

From Degree to Decent Work: Rethinking Youth Employability and HRM in Nigeria's New World of Work

BY

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Nigeria has one of the youngest populations in the world, with a median age of 18.1 years, yet nearly 80 million young Nigerians remain unemployed, and around 600,000 graduates enter a saturated job market annually. This isn't merely an economic statistic—it's a profound human tragedy and a growing political risk. The paradox is stark: jobs go unfilled because employers can't find skilled candidates, while degree holders endure fruitless searches. Nigeria is churning out certificates, not careers, in a digital era shaped by AI, remote work, and innovation. To secure our economic future, we must bridge the skills gap through innovative HRM strategies, shift from credential obsession to competency focus, and ensure degrees translate into decent work.

The Paper Ceiling: When Degrees Don't Deliver

The evidence is unsettling. Nigeria produces over 600,000 university graduates each year, yet youth unemployment stands at 6.5% among ages 15-34, affecting 4.18 million individuals. More troubling, the NEET rate—youth neither in education, employment, or training—hovers around 13.8%, with estimates as high as 20% in some models. Employers report that fewer than 20% of graduates are immediately employable, according to African Development Bank insights, due to a systemic misalignment between curricula and market needs.

This isn't about lazy youth but a mismatch: educated talent seeks jobs, employers need skills. In tech, despite global shortages, Nigerian developers face high underemployment. NITDA (National Information Technology Development Agency) estimates digital literacy at 50% in 2025, up from 44% in 2021, but 70% of rural adults lack basic ICT skills. Soft skills such as critical thinking and adaptability are often absent from many programs. A survey of HR professionals finds that graduates overestimate their readiness, lacking the emotional intelligence for success.

The fallout is immense: 93% of the workforce is informal, with time-related underemployment at 15.5%. One in five graduates works in unqualified roles, held back by a "paper ceiling." This

wastes human capital, costing families and the nation. Entering 2026, this disconnect threatens Nigeria's digital competitiveness.

Inside the Boardroom: What Employers Are Really Saying

From Lagos fintechs to Abuja hospitals, employers lament: thousands apply, few are ready without costly retraining. A Stutern (2022) report found that only 10% of employers view graduates as skilled, a sentiment that persists in growth sectors like IT and healthcare. Employers prioritise soft skills—teamwork, communication, adaptability—over technical ones, areas where preparation falters.

In tech, Nigeria boasts developers, yet 19.6% youth unemployment and 25.8% underemployment highlight gaps in professional practices. A Lagos fintech HR manager notes: "Applicants abound, but few blend coding with client-facing agility." Healthcare demands digital proficiency; engineering needs software collaboration. Financial sectors seek analytics amid soft skill deficits.

Consequences ripple: firms retrain, favouring experienced hires, deepening youth crises. SMEs can't afford it, stalling growth. Employers hesitate on young graduates, citing maturity gaps, perpetuating understaffing and lost potential.

Borderless Work: The Double-Edged Sword of Nigeria's Digital Future

Global work has transformed: remote jobs could reach 92 million by 2030, per the World Economic Forum. For Nigeria, this offers an opportunity amid challenges. Freelancers on Upwork and Fiverr access international markets; gig work booms, with Africa's digital freelancers growing rapidly. Nigerian remote roles pay \$1,000-\$5,000 monthly, far above local entry salaries of ₦150,000-₦200,000.

Yet vulnerabilities persist: success demands digital literacy, self-management, and cultural competence. Only 9.4% of households own computers; infrastructure woes, such as unreliable power, hinder competition. During COVID-19, gig workers faced losses, with precarity lingering post-pandemic. Regulatory gaps leave workers without protections, benefits, or stability.

This future is dual: skilled minorities thrive globally; the digitally excluded majority risks inequality. Without laws, infrastructure, and investments in literacy, Nigeria faces a two-tier workforce—elite vs. vulnerable.

AI and HRM Innovation: Promise, Peril, and the Path to Fairness

Nigerian firms adopt AI in HRM: 43% use it, per SHRM, up from 26% in 2024. In telecom, AI enhances recruitment efficiency. Tools screen 5,000+ CVs hourly, cutting time-to-hire by 40%, matching skills via keywords.

Yet perils loom: poorly trained AI perpetuates bias, excluding non-elite candidates. Western data misfits Nigerian contexts; digital divides exclude the underserved. Nigeria's Data Protection Act demands governance, but SMEs lack capacity.

The path: AI enhances judgment, expanding talent pools. Require collaboration, transparency, bias audits, and human oversight. CIPM (Chartered Institute of Personnel Management) provides ethical AI training. Use AI to promote equity, not exclusion.

Building Bridges, Not Walls: A Tripartite Pact for Nigeria's Youth"

If Nigeria is to turn its youth bulge into a genuine demographic dividend, it needs a deliberate, three-part strategy linking universities, employers, and HR professionals around a shared goal: guiding young people from having a degree to securing decent work. Overcoming Nigeria's employability challenge requires coordinated action—a new social contract that replaces isolated interventions with systemic collaboration. Drawing from global HRM research, Nigerian pilot successes, and international evidence-based models, here is a practical blueprint:

1. Curriculum Redesign: From Content to Competencies

Universities should transition from rote memorisation to competency-based education, emphasising critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration. This involves teaching theory through applied projects and simulations that mirror real-world challenges, rather than isolated courses. Soft skills should be integrated into all degree programmes. Business students should analyse real cases, engineering students present proposals, and science students write grant applications. The assessments should focus on students' ability to apply knowledge, evaluating students' real-world skills and knowledge through tasks that mirror genuine professional or life challenges. By collaborating with industry, Nigerian institutions can co-design curricula that align educational content with actual workforce needs, drawing inspiration from Germany's dual system and Switzerland's vocational education models.

2. Work-Integrated Learning: Making SIWES Work

The Students' Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES), established in 1973, connects theory with workplace practice in Nigeria. However, many internships are treated as mere formalities, leading to issues like inadequate supervision and poor placements. Research shows that short durations, often limited to six weeks, hinder meaningful skill development. A reform is necessary, advocating for structured programs of at least six months with clear learning outcomes, reflective assessments, and joint evaluations by academic and industry mentors. Strengthening partnerships between universities and industry and providing incentives for employers can enhance interns' experience. Following the model of Covenant University, known for its effective industrial training, can improve graduate employability. Collaborative investment from government, universities, and industry is crucial to transforming SIWES into a true pathway to employment.

3. Apprenticeship Pipelines into Growth Sectors

Nigeria's rapidly growing sectors—technology, fintech, renewable energy, health, and logistics—should adopt modern apprenticeship schemes that blend classroom learning with paid work experience. Drawing on successful models in Germany, Rwanda, and Singapore, collaboration among industry, government, and educational institutions is essential to establishing national apprenticeship standards. Companies like Andela and MEST demonstrate the effectiveness of intensive, practice-based training. Scaling this model through public-private partnerships can be enhanced by offering tax incentives to firms with accredited programs. HR professionals should create competency frameworks to assess apprentices based on skills and performance, particularly benefiting young individuals from non-elite backgrounds who have high potential.

4. Competency-Based Hiring: Beyond Credentials and Pedigree

Employers and HR teams should adopt competency-based recruitment, focusing on candidates' demonstrated skills rather than solely on credentials. This can be achieved through methods such as work samples, structured interviews, and practical assessments. Innovative approaches, like situational judgment tests, micro-internships, and portfolio reviews, offer a comprehensive view of candidates' abilities. To foster inclusivity, organisations should implement transparent hiring criteria, provide feedback for unsuccessful applicants, and engage underrepresented groups. In Nigeria, recognising skills gained from informal learning and online courses is essential, and promoting micro-credentials can benefit qualified individuals without formal

degrees. Careful governance of AI tools in assessments is crucial to avoid unintended discrimination.

5. Large-Scale Reskilling: Beyond the First Degree

For young Nigerians facing underemployment, the focus should shift from acquiring more degrees to targeted reskilling. With rapid technological changes making skills obsolete, education must continue beyond graduation. Collaborative efforts among government, industry, donor agencies, and universities can establish national digital and employability bootcamps tailored to labour-market demands in fields such as coding, data analysis, and cybersecurity. HR associations can set quality standards, and employers can recognise these credentials. Digital learning platforms provide scalable reskilling opportunities, necessitating public and private sector investment in continuous learning. Corporate Nigeria can lead by offering open-access webinars and subsidised certification programs. Tax incentives could encourage employers to invest in employee development, and universities should offer micro-credentials for working professionals, embracing the norm of lifelong learning.

6. Future of Work Preparedness and Labour Protection

Universities and training providers should incorporate courses on remote work, personal branding, global labour contracts, and cross-border employment. Policymakers and HR bodies need to develop portable benefits and legal protections for gig workers to fill the existing labour protection gap. This collaborative effort requires political will, financial investment, and ongoing partnership. The risk of failing to implement these reforms is a lost generation of educated yet unemployed youth, jeopardising Nigeria's competitiveness in the digital economy.

A National Capability Agenda: From Crisis to Asset

Nigeria lacks systems to deploy talent. The crisis stems from policy inertia and weak links between education and industry. Yet solvable: transform education, hiring, and development.

In collaborations among universities, employers, and the government, each stakeholder plays a crucial role in developing a strong workforce. Universities focus on equipping students with the essential skills and knowledge to become work-ready graduates. Employers partner with educational institutions to ensure training matches industry needs and provides real-world experience. Human Resources professionals work to design sustainable systems that foster talent development and retention. Meanwhile, the government supports these efforts by providing funding, crafting effective policies, and establishing laws that facilitate collaboration

and innovation. Together, these entities create a thriving ecosystem that benefits graduates, employers, and society as a whole.

With 242 million people projected, at a median age of 18, Nigeria's youth could be a dividend. Rethink now: from degrees to decent work via evidence-based HRM. Inaction betrays a generation; bold action models African empowerment.

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