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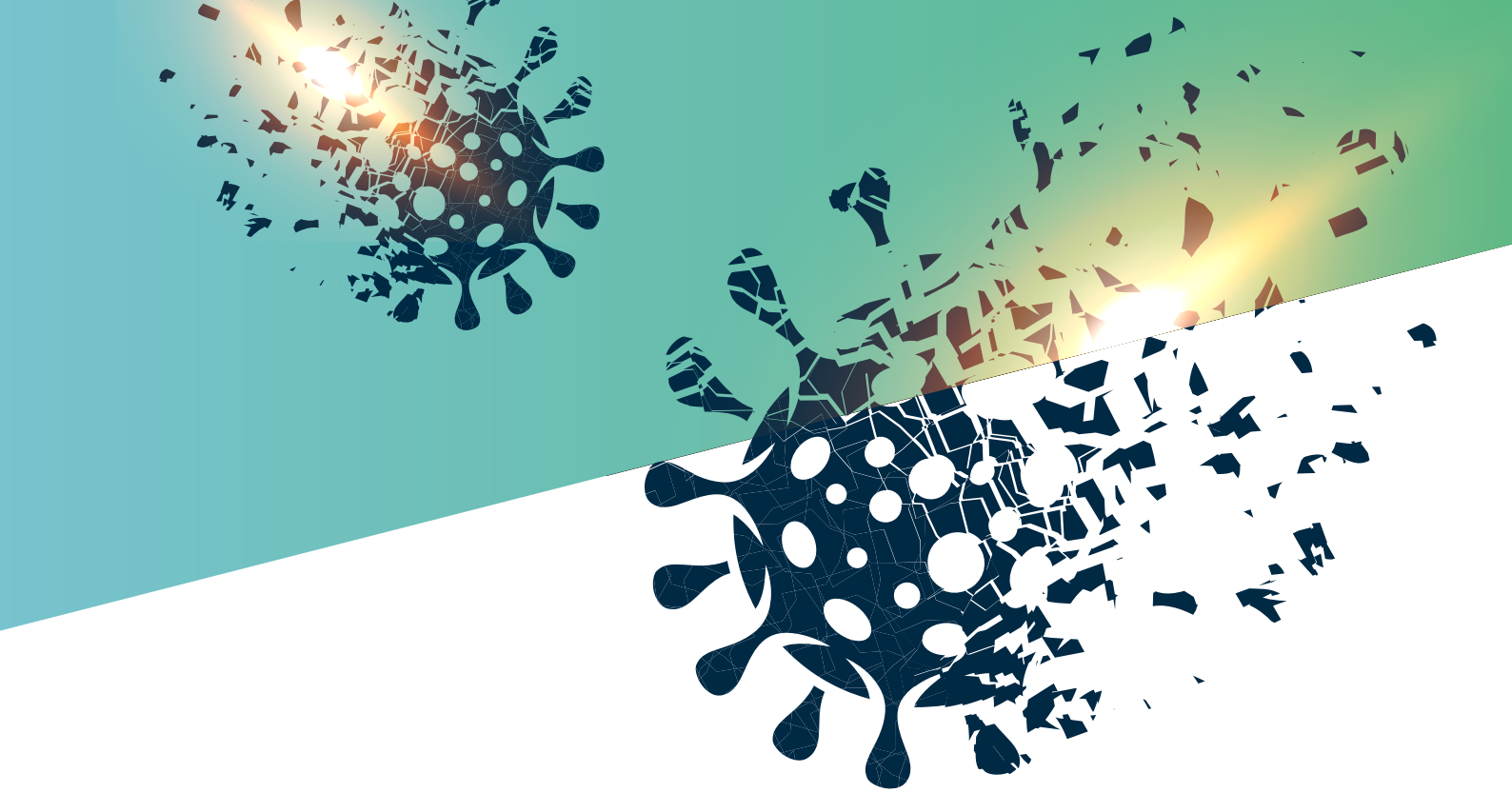
THE NEW WORLD OF WORK 2020

A look at how **COVID-19** has reshaped our attitudes to the issues surrounding the new world of work



INTRODUCTION

We are living in uniquely turbulent times. The Covid-19 Coronavirus has turned our world upside down to a stage where, for many of us, our working lives are unlikely to return to their former situation. The effects of the virus can be seen worldwide as can be clearly seen in data from the John Hopkins University[1]. Organizations, teams and individuals have been forced to change course. These changes have brought a great deal of suffering and hardship to many. With this paper we will look forward to a post-pandemic future whilst recognizing the tremendous work being performed by the experts in their field today. And let us take this opportunity to thank our scientists and healthcare workers that are using their talents to inform us in the short term, cure us in the medium term and keep us safe for the long term.

In many parts of the world, the national government's response to the pandemic has, sensibly, been to implement a social distancing policy. That means, where possible, people working from home. We now have goods delivered rather than enjoy the social experience of "shopping". It is of course technology that enables online ordering, large scale warehouse automation and processing, as well as online video conferencing that have enabled life to continue so effectively for so many.

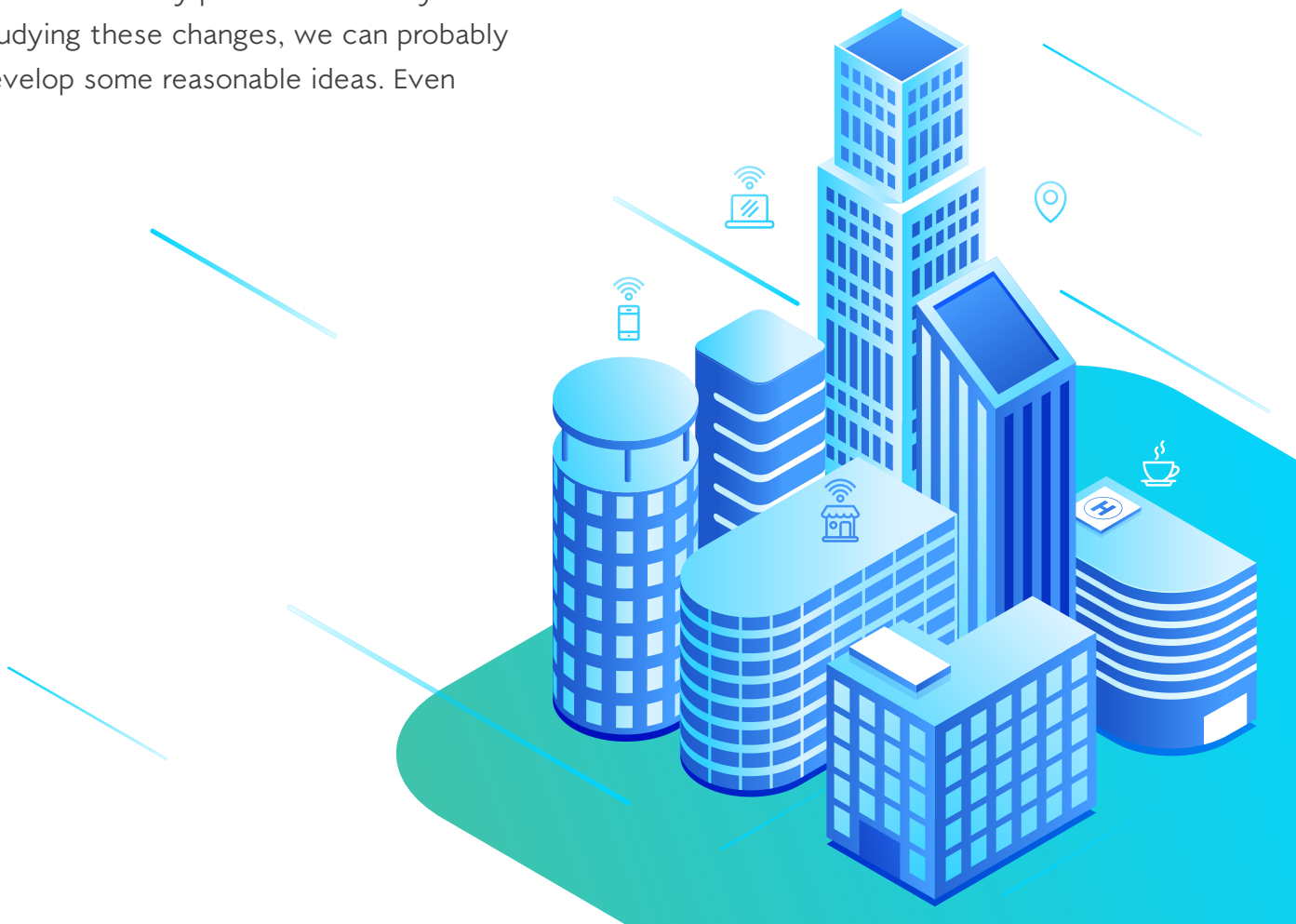
So today we are acutely aware of how these relatively new technologies have helped us to carry on when all else failed. It is interesting therefore to consider some of the less obvious and more embryonic technological changes as we look to a post-pandemic world. These

technologies include machine learning, AI, (Howard 2019) drones, automation, robotic processes, autonomous vehicles, and so on[3]. These new paradigms have already been driving significant changes across industries[4]. Recent research completed by Deloitte Human Capital Trends showed that AI and robotics are entering the workforce much faster than we may have imagined. It revealed that 38% of companies across 140 countries now believe that robotics and automation will be "fully implemented" in their company within five years.

Experts estimate that within the decade, the traditional notion of work will be transformed.[6 7]

No one knows what our work will look like in the future. The dramatic changes now being wrought by the current pandemic clearly prove that. But by studying these changes, we can probably develop some reasonable ideas. Even before Covid-19, we were experiencing a significant transition. These transitions had already contributed to a significant degree of uncertainty in terms of job security[8], and availability. Experts weigh in on both sides of the equation.[9] Some despise the changes due to the potential tsunami of unemployment and the stress it might put on society. Others welcome this transition[10] predicting a future where machines will fulfill our basic needs.

Whether we like it or not, the transformation has already begun, and it is here to stay. *It is interesting to see the changes we are already experiencing. A closer look at them might reveal how the future of work will shape up to be.*



Humans And Machines *Working Together*

Even before the advent of coronavirus, it was observed that around close to 45% of the jobs performed by humans today can be fully automated.[11 12 13 14 15]

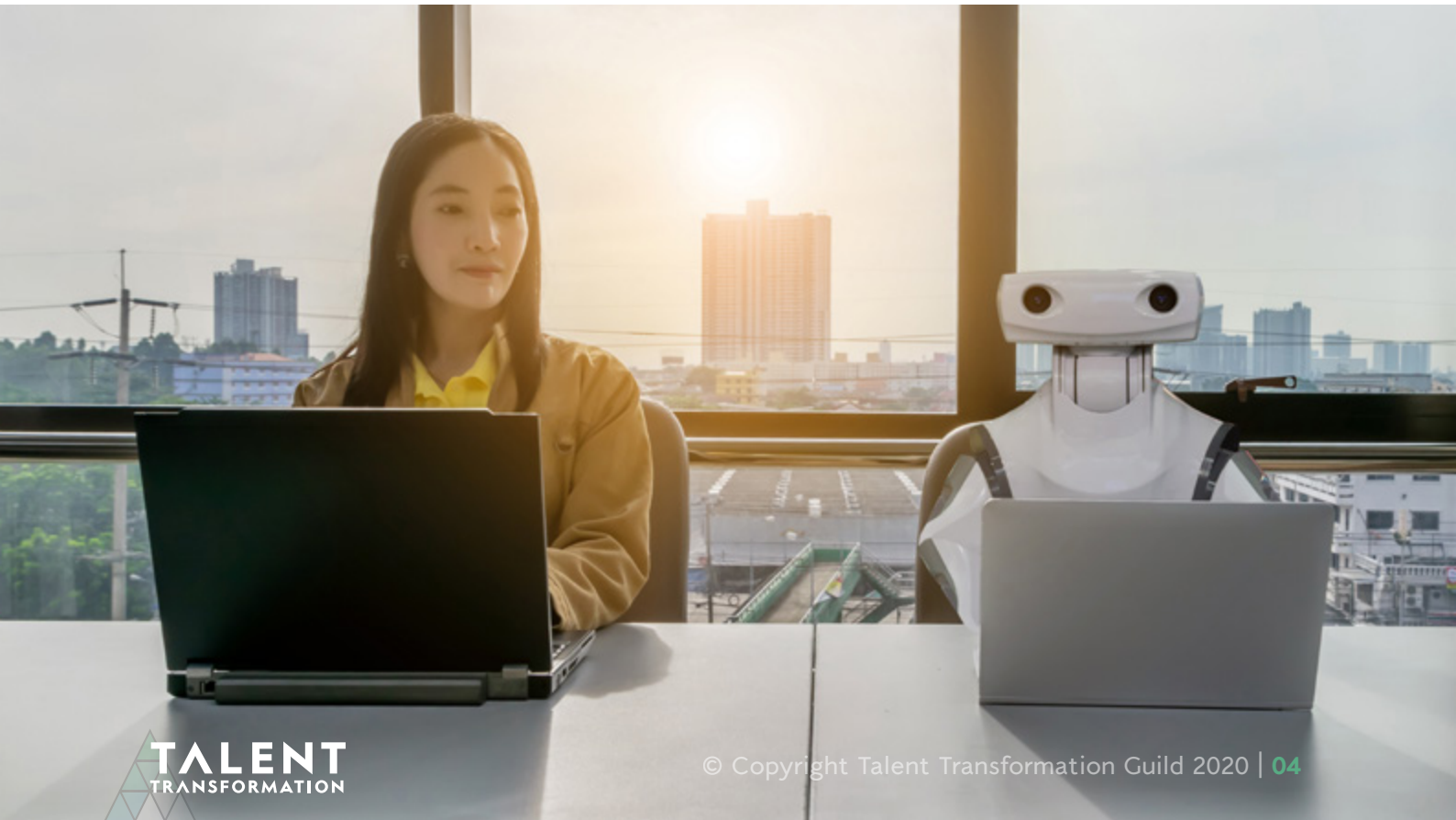
In some industries, such automation has already started. About 60 per cent of all occupations could see 30 per cent or more of their constituent activities automated, again with technologies available today.[16 17 18] The emergence of these trends makes employees insecure about their jobs. The public is much more worried than hopeful about the prospect that robots and computers may one day be able to do much of the work done by humans today. Their greatest concern is that automation will make it harder for ordinary people to find jobs.[19 20 21]

The situation is comparable to the wide-scale adoption of computers some

years ago. Employees everywhere were skeptical that the introduction of computers and later, the internet would make them redundant. But these changes actually created a whole new set of roles that did not exist before.[22 23] Jobs that require employees to interact with the computers, fix them, program them, and ensure the tasks are performed correctly. Not to mention the thousands of jobs created in the network engineering industry to keep the internet secure and up and running.

We are watching the same scenario unfold again. Despite 45 per cent of the workforce feeling that their jobs could be at risk, the adoption of AI, machine learning, and automation will require skilled employees to interact and communicate with these technologies. Recent studies paint a clearer picture. Despite there being more automation than ever before, there are close to 7 million well-paying jobs in the US alone that employers are finding it difficult to fill.[24 25] The real reason behind the current talent crunch is a skill-gap that is being caused by organizations engaging in digital transformations.

As technology progresses, organizations need more and more individuals to fill mid and high-skill roles.[26] To fill these roles, employees must be conversant with big data, OLAP, ML, AI, automation scripting, robot deployment, drone piloting, and other high-tech skills. Exposure towards STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) subjects is necessary to achieve these skills. But the participation of students, both in the US and Europe, in these high-tech and engineering courses has been dwindling for years.



Some organizations have already identified the challenges and are taking corrective steps. Amazon, for example, is investing close to US$700 million to upskill a third of its low-wage US workforce.[27] As these 100,000 employees are brought up to speed to work with the latest technologies, we expect other companies will organize similar initiatives.

Just as with previous industrial revolutions, the introduction of new and sophisticated technologies does not necessarily strip way jobs. Instead, it creates opportunities that were not possible before. Automation is intended to substitute for labor. But automation also complements that. It raises output in which in turn leads to higher demand for labor and interacts with adjustments in labor supply. Journalists and often expert commentators tend to overstate the extent of machine substitution for human labor and ignore the strong complementarities between automation and labor that increase productivity, raise earnings, and the demand for labor.[28 29 30]

Another reason for technology not replacing jobs is because necessity can still be the mother of invention. So it is often the case that machines are designed to take on the dirty, dangerous, dull, repetitive, demeaning, disliked, detestable and physically tough tasks. These are tasks which were always difficult to fill anyway. In many countries, lower cost labor would be imported to undertake these roles, where local employees who would be able to take up something more desirable. In this day and age, a modern job seeker needs to have skills that allow them to co-exist and collaborate with machines.[31] But if the current trend is a marker, we can see the skill gap widening for a good part of the next decade.

But of course, we should remember that, just because an activity can be automated, it doesn't mean that it should be. There are other factors involved. Jobs such as bookkeepers, and auditing clerks, for example, demand skills and training. That means they are scarcer than basic cooks. But the activities they perform cost less to automate, requiring mostly software and a basic computer. The only solution is for governments, companies, and educational institutes to adapt to the changing times. Governments to create environments to incubate the talents required for the future. Education to teach cutting-edge and cross-cutting skills as are necessary for this new age. Companies will have to share the burden of and preparing their workforces for the technology they must master. [35 36 37]

The Freelance *Work Culture*

While freelance consultants working from gig to gig [38] have been a part of the economy for many decades [39 40], this work model has seen a significant uptake in the current years.

The increase of homeworking during the pandemic has empowered more individuals and organizations to go down this route.

Studies show that 75 per cent of the millennials now prefer the work-by-project model instead of a steady job with an organization. This is a considerable change in terms of the workforce, economy, and current job market.

Some experts have expressed their concerns over this model since a gig-by-gig career cannot guarantee job security or sustained income. [44] Additional trade-offs freelancers face are infrequency, instability, barriers to high wages and intense global competition. [45]
The solution is for gig workers to recognize the skills they need and upskill

themselves. [46] With a better and updated skillset, gig workers can win high-skill projects that would otherwise be impossible to secure. This not only translates to better pay for the worker but also allows employers to find the right candidate for challenging to fill positions.

Gig platforms that accommodate employers and employees can detect skill shortages and upskill their members so they can benefit from emerging opportunities. They provide learning opportunities to their members and monitor their progress via assessments. This allows better opportunities for the worker, high-skilled employees for the employers, and build commissions for the platforms.

By introducing training programs, we can create a win-win scenario where everyone gets what they want and deserve.

Embrace, *Not Resist*

The changes to working as we know it is here, and it is inevitable. The changes to people's working practices during the coronavirus will only accelerate the adoption of these changes. Introduction of new technologies and growth of the gig economy pose challenges. But there are benefits to be had if we overcome them. And, as we have seen during the pandemic, the effects of these new technologies on our lives can be both positive and sudden.

The millennial workforce has shown it is more likely to embrace this change. Surveys reveal they are more open to change and new ways of working. Instead of longevity of work tenure, issues such as inclusivity, diversity and ethics are likely to figure far higher on their agendas.[40]

We're learning today how quickly these changes can happen under duress. History has taught us that industrial revolutions take away tasks and jobs, but it creates far more opportunities to take their place. It is up to us to embrace the changes and choose to adapt to this fast-changing work environment. The pandemic has reinforced the truism that we can never really know what the future holds. But it sure helps to stay prepared.

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