



## AI AT WORK: SHAPING THE WORKPLACE AND WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

So here we are - at the nexus of progress, people and policies. The question of how to address Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the market and the workplace is either a current or an emerging critical item on every corporate agenda.

AI is becoming ever more pervasive by the day. In case you blinked and missed it, you can now get a beef wellington recipe, marital counselling, or help with generating a business plan, all from WhatsApp (courtesy of Meta's embedded AI). Stanford University's recently published 2024 AI Index Report also confirmed a few things that we knew were here or coming: AI has surpassed human performance on several benchmarks and can beat most of us hands-down on things like English language understanding and making sense of images. This matters a lot in many applications, ranging from healthcare to education.

The good news is that we mere mortals are still ahead in complex problem-solving that requires broad, contextual understanding and the ability to adapt in real-time as things change – such as those situations we encounter in business every day where understanding intentions, factoring in new information, and being innovative are crucial. However, with the incredible amounts being invested over the next few years, the world's largest tech firms will continue to make huge strides in creating digital savants that will astound and confound us in equal measure.

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At Tsebo, we've chosen to opt-in to the use of AI as a transformative technology, with a deliberate programme that seeks to shape positive outcomes for our people and the way we service our clients.

*Dr. Chris Jardine  
CEO, Tsebo Solutions Group*

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Our investments are embarrassingly modest, but the value for money of accessible and safe technology is quite impressive. The fact that just about every piece of corporate software is starting to sport very usable AI tools will take us faster and further up the AI adoption curve.

We've steered away from the AI freebies in circulation and put in place company-approved tools, policies and training to keep our eyes on the prize. In our case, we are focused on reducing workloads while simultaneously aiming for a significant boost in productivity and also finding ways to generate insights to improve every aspect of our business.

As more companies embrace AI across every sector, it's clear that we will need national policies and regulations to ensure that our people, businesses, and our country are protected in an environment which arguably has insufficient rules.

At a recent forum on the skills crunch in South Africa, I shared a prevalent view that while the current skills landscape may seem daunting, AI offers a beacon of hope, enabling us to not only bridge the skills gap but also empower our workforce with new capabilities.

AI truly holds the potential to revolutionise how we address the skills gap. Adaptive training systems, tailored to individual learning preferences and coupled with virtual and augmented reality, will make learning more engaging and effective. However, unlocking this potential will require substantial investment, ideally made with the greater good in mind. South African businesses have demonstrated goodwill and a willingness to partner with government at so many critical junctures over the last few decades and we will have to do so again on this vexing skills challenge. The upside of solving this skills challenge is immense for our businesses and the economy as a whole. With our history and challenges as a country, we must ensure that technological progress promotes inclusivity and equity within the workforce and society at large.

As AI becomes more deeply integrated into our economic and social fabric, our government, as with governments the world over, is having to wrestle with

several critical questions to ensure that everyone benefits. The ethical and risk elements are many and varied. How do we practically keep manipulative AI at bay to safeguard voters, learners and consumers? How do we manage the potential impact of job displacements and reskilling people where job content changes? Should there be a “social net tax” for companies that employ bots at the expense of people? How do government, civil society, and businesses collaborate to prepare society, young people, and the workforce for the impending skills revolution? None of the answers are straightforward, but these questions and many others will need some hard answers and even harder commitments in the years ahead.

In South Africa, the government has recently kicked off the processes, which will culminate in policies, laws and regulations governing AI. Fortunately, we have some reference points from around the world, such as the EU’s Artificial Intelligence Act. In addition, dozens of other countries have developed AI policies, including the likes of the US, China, Japan, India, the UAE and Brazil. All of these share several common themes focusing on the responsible adoption of AI, upskilling the workforce, promoting economic growth and seeking to hold companies accountable for their AI practices. We should, therefore, look to the many learnings around us and ultimately adopt policies that are pragmatic, aligned with global best practices and address our unique challenges and opportunities.

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Considering the complexities and factors involved in adopting AI, Tsebo’s approach has involved some careful thought and planning. We aim to strategically integrate AI into our workplace and operations to balance our embrace of disruptive technology with empowering our employees and improving our client service.

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We cut our teeth on using AI in our security business, Thorburn, where the integration into aspects of our daily operations has fundamentally changed the dynamics of our engagements, both with our clients and within our own teams. Over the last three years, we’ve steadily built a platform which is helping us to migrate from the traditional rear-view diagnostic approach of security to a more proactive capability which provides closer to real-time risk assessments to enable quicker responses to threats. We’ve also used our security infrastructure to support our clients in managing their own customers’ experience, help with health and safety checks, and even provide analytics for their marketing teams. We are taking our many lessons from security into relevant applications for our catering, cleaning, hygiene and facilities solutions businesses.

These will accelerate once we’ve retooled our infrastructure with a new vast data repository enriched with advanced machine-learning capabilities. The potential to improve tried and tested ways of doing things is enormous, from refining menu planning and demand forecasting in catering to smarter employee rostering in our cleaning business, more efficient route planning in our hygiene division, and a whole lot more in our basket of facilities solutions. Once our infrastructure is built, the potential to do new things that bring value to our clients is even more exciting.

Internally, we’re also well into our journey, which has seen us deploy AI to support some of our teams. We have deployed AI tools in many parts of the business - from HR to Sales and Marketing, from Compliance to Internal Audit and into our Senior Executive Team; we’ve adopted a structured rollout of tools and training to help with the heavy lifting of routine, time-consuming tasks. Our goal is not just to lighten the load where people are often stretched, but also to have the AI give our employees a hand with more complex and strategic work. All our employees in this first cohort who have an AI assistant in their pockets are subject to a company policy on responsible AI use and ongoing training on how to use the tech productively and safely. Our firm belief is that this approach is as crucial for keeping our employees engaged as it is for attracting top talent looking for dynamic and innovative work environments. So far, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with most reporting huge productivity gains, but we’re developing proper impact metrics to have a more reliable scoreboard.

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With our relatively brief journey with AI, we are witnessing the profound potential it holds across all facets of our business. The magnitude of change that AI will bring obviously has the potential to reshape many aspects of society, markets and perhaps even the very construct of work as we know it.

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Implementing a thoughtful national policy and framework is essential to navigate this unknown territory effectively. While such measures may not guarantee a good outcome, the absence of a comprehensive and structured approach will certainly leave us unprepared and unable to harness these transformative shifts. As South Africa’s AI framework and policies evolve, all of us will need to adapt and seize opportunities to thrive in this new era.



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