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AUGMENT, DON'T AUTOMATE: A PRO-WORKER AI STRATEGY FOR SOUTH AFRICA

How should South Africa redesign education, industrial policy, and fiscal incentives to harness artificial intelligence for productivity growth while limiting labour market disruptions?

1. Introduction

In April 2026, for the first time, South Africa published its Draft National Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy (DCDT, 2026). However, it was withdrawn mere weeks later, after it was found to cite sources that did not exist and were likely fabricated by AI itself, a failure the Minister conceded had “compromised the integrity and credibility of the draft policy” (SAnews, 2026). The episode captures the dilemma South Africa is now facing, which is that AI is arriving, but there is neither a strategy nor, in many cases, the skills to use it well.

For South Africa, the costs of getting this wrong are high. In the second quarter of 2026, unemployment stood at 33.6%, and at 47.4% for those aged between 15 and 34 (Stats SA, 2026:5, 24). For such an economy, the central question is not only whether AI increases productivity, meaning output per worker, but whether it does so without closing the few routes into the labour market that remain.

This essay argues that the main risk AI poses to South Africa is not mass job loss but “so-so” automation (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019:8–9) that displaces entry-level workers while adding little to growth. It therefore proposes a strategy that directs AI toward complementing workers, funded largely by redesigning existing instruments rather than proposing new spending. Section 2 draws on recent research and published data to assess South Africa’s exposure to AI. Following this assessment, sections 3, 4 and 5 set out reforms to education, industrial policy and fiscal incentives respectively. Section 6 then considers how to protect workers during the transition, section 7 concludes, and section 8 sets out the recommendations.

2. South Africa’s exposure to AI

2.1 How AI changes work

Technology affects jobs only in part, through the tasks they involve, rather than in their entirety. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2019:2–3) demonstrate the displacement effect created by automation, which happens because capital takes over tasks once done by workers. On the other hand, new technologies can generate tasks in which people hold the comparative advantage, creating a reinstatement effect. The balance between the two effects therefore determines whether workers gain. In the authors’ view, the real

threat comes not from brilliant automation but from “so-so” technologies: those good enough to replace a worker, but not good enough to raise productivity by much (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019:8–9).

Many jobs are exposed to AI, but the degree of exposure varies sharply between countries and between groups of workers. Cazzaniga et al. (2024:7) estimate that almost 40% of global employment is exposed to AI, rising to about 60% in advanced economies. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that one in four workers worldwide has a job with some exposure to generative AI, although most of these jobs are more likely to be transformed than eliminated (Gmyrek et al., 2025:1). Within countries, exposure is concentrated among women, urban and more-educated workers (Cazzaniga et al., 2024:9; Demombynes, Langbein & Weber, 2025:3). In the South African context, this points to formal clerical, financial and call-centre work, the very jobs that often give young graduates their first foothold in the formal labour market. Women are doubly vulnerable, since their unemployment rate is already 37.5%, compared with 33.6% overall (Stats SA, 2026:35).

As Acemoglu and Restrepo (2019:9) observe, “when wages are low and labor is abundant, automation will bring modest productivity benefits and could end up reducing labor demand.” In an economy where much of the workforce has limited education and 8.5 million people are unemployed (Stats SA, 2026:18), AI is more likely to take the form of “so-so” technologies whose displacement effect outweighs their productivity effect. Early South African evidence is consistent with this concern. Giwa and Ngepah (2024:6) report a significant negative long-run relationship between AI investment and formal low-skilled employment over 2012–2021. However, the estimates rest on 40 quarterly observations, AI adoption is proxied by investment in US dollars rather than measured directly, and the reported coefficient of -0.089 implies that a 1% rise in AI investment is associated with a 0.09% fall in low-skilled employment. The direction of the relationship is suggestive rather than settled.

2.2 Early South African signals

Evidence of AI-driven job loss in South Africa remains thin. PwC’s job-advertisement data (2026:11) show that job postings in South Africa’s most AI-exposed quarter of occupations fell from about 524,000 in 2024 to about 314,000 in 2025, a drop of roughly 40%, yet postings fell across all exposure groups, to about 0.7 times their 2021 levels by 2025 (PwC, 2026:10). PwC (2026:10) concludes the drop is “driven more by broader macroeconomic factors than by differences in AI exposure.” What is changing instead is the skills that employers require. Between 2021 and 2025, the most-exposed occupations added an average of 66 new skills each, a shift which PwC (2026:14) says “heightens the barrier to entry” for entry-level workers.

2.3 Low growth and absence of AI policy

South Africa needs the productivity gains AI promises. Growth remains weak, and the 2026 Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS) cut the 2026 forecast to 1.2%, down from 1.6% in February (National Treasury, 2026:11). Hausmann et al. (2023:8) attribute South Africa's growth slowdown to two binding constraints: collapsing state capacity and the persistence of spatial exclusion. Like many developing economies, South Africa also began to deindustrialise at income levels far below those at which advanced economies started to do so (Rodrik, 2016:2). This eroded the sector that traditionally absorbed large numbers of unskilled workers (Rodrik, 2016:3) and left services such as clerical and call-centre work as an important alternative entry route, which are precisely the jobs most exposed to AI. Yet AI's gains are not automatic. Acemoglu (2024:4) estimates that AI may raise total factor productivity in the United States by no more than about 0.66% over a decade. Meanwhile, South Africa still has no adopted AI policy, since the draft published in April 2026 (DCDT, 2026) was withdrawn weeks later over fictitious citations (SAnews, 2026). Even the 2026 MTBPS mentions AI only as a global investment trend and a financial risk (National Treasury, 2026:10, 14), and not as a domestic labour-market concern.

2.4 Assessment

South Africa's AI risk is therefore not mass job loss but the spread of "so-so" technologies. These close the clerical and call-centre jobs that serve as entry routes into the labour market while contributing minimally to productivity and growth. Because disruption is arriving through rising skill requirements before job losses, there is still a window for policy to act. The response should be a strategy that steers AI toward complementing workers rather than relying on regulation alone. The withdrawn draft focused mainly on rules which, though important for safety, do not affect whether a firm uses AI to replace its workers or to help them. That choice is shaped by the cost and capability of each option. A firm is likely to consider whether workers have the skills to use AI, whether national infrastructure supports its adoption, and whether the tax system rewards replacing people or investing in them. For South Africans whose jobs are most exposed to AI, it is essential that policy favours the latter.

3. Education

3.1 Foundational literacy

Any strategy to harness AI rests on a labour force able to use it, and South Africa's foundations are weak. Unemployment is 12.4% for graduates but 39.2% for those without matric (Stats SA, 2026:22). In 2021, 81% of Grade 4 learners could not reach the Low International Benchmark in reading, meaning they could not retrieve explicitly stated information from a simple text (Roux, Van Staden & Tshele, 2023:31). This marks a deterioration from 78% in 2016, a figure the President cited as the share of children unable to "read for meaning" (Roux, Van Staden & Tshele, 2023:31).

AI does not lower the value of these basic skills but raises it. Using AI productively requires reading, numeracy and judgement, which together allow a user to write a clear prompt, interpret the answer and recognise when it is wrong. The withdrawn draft AI policy, with its fictitious citations, shows the cost of using AI without the capacity to verify its output. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2019:20) warn that a mismatch between workforce skills and new technologies reduces productivity gains and slows the creation of new tasks for workers. With the most AI-exposed jobs adding new skill requirements rapidly (PwC, 2026:14), learners who cannot read for meaning risk being excluded from them entirely.

These deficits are not evenly shared. Grade 4 learners from homes with few learning resources scored 262 points against 530 for those with many, a gap of roughly seven years of learning, while boys trail girls by 57 points (Roux, Van Staden & Tshele, 2023:30, 73). Without targeted intervention, AI risks widening these divides and deepening existing inequality. An AI education strategy should therefore begin with early-grade literacy rather than coding, and direct resources first to the learners who are furthest behind.

3.2 AI in the classroom

If used well, AI can accelerate the catch-up that 3.1 calls for. In a randomised trial in Nigeria, six weeks of after-school tutoring using Microsoft Copilot raised senior secondary learners' scores by 0.31 standard deviations, equivalent to between 1.5 and 2 years of ordinary schooling, at a cost of about 48 US dollars per learner (De Simone et al., 2025:18, 41). Two findings temper this result. First, the authors attribute the gains to “the intervention as a whole”, combining the AI with teacher guidance and structured prompts (De Simone et al., 2025:21). Second, the largest gains accrued to learners who were already performing better (De Simone et al., 2025:32). If left untargeted, AI tutoring may therefore widen the very gaps it could close.

The greater risk, however, is that AI becomes another “bad buy”. Governments often favour visible inputs such as textbooks and infrastructure, yet these are rarely cost-effective when provided alone, and the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel warns that “investing in hardware alone is a bad buy” (GEEAP, 2020:18–19). By contrast, structured lesson plans with ongoing teacher support and teaching matched to learners' level are among the most cost-effective interventions (GEEAP, 2020:12–13). South Africa's own trials since 2015 confirm that training, materials and instructional coaching together improve reading in poorer schools, yet coaching is “the most effective but the least sustainable element” under fiscal austerity (Social Impact Insights Africa, 2026:5, 8). AI could make such structured, coaching-like support affordable at scale, reaching the Quintile 1–3 schools that need it most.

3.3 Reskilling the workforce

Reforming schools will take a generation, but, as section 2.2 showed, workers in AI-exposed jobs face rapidly changing skill requirements now. South Africa already has the channels to respond. Employers pay a skills development levy of one per cent of payroll, 80% of which is allocated to the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) (South Africa, 1999: s 3(1)(b), s 8(3)). SETAs must direct at least 80% of their discretionary grants to PIVOTAL programmes, which combine qualifications with workplace learning, to address “scarce and critical skills” in their sectors (South Africa, 2012: reg. 3(6), reg. 6(11)–(12)). Under the Skills Development Act, SETAs approve firms’ workplace skills plans and allocate levy-funded grants to employers and training providers (South Africa, 1998: s 10(1)(b)). Prioritising AI reskilling for exposed roles within these plans would therefore channel existing levy funds toward retraining without requiring new spending. Section 5 extends this mechanism through the tax system.

4. Industrial policy

4.1 Electricity and digital infrastructure

AI cannot raise productivity in an economy that cannot keep the lights on. Hausmann et al. (2023:8–9) identify collapsing electricity, transport and water systems as the core of South Africa’s growth problem, noting that the country has lost its “key advantage of cheap and reliable electricity”. The 2026 Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement likewise names “infrastructure bottlenecks” as a key domestic risk to the outlook (National Treasury, 2026:14). The Nigerian tutoring trial succeeded despite power outages, but only in schools selected because they already had computer labs (De Simone et al., 2025:5–6). The most important AI industrial policy is therefore not an AI-specific policy. Completing electricity-market reform, expanding affordable broadband and lowering data costs would benefit every firm, school and worker, rather than a chosen few.

4.2 Supporting labour-intensive services

Beyond infrastructure, industrial policy should target sectors where AI can raise the productivity of existing workers. The strongest evidence comes from call centres. When a large firm gave 5,179 customer-support agents an AI assistant “designed to augment agents”, productivity rose by 14% on average and by 34% for novice and low-skilled workers, while staff turnover fell (Brynjolfsson, Li & Raymond, 2023:1–3). Agents with two months’ experience performed as well as unassisted agents with over six months’ experience (Brynjolfsson, Li & Raymond, 2023:2). Notably, most of these agents worked in the Philippines (Brynjolfsson, Li & Raymond, 2023:9), in an outsourced services industry comparable to South Africa’s. However, the authors caution that firms could equally use such gains to “replace lower-skill workers entirely” (Brynjolfsson, Li & Raymond, 2023:3). South Africa’s business-process services sector, an important

employer of young graduates, should therefore be supported to adopt AI that raises the value of its workers, moving up the value chain rather than being automated away.

4.3 Building local AI capability

At present, South Africa mainly adopts AI as opposed to creating it. In 2025, AI-user roles grew by 4.2% while AI-developer roles shrank by 8.3%, raising a “longer-term question about the country’s capacity to build, not just consume, AI” (PwC, 2026:15). Acemoglu and Restrepo (2019:20) argue that declining public support for long-horizon research likely disadvantaged the creation of new, labour-intensive tasks relative to automation. If South Africa only imports AI designed for other labour markets, it will import technologies built to save expensive labour, not to employ abundant labour. The withdrawn draft policy proposed AI hubs and supercomputing facilities for local start-ups (DCDT, 2026:7, 70). A revised policy should retain these, and direct public research funding toward AI tools suited to South African needs, such as applications in local languages and in labour-intensive sectors.

5. Fiscal incentives

5.1 The tax bias toward capital

Whether firms use AI to replace or to augment workers depends partly on relative costs, and tax policy shapes those costs. In the United States, labour faces effective taxes of 25.5%–33.5%, while software and equipment were taxed at about 10% in the 2010s and 5% after 2017 (Acemoglu, Manera & Restrepo, 2020:234). The authors conclude that this bias has “promoted levels of automation beyond what is socially desirable”, because marginal automated tasks “do not bring much productivity gains but displace workers” (Acemoglu, Manera & Restrepo, 2020:231). Rebalancing taxes toward labour could raise US employment by about 4% (Acemoglu, Manera & Restrepo, 2020:231).

South Africa may carry a similar bias. Tax depreciation and investment allowances cost the Treasury about R43.6 billion a year between 2014 and 2017 (Calitz et al., 2020:13), yet evidence of their impact on employment “remains ambiguous” (Calitz et al., 2020:18). Calitz et al. (2020:15) urge assessing “the likely employment to be added before deciding on any such incentives”. Applied to AI, untargeted capital allowances risk subsidising exactly the “so-so” automation that section 2 identified as South Africa’s main risk.

5.2 Redesigning existing incentives

The withdrawn draft AI policy proposed to “create incentives such as tax breaks and subsidies” (DCDT, 2026:25) but did not specify what these incentives should reward. This essay proposes that they reward investment in people alongside AI, using three instruments South Africa already has.

First, the Section 12H learnership allowance applies only to registered learnership agreements entered into before 1 April 2027 (South African Revenue Service [SARS], 2025:2). Its approaching expiry is therefore an opportunity to extend eligibility to accredited AI-reskilling programmes for workers in exposed roles, linking it with the SETA channels discussed in section 3.3.

Second, the Employment Tax Incentive already lowers the cost of hiring young work seekers aged 18 to 29 and runs until February 2029 (SARS, n.d.). Its next extension could prioritise young workers hired into AI-assisted roles. This would reward firms that use AI to expand employment, as in the call-centre evidence in section 4.2.

Third, any new accelerated capital allowances for AI and automation equipment should be conditional on evidence of training or job retention, rather than being available automatically.

Funding these changes by trimming poorly targeted allowances would keep the package close to revenue-neutral. The aim is not to make AI more expensive, but to make AI that complements workers relatively cheaper than AI that replaces them.

5.3 The case against a robot tax

Acemoglu, Manera and Restrepo (2020:231) suggest that where optimal tax reform is infeasible, an additional automation tax can raise employment. However, such a tax would not be appropriate for South Africa. AI is difficult to define for tax purposes, and with growth projected at only 1.2% in 2026 (National Treasury, 2026:11), the country needs more productive investment, not less. Re-targeting existing incentives pursues the same goal of steering firms toward labour-complementing uses, but with fewer administrative and investment risks.

5.4 Affordability and accountability

These proposals must also respect South Africa's fiscal limits. Gross debt stabilised at 78.4% of GDP in 2025/26 (National Treasury, 2026:3), and the main budget deficit of 3.7% of GDP is projected to narrow to 2.5% by 2029/30 (National Treasury, 2026:19). There is no room for large new spending, which is why this essay redirects existing instruments instead. In addition, three safeguards should apply. First, incentives should carry sunset clauses and be monitored regularly, as Calitz et al. (2020:16, 18) recommend. Second, eligibility should depend on measurable training or employment outcomes. Third, evaluations should be published, so that ineffective incentives are ended early rather than continued indefinitely.

6. Protecting workers during the transition

6.1 Income support linked to opportunity

Even well-designed incentives will not prevent all displacement, so the transition also needs a safety net that leads back to work. Government has already signalled this direction. The social relief of distress (SRD) grant will be extended for another year “while work continues on integration with labour market activation, skills development and enterprise support interventions” (National Treasury, 2026:33). AI-related reskilling, delivered through the SETA channels discussed in section 3.3, should form part of that integration.

6.2 Retain and retrain

The share of unemployed people jobless for a year or more rose from 66.9% in 2016 to 77.9% in 2026 (Stats SA, 2026:18). Workers retrenched because of AI are already entitled to benefits from the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) (South Africa, 2001: s 16(1)). However, many beneficiaries “remain unemployed for a long time due to a lack of necessary skills” (Department of Employment and Labour, n.d.:4). Two existing UIF programmes offer a better model. First, its training scheme requires partners to secure “a commitment letter from an employer to absorb beneficiaries” (Department of Employment and Labour, n.d.:5), which ties training to real jobs. Second, the Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme pays 75% of an employee’s basic salary for up to 12 months to distressed firms that commit to no retrenchments (Department of Employment and Labour, n.d.:7). An AI-transition version of this scheme could offer temporary wage support to firms that retrain workers in AI-exposed roles, rather than replace them.

6.3 Monitor and phase in

Because AI’s effects in South Africa are still emerging (PwC, 2026:10), policy should be phased in and adjusted as evidence becomes available. Tracking employment in AI-exposed occupations through the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (Stats SA, 2026) would allow government to scale up support quickly if displacement accelerates.

7. Conclusion

Drawing on recent research and official South African data, this essay has argued that South Africa’s AI challenge differs from that of richer, developed economies. With high unemployment and low wages, the greater danger is not mass job loss but “so-so” automation, which closes the entry routes into work while contributing little to growth. Because disruption is arriving first through rising skill requirements, there is still time for policy to steer AI toward complementing workers rather than replacing them.

This leads to three conclusions. First, education must begin with foundational literacy, and use AI to scale proven teaching approaches in the poorest schools rather than simply buying hardware. Second, industrial policy should prioritise reliable electricity and connectivity, and support labour-intensive services in adopting AI that raises the

value of their workers. Lastly, the tax system should reward firms that invest in people alongside AI, by redesigning existing incentives within tight fiscal limits.

8. Recommendations

Table 1 summarises the recommendations of this essay by policy area, fiscal cost and timing.

Table 1: Summary of recommendations

Area	Recommendation	Fiscal cost	Timing
Education	Use AI to support structured lessons and coaching in Quintile 1–3 schools at learners' level	Redirected education spending	Medium term
Skills	Prioritise AI reskilling in SETA-funded workplace skills plans	Existing levy funds	Immediate
Industrial policy	Complete electricity-market reform; expand affordable broadband	Largely private investment	Ongoing
Industrial policy	Support business-process services to adopt worker-augmenting AI	Low	Medium term
Tax	Extend Section 12H to AI reskilling on renewal	Within existing allowance	Before April 2027
Tax	Make new AI capital allowances conditional on training or job retention	Revenue-neutral	Next budget cycle
Safety net	Link SRD grant recipients and UIF beneficiaries to job-linked AI reskilling	Existing programmes	2026/27 onward

Source: Author's own compilation

The package is workable because it relies mainly on instruments that already exist, rather than on new institutions or large new spending. These instruments are the skills levy, SETA grants, tax incentives and UIF programmes. However, its success depends on

implementation. SETAs must update their sector skills plans, and incentives must be evaluated and ended if they fail. Given that collapsing state capacity is itself a binding constraint on growth (Hausmann et al., 2023:8), this is the package's greatest risk.

The withdrawn draft AI policy showed what happens when AI is used without the capacity to verify its output, and the same lesson applies to the rest of the economy. AI will only serve South Africa if its people are equipped to direct it. The question is therefore not whether AI arrives, but whether South Africa uses it to replace its workers or to empower them. Because incentives shape behaviour, policy must actively reward firms that use AI to upskill workers rather than replace them.

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