



## **Career Flexibility: A Panacea to Skills Obsolescence**

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### **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

### **Article Information**

DOI: 10.9734/AJESS/2020/V7i430204

#### Editor(s):

(1) Dr. Nasser Mustapha, University of the West Indies, Jamaica.

#### Reviewers:

(1) Samah Khaled Zahran, Ain Shams University, Egypt.

(2) P. Moodley, South Africa.

Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/56657>

**Short Research Article**

**Received 26 February 2020**

**Accepted 03 May 2020**

**Published 09 May 2020**

### **ABSTRACT**

A survey was carried out in Harare on young people who have completed college or University. The main objective was to analyse the employment status of youth in relation to the skills they have. Results indicated that the majority of the respondents are not formally employed, or those employed are not employed in the jobs they trained for. As a result, there is a high level of skills mismatch leading to skills obsolescence. Many graduates are unemployed or have resorted to self-employment or some type of entrepreneurship. The results also indicate that most of the research participants are engaged in hybrid jobs, mainly technical jobs so as to reduce the impact of skills obsolescence and at the same time earn some money to make a living. The study recommends that young people be encouraged to train in multi disciplines whilst in University or College so as to have career flexibility and competitive advantage when they graduate.

*Keywords: Career flexibility; skills obsolescence; renaissance job; hybrid job.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Most parents these days need their children's help with their computer or smartphone, this means the skills they learnt on the dialling phone have long become obsolete. This obsolescence of skills has now spread like wildfire reaching the

world of work. Skills obsolescence is not only affecting older people as formerly believed [1]. It is currently haunting a number of young employees and is the terror that looms over those in training. A lot of young people have this fear of the future of the career they are training for.

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Technological developments have led to replacement of some human skills with automated skills resulting in mismatch between required and available skills. This in turn has greatly contributed to high levels of skills obsolescence [2]. Changes in the terrain of the job market and the world of work demand career flexibility. Being able to take a flexible approach to work situations is crucial for reducing the impact of obsolescence. A study by Rishipal and Chand [3] found that there was positive relationship between counter productive work behaviour (such as disgruntlement) and obsolescence among employees of organizations.

The traditional approach of training for a lifetime career is fast fading away and being replaced by a new flexible career approach to career development. The job market has become so fluid that in some cases some careers that seemed lucrative few years ago become obsolete after ten or fifteen years. According to Chauhan and Chauhan [4] the pace of career change is very dynamic, what worked very well yesterday, is less effective today, ineffective tomorrow and likely going to be obsolete the day after tomorrow. Skills now have a very short shelf life. Bersin [5] observed that the shelf life of expertise has continually become shorter. Even the best experts find themselves outdated in a few years. According to Soissan [6] about 50% of employee's current skills may become obsolete in two years' time. By the end of the training, newly trained young people become frustrated as they realize that the job, they trained for is replaced by machines or no longer exists, thus leaving them unemployed.

With so many changes happening at such a fast pace, it is critical that labour market information provided to learners is based on real - world data on current and projected skills audit information not on memories and wishes of parents or teachers about what the labour market used to be like when they were young. It is also of vital importance that the young people be equipped with diversity of skills, this will make them more versatile and flexible [6]. It is no longer a time to believe a career is chosen once for a lifetime. The idea of a single, long-lasting career is becoming a thing of the past [5].

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) [7], observed that rapidity of changes in the labour market leaves

most workers at the risk of losing jobs as their skills become obsolete. According to a recent reports of skills audit in Zimbabwe [8,9] there is a huge deficit of Skills in the health sciences, in Medicine, in engineering and technical jobs while there is an over-supply or surplus of skills in areas such as accounting, journalism and law and other humanities. The Medical and Health Sciences cluster showed a deficit of 95 %. Unfortunately, uninformed young people moving under peer pressure, go for careers where the market is saturated. Only after training do they face reality and feel frustrated as they realize after graduating that there are no job openings and as such their careers become obsolete. Eventually they just get employed in any job as a way of earning a living, the result is skills mismatch.

This is the challenge this millennial generation is facing. We have lots of educated people working in the jobs they never trained for. Studies indicate that skills obsolescence is frequently associated with skills mismatch. Skill obsolescence is frequently an aspect of skill mismatch [7].

The labour market and how young people move into it are changing all the time. Studies are indicating that the labour market is very precarious [10]. Technology is fast replacing us in some careers. For example, the assistants who used to work at the fuel pump are replaced by automated fuel stations, the work of the bank tellers, supermarket salespersons, and Office Secretary is fast becoming extinct. Automation and robotics are taking over the work of coding and filing. Artificial intelligence is now doing the most of the work of lawyers, the work of medical doctor assistants is replaced by virtual assistants, and skilled jobs have been transformed to office or automated ones. This means employees need to develop career flexibility, become more multidisciplinary and possess diversity of expertise or else employees will always have a constant feeling of a sense of skills obsolescence and job insecurity. While Obsolescence is associated with skills mismatch, the later in turn is positively correlated to job insecurity and consequently low job satisfaction [11], (Allen and De Grip, 2012). In addition to low job satisfaction, Chauhan and Chauhan [11] observed that skill obsolescence is also associated with low self-esteem and job insecurity. Career flexibility especially in the form of hybrid jobs renders the individual greater competitive advantage [11,12] Career flexibility

seems to be a promising panacea to the challenge of career obsolescence.

Career flexibility is an adaptable approach to career that recognizes that sustainable careers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century usually follow a flexible instead of the traditional linear progression [3]. Career flexibility means ability to engage oneself with more skills than just one. Thus, an accountant who can also has computer and information technology skills is more in demand than a mere accountant. A medical doctor who also has qualifications in Law or in Management is more preferable than a mere medical doctor. It is no longer about choosing a cutting-edge career, but having flexibility with the two or more cutting edges. Such hybrid types of jobs or Renaissance jobs will keep the person on the cutting edge [5].

Hybrid jobs (new jobs that are created by merging two disciplines) are becoming popular as the rate of unemployment escalates and the acquired skills atrophy or become obsolete. Others are resorting to "renaissance jobs" (jobs that integrate technical expertise (in one or more domains). Such jobs as web designing and marketing skills, farming and project management are becoming popular. Studies by Van Loo, de Grip and De Steur [13] indicate that career flexibility is associated with one's willingness to be functionally flexible, that is willingness to carry out tasks that may not be part of the current job. Such qualitative flexibility goes a long way to counter skills obsolescence as it empowers one with diversity of work experiences.

According to a report by World Economic forum (WEF) [14] retraining, re-skilling or up-skilling may be considered as effective means of curbing skills obsolescence and unemployment. On the other hand, studies indicate that retraining is an expensive route if it is sponsored by employing organizations [14].

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

1. Sample description isn't clear enough; what are its demographic characteristics? Then the sample represents which community research?
2. What is community research? And what are their requirements for job? Not clear also. Harare.
3. What is the ratio of who works in their specialists comparing to whom working in general? This is reflected in Table 1.

4. It isn't clear how many the teachers, employers' perception do to their specialists, and the importance of continuous training. This was not the focus of the research.
5. To what extent the society needs such development and what is the plan that research suggests according to this vision.

According to a recent reports of skills audit in Zimbabwe [8,9] there is a huge deficit of Skills in the health sciences, in Medicine

1. The study followed a cross sectional descriptive survey that was carried out by the researcher in collaboration with UNICEF (U-report) in 2019 on employability and entrepreneurial skills among the youths in Harare. The population for this research are the graduates who graduated in the last two years from the State University in Harare. The University of Zimbabwe is the main state University in Harare and it graduates 2500 graduates each year. (<https://www.uz.ac.zw/index.php/current-students/student-records/>). Data was collected via UNICEF U-report electronic instrument. The instrument did not include demographic information such as gender as the focus was employability skills across the range of graduates. The questionnaire items sought information about whether or not they are using the degree/ skills they acquired during training, if not what skills they are using to make a living.

The results indicated that career flexibility and acquiring diverse skills through re-training or adopting hybrid jobs are among the major solutions to the challenge of skills obsolescence and unemployment. The study focused on the adaptability and career flexibility of young people to a world where unemployment is rampant and skills mismatch is high. Three major questions solicited the responses from participants. Of the 564 participants who participated in the Poll 505 provided the data summarized below.

### 4. RESULTS

The results are summarised in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1. Employment status of participants**

Item	Yes	No
Are you currently formally employed?	18%	82%
Is your current employment the one you trained for?	51%	49%

**Table 2. What skills do you have apart from your academic qualifications**

Dress making	8%
Cake making	11%
Room decoration	3%
Carpentry	2%
Building	5%
Web designing	7%
Fashion designing	4%
Other	60%

From the results of the survey (Table 1), the level of young people’s unemployment is quite high in Zimbabwe and of those few who are employed, almost half of them are not employed in the area they trained for. Consequently, there is a high degree of skills mismatch, while the skills they acquired lie dormant and become obsolete.

However, the concept of career flexibility is fast catching up with the unemployed to such an extent that (although a large percentage indicated that they are degree holders) they are not just idling waiting for job openings. In response to one of the key questions “What do you do to earn a living?” several indicated that they are involved in other occupations that can sustain them while they continue with the job seeking exercise. Such renaissance jobs include buying & selling, piece jobs, farming, housekeeping, helping parents and “Hustling”. Of course, there are some who indicated that they “do nothing”.

The respondents were further asked about the other skills they have apart from the academic qualifications. Table 2 summarises the findings. The idea of being multi-skilled, developing diverse skills apart from the usual academic training renders employee’s flexibility and competitive advantage [1] Van Loo, de Grip and De Steur, 2001 [4].

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the degree of unemployment for newly graduated young people seems to be high, and there seems to be

no guarantee that there are job openings in the course you trained for. However, the observation from the results show that more than 50 % of the unemployed graduates realized the significance of career flexibility, they have acquired other skills, such as cake making, carpentry, web designing, and etc, which they use as a form of employment and are able to make a living. So, instead of just staying at home, those unemployed youths are developing new skills that make them flexible and may even give them a cutting edge in the world of work.

The apparent skills mismatch is generally attributed to lack of coordination between training providers and the informal economy and the job market. This skills mismatch could be controlled or curbed if training institutions such as higher education could coordinate with the employing organizations to understand the needs so as to offer demand driven training [15].

## 6. CONCLUSION

It can be summarized that technological developments have resulted in obsolescence of skills to the extent that unemployment has risen. Those who seem to be able to cope with such challenges are the ones who have career flexibility and have, through re training, developed cross-disciplinary careers, hybrid jobs or have deliberately acquired other skills apart from the ones originally trained for. In a way, this seems to provide a panacea to the challenge of skills obsolescence as such flexibility renders employees versatility and competitive advantage. The study recommends that training institutions, universities and Colleges should focus on equipping young people with multi-disciplinary skills so that they have career flexibility and versatility, thus rendering them competitive advantage and ability to resist skills obsolescence. Employing organizations are also encouraged to provide retraining facilities for their employees to reduce frustrations associated with skills mismatch and skills obsolescence.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that Higher and tertiary education (Universities and Colleges) design their undergraduate programs so as to have students train for a hybrid degree (BA or BSc aligned with a Technical or vocational minor subject). This will give the graduate flexibility when they graduate and there is no employment in their major area of specialization. This, in a way will serve to curb youth unemployment and

skill- obsolescence. According to (Balash, 2013) such graduates can be self- employed or make a living as entrepreneurs.

The study also recommends further research be carried out on a larger scale, perhaps regionally, eg Sub Saharan Africa, or Asia or South America to find out if similar results are obtained what alternatives young people from other countries opt for as possible solutions to the high rate of youth unemployment.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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*The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:*  
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