

INAUGURAL LECTURE

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SENATE HALL

PROF IL POTGIETER

**THE NEW WORLD OF WORK: DIGITALLY CONNECTED YET
PSYCHOLOGICALLY DISCONNECTED**

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Colleagues from the College of Economic and Management Sciences,

Broader Unisa community and other institutions,

Family, friends and associates,

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

Good morning, goeie môre, dumelang, sawubona.

I would like to welcome you all to this inaugural lecture. I greatly appreciate your attendance on this occasion.

INTRODUCTION

My career in research has taken me along a number of different paths. My initial research focused on management competencies needed by chairs of departments for the successful leadership of academic departments. Over the past few years, my focus has shifted towards to the wellbeing and coping abilities of employees within the turbulent, fast-changing digital world of work, as influenced by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which has steadily created a “new normal” working context.

My topic today, entitled ***The new world of work: Digitally connected yet psychologically disconnected***, is a consideration of the impact of the digitally driven new normal working context on employee wellbeing and coping abilities. Never have we been more lonely, uncertain and, as reported by various recent studies, faced with as much psychological distress in the form of anxiety and depression. In the words of Emerson Csorba (2016) in the opinion pages of the *New York Times*, “The relationships we form digitally are superficial at best, and the social comparison that these connections fosters can be psychologically damaging.”

This topic provided me with the opportunity to reflect on and compare findings and conclusions in my field both pre-COVID as well as in the current new normal career space.

THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND COVID-19

The first, second and third industrial revolutions gave humanity steam power, electricity and electronics respectively. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is a fundamental shift that brings with it a set of radically new smart technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, algorithms, the internet of things, 3D printing, bio printing, gene editing and autonomous vehicles, all of which are set to transform the world at an incredible speed.

By explaining fourth industrial revolution, I would like to quote Schwab (2015).

We stand on the brink of a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope, and complexity, the transformation will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before. We do not yet know just how it will unfold, but one thing is clear: the response to it must be integrated and comprehensive, involving all stakeholders of the global polity, from the public and private sectors to academic and civil society.

The emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (also referred to as Industry 4.0) has forced us to rethink the human resource (HR) function and human capital management within organisations. Futurists predict that more than half of the jobs we do today will in the future be done by smart technology, artificial intelligence and robots. Alarmingly, this prediction was made before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The changes and restrictions that have come about due to the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated the adoption of technology in the workplace, presenting countries around the world with unparalleled economic and social challenges. The introduction of technology has been forced upon all profit and non-profit organisations, whether they were ready for it or not. This may mean that many organisations will start to re-assess their strategies and current job structures and functions with the aim of adapting to a more competitive business environment involving new technology, artificial intelligence and robots.

With the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, what was once considered normal has forever been changed. Who would have thought that visiting family and friends would be forbidden, that our children would have to be home schooled and not permitted to participate in any sports activities, that we would be prohibited from buying from certain stores and that we would not be allowed leave home without wearing a mask? I am sure you remember that at one point in terms of South African lockdown policies we were prohibited from buying sandals and open-toed shoes! These drastic (and often bizarre) changes are also seen in the workplace. The nature of people's work, jobs and careers drastically changed and required them to adapt to the now so-called "new normal" work

environment, which has entailed a combination of the technology-driven Fourth Industrial Revolution, remote working and social distancing.

Together with global demographic and economic trends, the increased competition for competitive intelligence, the radical changes to the workplace and skills requirements emanating from Industry 4.0 as well as remote working policies have created a perfect storm for human resource management.

The changes within the workplace apply not only to the way in which work is done, but also to everyday life, as organisational systems do not exist without human beings. Managing employees as human beings and helping them cope within this perfect storm is therefore of utmost importance.

DISCUSSION

In this changing world of work, the only thing that we can count on is change. My research focus is on how employees perceive and cope with these technological advancements and changes within the working environment, and specifically how these influence their jobs, careers and wellbeing.

Coping

Coping is the ability to deal with and attempt to overcome problems and difficulties. Positive coping strengths are essential personal resources which help employees to deal constructively with the changes within the career space as well as the complex interaction between the individual and the environment. Positive coping is a multidimensional construct which includes inventive coping behaviour – behaviours such as positive problem-solving anchored in an individual's self-esteem, internal locus of control, optimism, humour and positive reframing, and emotional, motivational and interpersonal or social capacities. Positive coping also includes engaging coping behaviour, which entails the ability to generate and maintain positive emotions, feeling self-efficacious in

alleviating stress through emotional granularity and feelings of happiness and engagement. Intentional coping behaviour relates to proactive coping through intrinsic motivational and self-efficacious goal-directed behaviour, conscientiousness, adaptability, resilience and flourishing. Lastly, influential coping behaviour is positive social behaviour through extroverted behaviour, positive interactions with others, agreeableness and building social support. It is thus evident that positive coping resources are a combination of a dynamic and complex set of cognitive, emotional, behavioural and interpersonal or social behavioural responses to a stressful event.

Significant correlations are confirmed by numerous studies that demonstrate that the ability to positively and effectively cope with uncertain and stressful events, such as those presented by the new normal career space, directly influence an individual's wellbeing.

The World Health Organisation views mental health as a state of wellbeing in which a person is able to realise their abilities, cope with everyday stresses, work and contribute to society. Subsequently, it links wellbeing to a person's position in life, their self-concept, values, culture and goals. A report by Deloitte, published in 2020, indicated that 80% of organisations recognise the importance of employee wellbeing, but alarmingly a mere 12% believe that they are ready and able to contribute towards the wellbeing of their employees. This underscores the importance of an increased focus on employee wellbeing, while maintaining organisational goals and objectives.

Advancing research into and knowledge of the psychosocial variables that influence the agile coping behaviour and wellbeing of employees has become important in helping employees to survive this perfect storm within the new world of work career space.

Employees in most industries are experiencing increased pressure from both their employing organisation and the customers they serve to utilise advanced technologies as emanating from Industry 4.0. Research suggests that the speed of technological changes introduced by Industry 4.0 has created a significant gap between the current ability and skills of employees and the rapidly changing requirements of their roles. Who would have

thought that primary school teachers would need to present classes on a technological platform, that doctors would need to consult and make a diagnosis over the internet, or that all students would need to use technology to write exams? Technological innovation and its accelerated implementation therefore require employees to develop a wide range of new competencies such as technological skills, the ability to analyse complex data, creativity, adaptability, and social and emotional skills.

In order for employees to survive within and cope with the new normal employment context, rapid upskilling and agile, flexible adaptation is essential. The pressure to continuously change and adapt to these drastic shifts has an impact on the wellbeing of employees.

Stress

Rapid changes and increased pressure and role demands lead to anxiety and stress among employees. Anxiety and stress-related feelings negatively influence employee productivity, compromising the competitive edge of any organisation. In collaboration with some colleagues, our recent research suggested that employees should develop coping resources to deal with anxiety and stress posed by the new normal career requirements.

Human resource management

Although Industry 4.0 and technology give rise to a number of challenges for both the employee and the organisation, the opportunities offered by technology are enormous. These changes pose a significant challenge for human resource management. Human resource professionals are expected not only to assist with the implementation of new digital systems and innovative organisational solutions, but also to provide employees with opportunities to develop effective coping resources to enable them to seize opportunities in the new world of work. Insight into the psychosocial variables that influence agile coping behaviour of employees is therefore paramount if employees are not only to survive, but also to excel in the new world of work in the digital era.

For decades, flexible working arrangements and working from home were possible only for a few elite, mostly white-collar employees. The global COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns forced many employees to adapt and work from home. As employees settled into the new normal working context of working remotely, what was once considered a benefit (that is, the flexibility to work from home) now imposed new challenges for both employees and organisations. Previous research emphasised that the positive outcomes of working remotely were enjoyed only by those employees who chose to work from home. Working from home as part of the new normal working context or lockdown regulations, however, offered employees no choice. Consequently, many employees did not respond positively to being required to work remotely. In fact, many employees reported increased levels of stress, loneliness and even depression due to being forced to work from home. Remote working had a negative effect on their wellbeing and attachment to the organisations.

Research findings/results

Although many studies have focused on the positive effect of remote working, such as enhanced productivity and better work–life balance, other studies have found remote working to have negative outcomes, such as stress, anxiety, and a reduction in employee interactions, social connectedness and creativity.

Some of my research (such as my recently published article entitled Psychological attachment in the new world of work: Influence of career navigation and career wellbeing attributes) revealed remote working in the new normal COVID-19 career space to result in reduced psychological attachment. I found work–family conflict to be one of the most significant contributors to lower levels of psychological attachment to the organisation and decreased levels of wellbeing. Many employees struggle to separate work and home life, as working from home also means living at work. Other researchers found that enforced remote working leads to decreased motivation, burnout, increased stress and lower levels of creative problem-solving.

It is easy for technology-enabled employees to work from anywhere in the world. Employees around the globe have been connected for many years. With the accelerated adoption of technology due to enforced working from home practices and the emergence of the right tools to support telework, employees have been provided with boundaryless opportunities to work for any company abroad or at satellite offices. Employees are thus connected. Although this is a positive outcome for many employees, employees have in some cases become less attached and committed to their current organisations owing to attractive opportunities to work for international organisations. Keeping valuable employees attached and committed to the organisation has thus become an essential human resource practice within the new normal working context.

Another dilemma associated with working remotely is that employees are technologically connected, but psychologically not so much. Not in terms of their commitment or attachment to the organisation, nor to their fellow colleagues. Interacting through a technological platform such as Zoom or Teams does not provide employees with the opportunity to connect with one another on a deeper personal level. Connecting with colleagues on a deeper level provides the opportunity to form workplace friendships, which have been found to be one of the most significant contributors to coping and employee wellbeing. Workplace friendships are different from general types of friendships, as they occur within a workplace specifically and comprise informal ties between employees who support one another in various ways. Support can be provided through instrumental support (such as practical assistance or sharing of information) or emotional support (such as being empathetic or caring). Workplace friendship is thus more than just a mutual acquaintanceship, but is instead a voluntary relation within the workplace with a co-worker that includes commitment, mutual trust, shared values and interests as well as a common liking in each other.

In addition, the increased use of machines has reduced social interactions among employees, and therefore reduced the opportunity to connect with people and form meaningful workplace friendships. Social distancing and the new normal of working from

home have reduced social support and the opportunity to invest in workplace friendships. Workplace friendship is a supportive function that helps employees to advance in their careers through social network connections. My recent research found and emphasised that social support and workplace friendships are essential coping mechanisms that enable individuals to deal with unexpected or uncertain changes within the working environment.

It is therefore not surprising that workplace friendship is recognised as an essential part of the informal structure of any organisation. The increased tendency to use teams within an organisation is a mechanism for creating friendship opportunities. Considerable research has been conducted on the benefit of healthy workplace friendships. On an organisational level, workplace friendship increases institutional participation, motivates employees, increases productivity and the bottom line, grows organisational commitment and retention, and provides platforms for information sharing and creative brainstorming. On an individual level, workplace friendship contributes to enhanced motivation of employees, greater career wellbeing, increased trust and respect among colleagues and reduced feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, and helps employees to break the “glass ceiling” (thus moving beyond gender and race stereotypes). Several of my research studies within a range of business sectors found significant correlations between workplace friendship and career wellbeing.

Employees who have good friends at work are able to more effectively manage their own needs and emotions through cognitive processes. Employees with healthy workplace friendships are less likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and low self-esteem, and these employees are more likely to engage on a social level and participate with other people. Also, employees with healthy workplace friendships find support in their work friends, and as a result experience less stress arising from demanding or uncertain situations. It therefore seems that workplace friendships have a direct influence on the positive coping resources of employees.

It is therefore ironic – never have we been more connected (that is on a technological level), yet so disconnected on a personal and psychological level.

Proposed strategies for coping and wellbeing within the new normal working context

I would like to share with you my research and experience within this field of agile coping and wellbeing within the new normal working context. My research emphasises the need to find a balance between connection and connection through affording employees the flexibility to work remotely and connect on technological platforms while at the same time having the opportunity to connect socially on a personal level. Should employees have opportunities to develop friendships at work and if they have an interest in forming workplace friendships, they will be able to successfully adapt to changes within the working environment, such as technological changes and challenges presented by Industry 4.0 and the new normal working context. My research further indicates that should employees feel that they have good workplace friendships, they will be equipped to deal and cope with stressful situations within the workplace by harnessing inventive, engaging, intentional and influential coping behaviour.

If organisations are to survive and thrive in the digital era and the new normal working situation that it has ushered in, they need to invest in their greatest asset, that is, their employees. Individuals are nevertheless expected to take control of their own career planning and career management. Since work plays a significant part in any person's life, employees need to invest in personal resources that will equip them to deal with stressors within their working environment.

I have published and co-published several book chapters and articles recommending strategies for effectively enhancing personal resources to positively cope on both an organisational and an individual level (Coetzee et al., 2019; Coetzee et al., 2021a; Coetzee et al., 2021b; Potgieter, 2019; Potgieter, 2021; Potgieter et al., 2019; Potgieter et al., 2021).

Proposed strategies on organisational level

Some of the proposed strategies on organisational level include the following:

Since change and the adoption of technology are inevitable in most working environments and industries, it is recommended that organisations should implement online and technologically assisted career interventions. Taking into consideration the changes in the workplace due to Industry 4.0, and even more so with the onset of COVID-19 and the restrictions that it has necessitated, digital support practices in the form of online career information sessions and video-based career counselling are a tool organisations should not ignore.

Organisations cannot help employees to enter into friendships within their workplaces, as the need to make friends is dependent on the individual and their specific needs and personality traits. However, organisations can create environments conducive to connecting with colleagues, as a result of which people may perhaps enter into a workplace friendship. Organisations can also provide sufficient social time during the workday to allow employees to engage with colleagues socially.

The use of open plan offices offers employees greater opportunity to become involved on a personal level, as face-to-face contact and interactions occur more frequently. However, greater use of technology reduces the opportunities employees have to meet with each other face-to-face. A number of studies have found, however, that workplace friendship can nevertheless be developed through the use of technology and virtual platforms such as e-mail, Facebook and social media, although virtual interaction is not as meaningful as face-to-face or human contact interaction. Organisations (especially those that use technology and virtual platforms to conduct their business) should strive to create face-to-face interaction opportunities as much as possible. This can be achieved by scheduling some meetings at the office (as opposed to the exclusive use of platforms such as Zoom or Teams), or by hosting regular social events.

Another mechanism organisations can use to create workplace friendship opportunities to connect on a deeper level is the use of work teams, as employees are then “forced” to connect with people, and opportunities are thus created to develop friendships while working together closely.

Organisations should strive to enhance and develop their employees’ positive coping capacities, and should help employees to shift their mindset to positive thinking, which will facilitate the development of positive coping behaviour resources. Organisations should implement positive psychology interventions in order to develop and enhance positive coping capacities. The administration of a positive coping behaviour inventory (which is an instrument developed by one of our doctoral students) may help employees to become aware of their coping capacities and may help them to shift their mindset to more positive thinking behaviour.

Organisations should equip their employees with skills and self-regulatory career behaviour mechanisms to adapt to changing career situations. Teaching employees how to prepare themselves to cope with unpredicted changes enhances their wellbeing – and if there is one thing that we can be assured of, it is that unpredicted changes will come.

Coping with and not only surviving, but thriving in the new normal working context is not the responsibility of the organisation alone; individuals need to accept accountability for their own career path and wellbeing as well.

Proposed strategies on individual level

Individuals need to take responsibility for equipping themselves with the skills required to survive in the digital era. As everything is being digitised, individuals should consider enrolling for online technology courses, of which a number are available on the internet. Understanding the technology and acquiring the skills needed to work comfortably on technological platforms will reduce stress and increase coping abilities.

Employees should participate in social events facilitated by their employers. They should embrace opportunities to work in teams and both provide colleagues with support and seek it from them as a means to strengthen and deepen social ties in the workplace. Individuals should, furthermore, consciously and purposefully shift their mindset to positive thinking. They should seek out the opportunities presented by change and challenges, rather than focusing on the obstacles, uncertainties and inconvenience caused by change.

A number of earlier research studies have reported a significant correlation between physical health and positive coping behaviour. Engaging in physical activities (whether strenuous exercise or light training such as walking) can contribute to a positive mindset and positive coping within the new normal working context. Exercising with colleagues in groups may not only improve health and thus coping abilities, but will also provide opportunities to form workplace friendships. The facilitation of group-type exercises in which colleagues participate is therefore another opportunity that organisations can use, not only to improve the physical and mental health of their workforce, but also to create opportunities to connect on a friendship and personal level.

I am therefore of the opinion that both organisations and individuals should strive to find a balance between technological connection and psychological connection.

Research published before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that individuals believe that if they are given the flexibility to work remotely, they will be more productive and experience higher levels of wellbeing. It quickly became apparent, however, that rapidly enforced remote working policies did not have precisely the outcomes expected. Yes – some of us might be more productive, but are we creative? Are we finding innovative solutions? Are we happy? Are we coping? Are we really the best version of ourselves that we can be? Or are we just comfortable?

We have not yet entered the post-COVID career space. One thing that we have all learnt in the past two years is that change can come unexpectedly, and what is frowned upon today may be totally acceptable and considered our new normal tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

I believe that we are at a critical point and a defining moment in time. We have the opportunity to redefine our new normal and provide insight to the labour market into the balance between being technologically connected (coupled with all its benefits and opportunities) and being socially and psychologically connected (coupled with all its benefits).

Let us not be responsible for causing the generation to come to be psychologically damaged. Let us overcome superficial connections and invest in finding a balance between technological connection and psychological connection.

I am looking forward to being part of this ongoing journey to discover what the impact of the new normal career space on the psychology of employees will be. My passion lies in researching the impact of the changes on employees and proposing strategies on both the organisational and the individual level to cope with the changes and adapt to whatever our new normal may be tomorrow.

Ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to say a few words of thanks. In celebrating this special milestone I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all of you who are present at this event (including those attending remotely) and who are sharing this occasion with me. I would like to thank Unisa and the College of Economic and Management Sciences in particular for the support and for all the opportunities I have received. I would like to thank Prof MS Mothata for the welcoming address, Prof Mogale for the kind introduction, and Prof Barney Erasmus for graciously agreeing to be my respondent today. I would like to thank all my colleagues within the department of Human Resource Management and those in Industrial and Organisational Psychology with whom I have worked closely. I

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