

HR & the future workplace: Start planning for these 5 realities

You have probably heard the phrases “fourth industrial revolution” and the “future of work.” Both refer to coming changes in the way people live and perform their jobs.

Here are five things you should know about advanced technologies and the workplace. All have potentially significant effects on HR functions and the work HR professionals do.

1. It's not just AI. While artificial intelligence is making important changes to the world of work, there are additional technologies about which we should all be aware.

Organizations are using more “intelligent” robotics, performing tasks that historically required human intelligence. Biometric technology, which authenticates workers based on their unique traits (e.g., facial recognition, fingerprints and voice), are becoming more common as a secure way to authenticate employee identity.

Organizations are also increasingly using wearable technology like smartwatches, smartglasses and exoskeletons to augment employees' physical and perceptual capabilities. Finally, augmented and virtual reality are improving training and collaboration.

2. If you aren't ahead, you aren't behind ... yet. Organizations are all at different stages of digital maturity. For better or worse, business leaders will look to HR to collaborate with other strategic internal stakeholders to lead their organizations' digital transformations. Staying current with the best practices (and the legal and practical risks) associated with new technologies will be increasingly important.

3. Potential bias isn't the only legal concern. Most media and regulatory attention has focused on the potential for AI to unintentionally treat one group (for example, women) differently than another. Employers need to also be aware of other labor and employment issues.

For example, many new technologies collect, move, analyze or store data—often sensitive data. The ever-growing list of federal and state laws regulating data use and collection (as well as common laws concerning privacy) could create compliance concerns.

Additionally, wearable devices raise workplace health and safety compliance issues.

4. Regulation is increasing. One factor that may inhibit organizations from adopting advanced technologies is concern about compliance risks. The fit between 21st century technology and 20th century laws is not always a good one, leading some organizations to hesitate before, for example, incorporating AI into their talent acquisition processes.

There has, however, been an uptick in regulatory activity in this space.

Organizations may want to consider state-by-state analyses before adopting new technologies.

5. Legal compliance is not enough. While legal compliance is a necessity, the advance of technology into the workplace presents an equally important employee-relations challenge.

Employees are anxious about what technological developments will mean for their jobs. Before implementing any new technology, pay attention to communication strategies and the potential need for retraining or upskilling.