Robots, AI transforming future supply chain workforce

According to Kamendran Govender, procurement and supply chain transformation lead at Accenture Consulting, advances in automation are transforming the supply chain workforce of the future. No longer relegated to the factory floor; robots are supplementing and augmenting human roles in such knowledge-intensive areas as supply chain planning, customer order management, and inventory management.



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Executives surveyed in the *Accenture Supply Chain Workforce of the Future* report believe that the responsibilities and tasks of supply chain workers will change due to digital advances over the next few years; two in five (40%) feel this change will be to a very large extent. In the next three years, we foresee the most change in two areas:

- Supply chain demand and planning professionals focusing extensively on forward-looking, strategic decisions to support their business goals and spending less time on reactive problem-solving.

- For logistics, roles are expected to shift towards purchasing, manufacturing, and logistics in an integrated fashion, where greater collaboration with suppliers and customers is also expected. Over half of executives surveyed (67%) expect an increase in logistics jobs for their organisations in the next three years.

“By enhancing and extending human cognition and capabilities, robots are already driving greater operational excellence. In time, they also promise to deliver significantly better business outcomes, by harnessing the power of evolving artificial intelligence (AI) and using prescriptive analytics to help people reframe how crucial business decisions are made,” said Govender.

“For humans, liberating the supply chain workforce heralds an exciting freedom to focus on what people do best: the abstract thinking and contextual reasoning that still elude machines. Though some jobs will change, new, value-enhancing roles will emerge. Thanks to the combined power of humans and machines working together, supply chain executives have an unprecedented opportunity to drive a deep shift in supply chain operational performance.”

Capitalise on revolutionary technologies tomorrow

Integrating AI, robots, and prescriptive analytics into the supply chain workforce today will position any business to capitalise on the revolutionary technologies tomorrow. To get started, consider the following:

- **Attract the future workforce:** Identify exceptional talent, including people who may never have considered a career in supply chain before, to fill the roles of entrepreneurs and innovators. Don't just invest in training; ensure the workplace reflects the ethos of the new supply chain. Integrate mobility, technology and collaboration tools, and reinforce new behaviours and mindsets throughout the talent development lifecycle. Recruitment, performance metrics and career advancement all need to be viewed through a lens of technology-driven innovation.

- **Extract the robot from the human:** Start prioritising and defining robotic process automation opportunities. Begin with the most routine and transaction-focused activities, based on specific roles and tasks. But don't stop there. Redirect the "liberated" human worker to focus on the customer, service level promises and new products and services.

- **Place your innovation bets:** Map opportunities to existing technology solutions according to their maturity and availability (e.g., explorative vs. ready-to-implement). Multi-echelon inventory optimisation technologies are already on the market, as are such techniques as game theory and non-linear or stochastic dynamic programming. These technologies incorporate complex algorithms to help optimise planning. Start exploring their potential, talk to their inventors and consider pilots. Think big, but start small. Then invest further in technologies that show promising results.

"By dramatically augmenting the workforce of the future, the march of the robots promises to drive an exponential improvement in supply chain operational performance. Companies in the forefront are already capitalising on this promise and leading in this new area with growth potential. Now is the time to join them," concluded Govender.

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