

What's in store for a digitally connected Africa?

One of the great privileges of working in Africa is how no two days are ever the same: the continent is dynamic, constantly reinventing itself amid a cultural melting pot of ideas and people

 By Cathy Smith 14 Jan 2020



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Perhaps this explains our rich capacity for invention and innovation. Or perhaps it's our youthfulness: Africa is, after all, the world's most youthful continent, with more than half of all people under the age of 25 expected to live on the continent by 2050.

By then, Africa's population would have doubled, with sub-Saharan Africa accounting for a quarter of the world's people. This is creating unique challenges for our growth, sustainability, development and participation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The dawn of a new decade is an opportune time to take stock of the challenges ahead and how we respond to them, as this will set the tone for the next ten years.

So what's in store for digitally connected African businesses and consumers in 2020?

The reinvention of the enterprise

African organisations are using the technological building blocks of the Fourth Industrial Revolution to reinvent themselves as intelligent enterprises. Driven by greater cloud adoption, in-memory capabilities and

powerful new technologies such as AI and IoT, the intelligent enterprise transforms data into action to deliver exceptional experiences across every line of business.

This was clear by the projects that some of the leading African enterprises showcased at the recent Quality Awards, an annual awards programme recognising the best and most innovative business transformation projects built on SAP technologies.

By using powerful technology tools – cloud, AI, real-time analytics, and more – these organisations have transformed how they deliver services and experiences to customers, engage with employees, and collaborate with partners.

It's also reshaping the agriculture sector, where a breakthrough IoT deployment helped one of the region's top sugar cane producers and processors to more sustainably use scarce water resources and improve their overall efficiencies. How Africa's large-scale food producers put technology to use to navigate the complexities of climate change and changing market forces will play an important role in our food security the coming decade.

Supporting the growth of micro-enterprises

Let's not forget the little guy: across Africa, hundreds of thousands of smallholder farmers are being equipped with mobile applications that connect them to various suppliers in the agri value chain as well as greater market opportunities, and access to farming best practice and weather information.

Why? Smallholder farmers account for 80% of all food consumed in Africa. Giving them access to increased market opportunities establishes them as micro enterprises, which is where the majority of economic upliftment and job creation opportunities still reside. And with access to better information and inputs, as well as greater opportunity to sell produce at higher prices, smallholder farmers can build more sustainable futures for them, their families and the millions who rely on them for fresh produce.

Social impact, purpose

There is also a new breed of enterprise that is gaining traction worldwide. At a recent visit to the Social Enterprise World Forum in Ethiopia, delegates were inspired by new thinking around what an enterprise is and can be. Social enterprises are purpose-led yet for-profit businesses focused on addressing socio-economic challenges by uplifting communities, accelerating progress and creating job opportunities.

Expect large purpose-led enterprises to support the growth of social enterprises through improved procurement practices, knowledge transfer, social sabbatical programs and resource-sharing in the years ahead.

Experience still the top consideration

The Experience Economy is not going anywhere. Gartner tells us half of all product investment projects are now focused on customer experience innovations.

Organisations are using technology tools to mine big pools of customer data to uncover insights that could inform more personalised engagements between businesses and their customers, partners, suppliers and employees.

In boardrooms across the continent business leaders are discussing how they could merge operational data with experience data to create consistently positive experiences that give them an edge in the age of the consumer.

Employee experiences

With the continuing war for talent, organisations are also taking greater care of their employee experiences. At a recent corporate awards ceremony, I was struck by how many organisations have invested in their talent management capabilities over the past year, and how extensive their strategies are to remain attractive as employers.

Considering the growing prevalence of millennials and other younger, more socially-conscious generations in the workplace, it's also not unsurprising that many businesses are more clearly defining their higher purpose to illustrate their commitment to solving challenges in the environments in which they operate.

Lifetime value engineering

For B2B businesses, the focus has shifted completely away from selling products and solutions to generating lifetime customer value. Why? Customers simply expect more from their investment into technology, and want quick time-to-value.

Expectations are high: IT spend used to be confined to the IT department, but every business transformation project today is also a technology project. Now it's the CEO, CFO and CMO who work with the CIO on major digital transformation projects.

Co-innovation as a blueprint

With major tech deployments now focused on delivering value over long periods of time, and executive buy-in and ownership from day one, technology providers have had to change how they engage and collaborate with customers.

The Co-Innovation Lab perhaps provides a useful blueprint for how organisations can work with tech providers to jointly develop solutions and proofs of concept before major funds are invested in large-scale projects.

Accelerating digital skills development among youth

Africa may be home to as many as 700 million young people, but less than 1% leave school with even basic coding knowledge. Fixing this will take a collective effort from the public and private sectors, NGOs, and civil society.

Initiatives such as Africa Code Week, a collaboration of more than 130 partners and 120 ambassadors across 37 African countries that has introduced more than 4.1 million youth to coding and digital literacy since 2015, point to one working model for mobilising mass resources behind large-scale digital skills development efforts.

The coming decade will present opportunities to solve some of the continent's prevailing challenges and take advantage of the immense opportunities presented by the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

By joining forces in a collective effort while keeping one eye on an uncertain but exciting future, we may ye build the prosperous, inclusive future for all who call Africa home.

ABOUT CATHY SMITH

Cathy Smith was appointed Managing Director of SAPAfrica in March 2018. She is the first-ever female executive of an emerging markets market unit in SAP's history. View my profile and articles...

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