

The tourism industry's biggest challenge in embracing the digital age

The face of travel and tourism sectors across the globe has felt the revolutionising forces of technology, but what is the biggest challenge associated with this giant shift?



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According to Tshifhiwa Tshivhengwa, CEO of the Federated Hospitality Association of South Africa (FEDHASA), while technology has transformed and advanced the industry in a positive manner quite rapidly, the biggest challenge that comes with technological advancement is the probability of replacing existing staff with a technological device, since the device can do the same job just as well.

Incorporating both the benefits of technology and the human touch

Even so, he says the industry remains labour intensive and as a result continues to work hard to boost employment levels. And with the rate of unemployment at 27.7%, the economy in recession and tourism a key driver for economic growth in the country, job creation and retention is necessary. He adds that the hospitality industry depends on human interaction to deliver the experiences to the customers and that is always the key differentiator.

"The advancement of technology in the industry comes with many advantages: a travel agent in the 90s compared to a travel agent now is as different as night and day. But we can't afford for this change to be the cause of a loss of jobs merely because a machine can do the work. We need to continue to innovate the way we deliver a service to customers, incorporating both the benefits of technology and human touch," he says.

Technology is on trend - both young and old are tech-savvy and digital advancements are everywhere. These days, in the hotel industry, the booking process for guests can be completed within minutes with the tap of a finger, and checking-in at that same hotel can be done easily using a mobile phone. Similarly, in future, room service will also be ordered without picking up a phone.

Whereas previously, most internal and external administration and finance-related jobs were completed on paper or telephonically, making almost everything a manually-driven process.

Balancing innovative developments with job retention and creation

As the world embraces the digital age, Tshivhengwa says that in South Africa specifically more emphasis should be placed on how to embrace digital transformation and all that comes with it, as well as to retain jobs and create new ones in the process

"Likewise, we should welcome technological advancement within the industry while ensuring that we do not lose the human touch, that's what makes the service so special. We need to balance these innovative developments with job retention and creation. Understanding the needs of millennials including the previous generations is vital. We need to work to find solutions that meet the needs of various market segments," he says.

Tshivhengwa says one way of addressing it is to consider introducing measures that safeguard and retains the staff in the sector. This could be done through up-skilling of existing staff to operate and work within these technological advancements.

"We need to commit ourselves to making technology work for us. If we need to introduce new skills and up-skill our staff, let's look at the kind of interventions necessary to move the industry further forward. And when we do, our future will look even brighter," he says.

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