The digitalization of the workforce: challenges for administrative assistants

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The changes brought by the 4th Industrial Revolution and by the digital transformation have been resetting organizations and working methods. Besides the visible alterations in business models, communication, cooperation, relationship between private and professional life and the organizations' hierarchies, technology has been impacting jobs and employability. Organizations and investigators have been reporting a high and vast number of job positions that are currently at risk of being replaced by technology and automation, as the work becomes more and more digital, virtual and remote. In fact, there is a global tendency of growing and pressing needs and demands converging towards the inevitable redefinition of skills, tasks and responsibilities of a broad number of professionals and careers.

One of the professions that is highly permeable to the digital transformation, in which the effects of technology are already visible and where future ruptures are foreseeable, is the administrative assistants' one. This is a career based on instrumental knowledge, frequently performed as an extension of other occupations or positions, to whom support is provided in a very diversified set of tasks. The administrative assistant is a professional with a facilitator and eclectic profile whose tasks involve organization, connection, communication, organizational representation and data management. This is established through administrative and interpersonal procedures that are always supported by technology.

To preserve the professional flexibility required to house and answer the needs of a wide group of professionals that he/she supports, the administrative assistant is usually not specialized on a specific area or field of knowledge. The specialization of this profession happens mostly on the technical and multidisciplinary level of the interpersonal and technology skills. Therefore, and in this role of "assisting others", the profile of this professional collides directly with two of the main functions of technology in the workplace: automation, which aims at the eradication of ineffective activities and focuses

on streamlining, simplification and optimization; and innovation, directed to cost reduction and maximization of quality, accessibility and convenience.

Consequently, it is crucial to reassess the job description of administrative assistants under the light of the current and future tendency of jobs being replaced by technology or being assigned as complimentary to other job descriptions, a result of the global transformation of professions.

In this paper, we analyse and anticipate the reach and depth of the impact of the current and future technology on the administrative assistants' career, through an exploratory study conducted in human resources portals. To do so, on a first stage, we compiled the tasks that these professionals consider to be core and with a relevance score of at least 50%. On a second stage, we conducted an analysis on digital automated services and tools with potential to replace the clerical tasks conducted by humans. On a final stage, the results were triangulated to identify which are the core tasks assigned to administrative assistants that are at risk of being replaced technology and which are expected to remain as tasks conducted by humans.

A set of emergent skills and knowledge is also be presented, along with essential strategies for the repositioning of this profession in the era of digital transformation. The obtained results will not only allow for a better understanding of the potential transformation of this profession but will also help to identify which tasks might be replaced or reinforced by technology. These results might also allow to (re)think the education and training programmes that prepare these professionals, as well as to identify educational approaches and new curricula that can/should be included in their training.

Keywords: Digital transformation, digitalization, administrative assistant, human resources

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