

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