

# The Robots are here ! Are municipalities ready ?

Harlan Cloete & Karabo Moloko

20 September 2019

Last night I returned from Johannesburg where Karabo Moloko and I presented a paper for the Department of Higher Education on the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4iR) and the implications for post school education. The 4iR, now a local reality, offers huge potential to municipalities in particular to transform and realign the delivery processes. It has the potential to leapfrog and accelerate delivery of key services through digital enabled solutions.

Our pilot study considered the perceptions of line managers and HR practitioners in two municipalities in the Western Cape and that of two trade unions. Through quantitative research we analysed the data along 6 core themes, reported on below.

## **Strategy and Leadership**

There is consensus amongst the actors that there is no digital strategy included in the municipal strategy (IDP). It is therefore not surprising that there is no digital transformation team in place, with low budget allocation for digital technologies. What is worrying is that leadership decision making are not fully based on empirical data evidence.

## **Customer Care**

There is deep understanding amongst the actors that customer needs are changing. Municipalities are investing in digital channels such as online payment services and customer portals however municipalities are not sufficiently using customer data to inform decision making and customers are not involved in defining their requirement, prioritization and solutions. One participants argued that management act in total isolation, they operate and develop strategies on their own and exclude shop stewards.”

## **Municipal Culture**

There is overwhelming positive feedback on value of ICT in improving delivery and controls in municipalities with diverging views on whether there is ‘resistance to change due to technology’. In general it is felt that Information technology can only be embraced if it is well communicated. However as one participant reported, “line managers need a change of attitude.”

## **People**

Amongst the organisational actors there is consensus that technology enhances job satisfaction. However the organisational actors expressed a concern about job security with the increase of technology. As reported by one respondent, “no communication done by the municipality to sensitise the subordinates on changes and to get their sense of ideas, which is why subordinates are mostly in the dark.”

## **Risk Management**

The research findings indicate that risk management component and information security and protection of personal information controls are sufficiently embedded. However more work must be done to strengthen information security risk at the organisational and managerial level. The many platforms for reporting was highlighted as a risk with no real system in place to address compliance and reporting.

## **Change Management**

Municipalities are not preparing for change and management in particular are perceived to not be anticipating and leading change, nor are they perceived to be open minded towards new ideas and policies. It is concluded that management in municipalities are not celebrating and rewarding change and are not at the forefront of change initiatives. “Management are resistant to change, clearly biased when gathering data”, as reported by a participant. The cry from one of the research participants was for an integrated reporting mechanism, arguing that there is a real risk of managers becoming “glorified admin clerks with B.Degrees sitting in offices, IT should be tailored to seamlessly work for us, and not make us reporting slaves”

## **Conclusion**

The DHET conference concluded that more research should be done. And yes, we concur. But in the short term we better embrace the wisdom of philanthropist Mike Bloomberg, who maintains, *“Our work is driven by reliable data, and we follow it wherever it leads. We use it to identify problems and opportunities others have overlooked – and to target our resources, measure our success and adjust our strategies”*.

So what should be done? We need to ensure that evidence based decision making at municipal level be introduced as articulated by SALGA president Parks Tau (2019), *“Delivering policy and public goods should be based on data as opposed to just subjective opinions, dogmatism and even functional*

*politics. Evidence-based policy-making has more chances of succeeding if it prioritises wide-ranging consultation and co-creation of policies. This will allow us to be proactive and not simply to be reactive in our response to structural challenges we are daily confronted with.”*

We maintain that the 4iR municipal champion, is the skills development facilitator (SDF) who should embrace their evolving role away from admin clerk to that of strategic partner. The primary task of the functionary is to ensure that human resource development (skills planning) is credible and to prepare the municipality for the changing nature of work (World Bank 2019 Report). Municipalities we will have to gather **data** (evidence) to compile 5- 10 year workplace skills plans, make sure they use data analytics (forecasting) to turn the data into **information** in order for the municipality to make better HRD **decisions** (interventions) to ultimately improve municipal performance. It's as simple as that.

The recent cabinet endorsement of the Khawuleza (*hurry up*) district service delivery model entrenches participatory governance as envisaged by Tau. It is a viable sustainable mechanism to build socially cohesive societies that are capacitated to drive impactful programmes and implement social compacts between the private sector, civil society and municipalities (Mabuza, 2019). Municipalities and by implication communities will be left behind if we fail to act NOW.

My friends, the robots are not coming. They are here! The question is, ARE YOU READY ?

**END**

#### **The research team**

**Dr Harlan Cloete** is an Extraordinary lecturer at the School of Public Leadership -Stellenbosch University. His main research interest is exploring effective and ineffective HRD governance systems in the public sector with a keen interest in local government.

**Ms Karabo Moloko** is a 4iR champion and the owner and CEO of Unleash Institute and , Director at CoLABProject Implementation. She holds a BCom from UCT, Certified PMP and Executive Programmes from Instead and Oxford University, majoring in Digitisation.