

SKILLS FOR THE WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE

BY PROF. DR. ING. DIETER SPATH

Digitization has ushered in a process of transformation which is quickly gathering momentum. Companies should neither underestimate this development nor be hesitant in taking it on. Great as the challenges may be, *companies in Germany largely perceive the digital transformation as an opportunity.*

The fourth industrial revolution is not only changing companies' production and business models, but is also transforming the working world as a whole. Learning machines, altered channels of distribution and integrated logistics are posing new challenges for work organization and humans alike. Today, employees are controlling increasingly complex processes with the aid of digital assistants. They need to learn to understand these, and to orchestrate them in flexible teams. Corporate management teams and human resources managers should support this transition as change managers.

In the future, machines will not only take on a growing number of tasks in the field of industrial production, but the services and administrative sectors will also be reinterpreted through automation. Where today forms are often filled out manually, digitized, then printed out again and processed further, intelligently networked systems will take over many of these steps in the future. This will mean that many activities will no longer be necessary, particularly with general processing, as we describe it here in Germany. At the same time, more self-determined, more skilled and better-paid jobs will emerge. After all, employees –

with their power of judgment, creativity and wealth of experience – are central to the introduction of new technologies and networked production. Personnel development that understands this will strengthen solid, self-determined work.

ACHIEVING INDUSTRY 4.0 THROUGH FURTHER TRAINING

In the HR circle coordinated by acatech, HR heads and researchers alike have investigated how companies and employees can benefit equally from digitization. One result is that advanced and further training have been identified as core concerns and basic prerequisites within the company for successfully attaining Industry 4.0. Companies should promote the autonomy and flexibility of their employees and entrust them with new tasks. To this end, some regulatory scope for internal experimentation is desirable – both on the part of lawmakers and within companies.

When it comes to competency management, both in relation to the implementation of new products and the development of innovative business models, it is

absolutely true that decision makers in companies must develop an understanding of the disruptive changes that digital transformation brings with it. Based on this understanding, they can then derive strategies and measures for developing the skills of their employees. In addition to IT skills, data evaluation and analysis as well as cross-divisional process expertise and management are at the core of advanced and further training. Also continuing to grow in importance are soft skills, which assist with increasingly flexible working across language and cultural barriers, in changing teams.

FROM PASSENGERS TO DRIVERS

In order to succeed in the platform economy, start-ups, medium-sized companies and large corporations will need to cooperate much more closely than ever before. This also applies in the area of employee training, wherein small and medium-sized companies are in particular need of support. Otherwise, our employee training study warns, there is the danger of a double digital divide: one between high- and low-skilled employees and one between large, small and medium-sized companies.



Companies should promote the autonomy and flexibility of their employees and entrust them with new tasks.

In an environment of dynamically changing networked work, one of the greatest challenges all companies will face is defining individual skill requirements among their staff. On this basis, they can then develop tailor-made training formats. It is also important to test flexible forms of working and to attract the smartest talent from all over the globe. This will help companies transition from being driven by disruptive innovations to becoming drivers of such innovations, and will lay the foundations for their future growth. While they will need to invest substantially in the short term, in the medium term they will be able to tap into new, high-margin markets by offering innovative packages of products and services based on their traditional business models. ■



Photo: acatech / C. Rieken

PROF. DR. ING. DIETER SPATH has been President of acatech – the German Academy of Science and Engineering – since February 2017. Among other positions, he is the Director of the Fraunhofer Institute for Labor Economics and Organization, and is currently researching the effects of digital transformation processes on work. As a former member of the Board of Wittenstein SE, the occupational scientist has had previous experience of digital transformation in the mid-sized sector.