

Taking regional businesses into the paperless realm

By [Winston Taylor](#)

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Much of the distribution sector in sub-Saharan Africa still runs on pen and paper and an awkward mix of popular but business-inefficient communication channels.



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The further north of the Limpopo one goes (and in some instances south!) the pace of business slows and the aptitude for 'the good life' increases.

It is not surprising, therefore, that businesses in places such as Lusaka, Arusha, and Harare are relatively content with what they have been accustomed to for a decade or two.

It works, so why change?

By all means, technology has been adopted in these markets, but predominantly for mainstream communication such as email, WhatsApp, and Facebook.

Business-centric communication tools like Slack and Trello that are largely available for free see little light of day. However, Whatsapp group chats for ordering several million dollars' worth of FMCG goods on a monthly basis abound.



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This has been evident for more than half a decade in the regional and global marketplace, and a number of startups emerged in the early 'tweens' to solve these challenges for predominantly SME-size businesses.

As could be expected, a number of good sales mobility apps arose from Europe and the USA, some of which began to punt their solutions in the African market with relatively large degrees of success, until they tried going north of the Limpopo their solutions were only a good fit for formalised economies with good on-the-ground skill sets.

“ Some of the best Africa-centric tech has been born on the continent: m-Pesa, Ecocash, and Mukuru come to mind and highlight that shoe-horning foreign technology into African markets can be a futile exercise. ”

Yet, even within this space, much of the focus has been on B2C tech offerings rather than B2B, and it is this latter space which still holds untold opportunity in the region.



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FigJam Inc, a mobility software solution startup with its dev hub based in Harare, has made good inroads into this B2B market - not only locally but across the region (South Africa included).

“ It makes sense that building tech to match the users will always produce the best results possible, however, the biggest challenge that still remains is converting scores of successful business owners and managers into the paperless realm. ”

This is where tech-savvy entrepreneurs who are as good with people as they are with tech will feature well.

Technology adoption, especially at a level where intimate business intellectual property (IP) has to be shared with a third party, takes considerable trust and is only possible where proven track records exist within each local market. A somewhat chicken and egg conundrum if the tech is yet to enter a local market.



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Fortunately, cross-border networks, for those in the know, are far more extensive than one might think and it is this web that is particularly well spun in the FMCG distribution sector in sub-Saharan Africa. Appetite for free software trials is exceptional in one country, whilst much hand-holding and prodding is required in the neighbouring country.

The lesson from all of this is that each market has its idiosyncrasies, and businesses dreaming of rolling out their winning-formula software across the region will be well placed to look carefully and listen intently before venturing north of the Limpopo.

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