

The future of work: skills for 2020

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Anel Martin highlights the top ten skills you need to future proof your career

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has produced a report in consultation with the most influential chief human resource and strategy officers in the world; entitled “The Future of Jobs”, it was launched during the Annual Meeting of the WEF in 2016.

The goal of these discussions, and the report, is to identify and predict what skills employers will be looking for in 2020. Five years from now, over one-third of skills (35%) that are considered important in today’s workforce will have changed. But is our formal training and personal development taking this into account? Or are we preparing for an economy and a world of work which will no longer exist?

The economy has already moved into what is called the Fourth Industrial Revolution or The Connection Economy. Each economic era is driven by its own technology and this one is driven by social media.

Social media gives us the ability to create content, sell products, build communities, and form human interactions and customer experiences in a way that only large corporations could a few decades ago. We now have a voice, and more choices than ever before - and so do our customers.

What will be required from you? If you can produce a product or service of high quality that is unique, craft good relationships, and exceed the expectations of your customers, you will be very successful in this new era. However, if you are an “Average Joe”, waiting for instructions, doing things the way you have always done them, and not taking initiative, your company can (and will) find someone cheaper. The major differentiator will be doing “human work” as Seth Godin puts it. Working without detailed instructions, figuring things out, innovating and solving problems will be prized and rewarded. An exciting and scary time to be an employee!



There is a very direct correlation between the new economy and the list for 2020 and I think that by focusing on and honing these skills we will be more equipped to face the new world of work.

In general, the list is good news for office professionals. I think it will have a positive impact on our role in the future, and make our chosen profession more respected and more valuable.

But knowing the list, and actively harnessing and enhancing the skills on the list, are two very different things.

The Top 10 Skills

- 1 Complex problem solving
- 2 Critical thinking
- 3 Creativity
- 4 People management
- 5 Coordinating with others
- 6 Emotional intelligence
- 7 Judgment and decision-making
- 8 Service orientation
- 9 Negotiation
- 10 Cognitive flexibility

So, how do really great assistants measure up?
How do they use these skills?

1 Complex problem solving

Assistants use complex problem solving daily. We work with tasks we have never worked on before, resolve issues that arise on projects, during travel, or simply in the daily lives of our executives. We reach out to our networks, Google, or simply use our common sense to solve problems. Complex problem solving requires logic and confidence, and gets easier with experience.

2 Critical thinking

The definition of critical thinking is the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue, in order to form a judgment. Assistants are expected to review and analyse information, and are expected to be practical and intelligent. We need to understand what is happening in high level discussions and then translate strategic instructions into practical solutions, and concrete action. We are often expected to weigh up alternatives on behalf of our executives, and suggest a preferred option. Critical thinking can be enhanced by strong business acumen, and a network of subject matter experts that you can consult if you need assistance.

3 Creativity

Creativity is not being “arty-farty”. It is the ability to see things from a unique perspective. To be able to join the dots in a situation; dots that others don’t even see. It is the ability to create new processes, put together an event, explore solutions to a problem, make a birthday card, sort out a diary conflict, design a layout in PowerPoint, make a new connection and brainstorm with the team. These are all creative processes, but there are many more daily examples.

4 People management

Our executives spend more time than ever in meetings, so we are often the central point of contact for our team. We are the one they call when there is a problem, they need someone to confide in, or look to for guidance. We often manage their leave requests and follow up on their action items on behalf of our executive. Assistants are taking on more of the management portion of their executive’s jobs

which frees them up to lead! Assistants manage up, down and side-ways.

5 Coordinating with others

Assistants and project managers are the only staff that are expected to work cross-functionally, and at all levels of the organization, on a regular basis. We schedule and liaise with other divisions; we manage stakeholders in our team and externally. We ensure that all role players have produced their portion of the work so that we meet our deadlines. Coordination is also the ability to get people into the same place (actual or virtual) so that they can do important work - hence the importance of diary management in the new economy. We manage time like an asset and make sure meetings are productive and efficient.

6 Emotional intelligence

According to a 2015 survey conducted by Avery, in association with Executive Secretary Magazine, “PAs have a higher Emotional Intelligence, which means they are better able to recognise and manage emotions in themselves and others”. Assistants in the study cited numerous reasons why emotional intelligence was vital to their success, including having to be the ears and eyes of their bosses, managing expectations, being in a position of confidence, reporting on morale and understanding how to get the best from people.” I completely agree with these findings, in my own experience you cannot be a good assistant without very high emotional intelligence.

7 Judgment and decision making

Assistants are often expected to make decisions on behalf of the executive, in their absence or in the scope of what they are expected to achieve during a working day. An intelligent and well-informed assistant with good business acumen can add great value in ensuring that the business moves forward when urgent decisions are required. Naturally, we all need to be aware of the delegation of authority when doing so, and what decisions are in our preview and appropriate. Your decision making will also be limited by how empowered you are, the trust that your management team has in you, and

your ability to take responsibility and deal with the consequences.

8 Service orientation

Being an office professional is a service based occupation. In the past, roles that provided service were looked down on, but the new economy will need this skill. It will not simply be about customer service, but rather customer experience.

9 Negotiation

Assistants rely on influence vs. positional power all the time. They rely on negotiation skills when dealing with people superior in rank or in divisions outside of their own. They often need to mediate situations with other team members, or calm and assist angry customers. Top tier assistants are already well versed in this.

10 Cognitive flexibility

This is the human ability to adapt cognitive processing strategies to face new and unexpected conditions in the environment. As assistants, we are regularly faced with change, unfamiliar tasks, and new circumstances. Our ability to deal with these, without succumbing to stress, will make us extremely valuable in the future. This is perhaps our biggest area of development as a group. We are averse to change and can be stuck in our ways. It is important to realize that change will be our only constant in the future and being flexible and adjusting at speed will be great for our careers.

Does this list make you feel positive about the future? It should! Very few employees are as well positioned as we are to face the imminent changes in the world of work. Work is evolving from the industrial, traditional employment space into the future of collaborating, idea creation, connecting and problem solving. Make sure that you are riding this wave in your organization! How do we ride the wave and not get swept away? We really focus on these top ten skills and enhance them in the next few years to ensure that our careers are future-proof.

about the author



Anel Martin is a multi-award winning ex-Personal Assistant who now works as a full time trainer. She has extensive experience in the profession and is widely considered an industry expert. Anel is also one of the Directors of the Isipho Admin Bursary (www.isiphoadmin.org.za) and currently involved in the World Administrator Summit 2018. She is the author of *The Executive Secretary Guide to Building a powerful personal brand*, available now on Amazon. Anel will be speaking at Executive Secretary LIVE Johannesburg 16 & 17 February 2018. For more information please visit www.executivesecretarylive.com

