the population boom could return a so-called demographic dividend: economic benefits as the pool of workers increases and the proportion of dependents declines. Greater consumption, production and investment could drive growth upward and increase per capita income fourfold.

But the inverse risk is immense. According to the IMF, Africa will need to create 18-20 million more jobs a year for the next quarter century to keep up with its growing population.

Africa's embrace of technology sets it apart from other continents, with an explosion in early adoption in many sectors, including the world's biggest 3-D printer at the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research in South Africa. But the overall effect on employment is difficult to predict.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution could bring increased productivity in agricultural and services sectors. Challenges include poor levels of the STEM skills necessary for the digital economy and the risks that robotics poses in traditional manufacturing.

Stanford Social Innovation Review argues that AI has the potential to bring myriad positive changes in sectors such as healthcare and finance, bridging the gap between physical infrastructure inadequacies and consumer demands, while freeing up more time for skilled labor and increased labor productivity. These types of "intelligent machinery and processes present a rare opportunity for economic transformation," SSIR writes.

Of course, the problem is we have absolutely no idea what is actually going to happen. This isn't Asimov's fictional *Foundation*. Blending big data with sociology cannot yet eliminate the futility of such a prediction.

Governments, NGOs and business interests in Africa might do well instead to recall a quote from another *Foundation* series character: "To succeed, planning alone is insufficient. One must improvise as well." ◆

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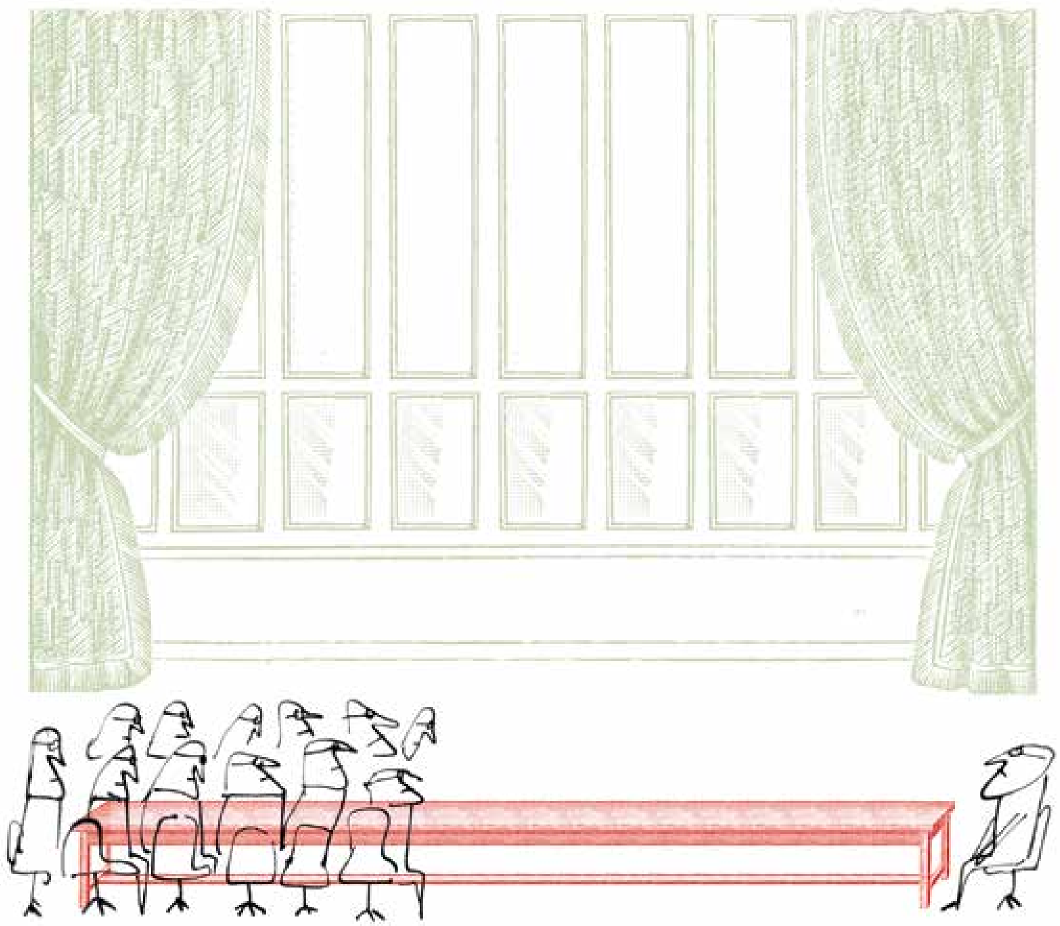

ILLUSTRATION: SERGE BLOCH

A Rare Breed: The Communications Board Member

There are more living ex-Presidents of the Swiss Confederation (18) than there are Chief Communications Officers serving on boards of S&P 500 companies today (16).

Recently published research by executive search firm Spencer Stuart estimates that of the 5,473 board seats at S&P 500 companies, less than 0.3 percent are occupied by top communications professionals.

The near-complete absence of communications professionals from the boardroom seems difficult to reconcile given how many companies stress the critical importance of building trust, safeguarding their reputation, and connecting with their stakeholders – areas where communications plays a driving role. The field is talked about as business-critical, yet its leaders are all but excluded from the boardrooms of big businesses.

Part of the challenge, according to Spencer Stuart, is a dearth of vacant seats. S&P 500 boards appointed 397 new independent directors in 2017, the largest number in more than a decade – yet still a paltry turnover rate of 7 percent. That same year, almost half of S&P 500 boards (48 percent) didn't appoint a single new member.

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NUMBER of CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICERS serving on boards of S&P 500 companies today.

And the reason these hard-to-come-by seats aren't being filled by Chief Communications Officers, according to the report's authors, is "the belief that communication skills – while valuable in their own right – aren't enough on their own to contribute significantly to a board's larger mandate." That's why most boards look for – and ultimately hire – the high-level leadership experience and strong financial acumen associated with CEOs, CFOs and COOs.

But here's some consolation: A separate Spencer Stuart study found that a majority of global CCOs (64 percent) report directly to a company's President or CEO. ◆

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