



From unequal pay to robots - the hot button workplace issues likely to dominate 2018

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Workplaces the world over are changing rapidly thanks to the way we prefer to work, social changes and technological advances.

Richard Andrews, Managing Director of Inspiration Office, an Africa-wide office space and furniture consultancy said seldom has so much change come at once to the workplace as it has this

year. These are the more significant trends that will continue to dominate the conversation around work in 2018.

UNEQUAL PAY

South Africa is ranked 19 in a global index report on gender inequality released by the World Economic Forum (WEF) late last year. The report finds that while South Africa has improved its share of women legislators, senior officials and managers, the gender wage gap in the country has increased. In recent years, women have made significant progress towards equality in a number of areas such as education and health, with the Nordic countries leading the way.

But the global trend now seems to have made a U-turn, especially in workplaces, where full gender equality is not expected to materialise until 2234 according to WEF.

"This is a hot topic the world over," said Andrews. "And until there is fairness, wage gaps will continue to be scrutinised. Closing the wage gap could add millions to the economy and uplift so many people's lives."

Andrews noted that he expects more countries around the world to follow in the steps the UK took last year in making it a legal requirement for companies with more than 250 employees to declare the gender wage gap.

WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

Last year there was a lot of news of workers coming forward to tell their stories of discrimination and harassment at the hands of those in power. In light of these developments, employees expect their leaders to rest their values and workplace policies. Said Andrews: "We need to ask what can we do about this?"

"It starts by taking a more responsible approach to leadership and continues with a concerted effort to change the way organisations monitor employee interaction throughout the company."

Andrews noted that leaders need to "move beyond check-the-box engagement metrics to dig in and do deeper work developing transparent cultures. In short, 'See something, say something.'"

GENERATION INCLUSION

"Generation Z's university graduates are entering the workplace full-time, changing the fabric of the workforce," said Andrews.

"Gen Z came of age during the 2008 economic crisis, and many within the generation are more interested in job stability than their millennial peers, who have gained a job-hopper reputation. Employers should be thinking about fostering growth opportunities rather than simply looking to pay them more to keep them loyal."

Mixed generational management will be at the top and throughout organisations, with Gen X and millennials leading,

while boomers and traditionalists migrate to project and consultative contractor roles, Andrews noted.

The necessity for employers to offer their staff a palette of places, presence and postures, thereby giving complete choice and control over where and how they work, has never been greater than it is now.

"Older millennials are entering the C-Suite, and they will be asking boomers to help them as advisers, coaches or mentors," he added.

FLEXIBLE, REMOTE AND FREELANCE WORK

Globally, the importance of flexible work for both the already-employed and for job seekers can't be understated.

"In addition, telecommuting and working from home is on the rise too," said Andrews. "Not only will more companies invest in remote workers, but those who require workers on site will do everything possible to make work feel like home. Developers will adapt with mixed-use developments that bring workers closer to the office." Andrews noted that Inspiration Office has changed its furniture offering in the past few years along with these trends to meet the demand for more comfortable, less formal office spaces at rates that don't break the bank.

There is also a rapid rise in the freelance workforce in South Africa and around the world. In the U.S. for instance, the freelance is growing more than three times faster than the U.S. workforce overall. The number of U.S. freelancers now stands at

57.3 million, representing an 8.1% jump over the last three years.

ROBOTS AND AI

A recent report on the future of work from McKinsey noted that as many as 375 million workers around the world may need to switch occupational categories and learn new skills, because in about 60% of jobs, at least one-third of the work can be automated.

"It isn't cause for alarm just yet," Andrews noted. "Only 5% of jobs can be completely eliminated by automation. But it does mean that workers need to be prepared to make a change by learning new skills and constantly adapting."

As Artificial Intelligence (AI) becomes part of even more technologies from Amazon's Alexa to smart home devices and cloud computing platforms, demand for workers skilled in artificial intelligence will rise.