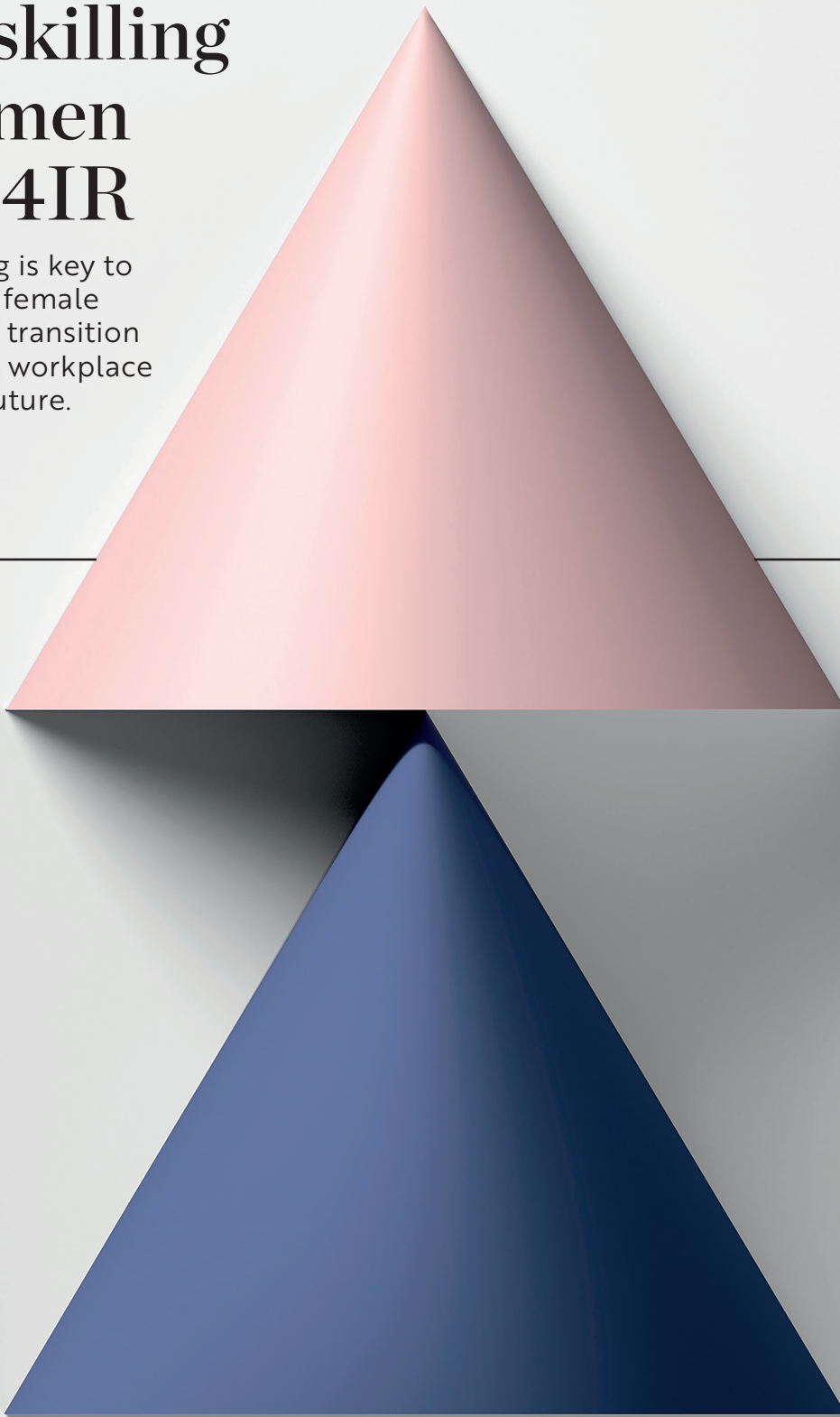


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# Upskilling women for 4IR

Learning is key to helping female workers transition into the workplace of the future.

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Artwork by Deep Yellow Studio

From unhelpful stereotypes and unconscious biases to unequal pay structures and a lack of role models, gender equality in the workplace has long been a hot topic. Women currently make up just 39 percent of the global workforce, according to the *Harvard Business Review*.

**“It’s impossible for a robot to be empathetic; hence the need for the very human attribute of high emotional intelligence.”**

However, this number may decrease even further if women are unable to transition successfully into the workplace of the 4IR.

As automation and AI infiltrate various industries, employees are likely to be displaced, says research by the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI). Women, especially, will suffer a considerable blow: “Between 40 million to 160 million women globally may need to transition between occupations by 2030.” Although women face “pervasive barriers”, there is hope. And lots of opportunity.

The MGI report, which is titled ‘The Future of Women at Work: Transitions in the Age of Automation’, says that – if women are able to successfully make these transitions in the workplace – more productive, better-paid work will be waiting for them. Learning is

an integral aspect of becoming better skilled, more mobile and more tech savvy for the 4IR workplace.

#### **INVESTMENT IS KEY**

As Amazon and other companies have shown, organisations are upskilling current employees to prepare them for technological changes in the workplace – a tactic that could prove useful for ensuring gender disparity does not increase. The MGI report suggests that companies and governments can support female workers across industries by:

- Investing in training programmes and platforms that help women develop necessary skills;
- Enabling women to balance paid and unpaid work, and developing infrastructure networks to enable their working mobility; and
- Raising women’s access to technology, their skills to use it, and their share of tech jobs and leadership roles.

#### **MORE THAN TECHNICAL SKILL**

While automation and AI are rendering many current physical and manual skills obsolete, the need for technological know-how is becoming increasingly prevalent. According to the *Mail & Guardian*, 4IR demands transferable skills and capabilities that will encourage resource-intensive work.

These capabilities are centred on the four Cs: Critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. Additionally, says the MGI report, the demand for social and emotional skills will also speed up. It’s impossible for a robot to be empathetic; hence the need for the very human attribute of high emotional intelligence. Online

short courses could be useful to assist women in the workforce with developing their technical, emotional and knowledge-management skill sets.

#### **JOB TRANSITIONS ARE A NO-BRAINER**

As more of the working world becomes automated, approximately 400 million jobs could potentially be lost by 2030, reports MGI. At the same time, the report points to a net increase in jobs during the same period – more than 150 million, in fact. In addition, up to nine percent of employed people may end up in new occupations. Women workers face significant challenges, such as currently occupying jobs that are not highly paid or that may become partially automated.

Yet, if upskilled sufficiently, women will be able to transition between both occupations and skill levels, allowing them to work more flexibly, and to use their social and emotional skills – skills that are often associated with lower-paid or unpaid work. They will be able to learn to integrate these skills with the technological expertise required for 4IR through digital-learning programmes that allow them to learn in their own time and at their own pace. Importantly, there needs to be a focus on both practical and theoretical capabilities, so that people are empowered to hit the ground running with instantly applicable skills. ☺

*This article appears with permission of Stellenbosch Graduate Institute (SGI), which offers online short courses designed to help first-time students as well as employees looking to develop the necessary skills for the 4IR workplace.*  
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