

Digital transformation vital to improve service delivery

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The Covid-19 pandemic lays bare the urgent need for a government-driven strategy to propel digital transformation in the public sector and greater South African society.



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The South African government's handling of its response to Covid-19 is highly commendable. If anything, its response has highlighted the very real need to improve access and connectivity for citizens across all levels of our society. It has shown that accelerating South Africa's digital service delivery strategy is becoming an increasingly urgent aspect of just how to embrace doing things differently.

Infrastructure and Universal Access

The National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) published in 2012 states that by 2030, ICT will underpin the development of dynamic and connected information society and a vibrant knowledge economy that is more inclusive and prosperous. A seamless information infrastructure will be universally available and accessible and will meet the needs of citizens, business and the public sector, providing access to the creation and consumption of a wide range of converged services required for effective economic and social participation – at a cost and quality at least equal to South Africa's main peers and competitors.

Within this vision, the underlying ICT infrastructure and institutions will be the core of a widespread digital communications system. This ecosystem of digital networks, services, applications, content and devices, firmly integrated in the economic and social fabric, will connect public administration with the active citizen; promote economic growth, development and competitiveness; drive the creation of decent work; underpin nation-building and strengthen social cohesion; and support local, national and regional integration.

Public services and educational and information products will be accessible to all, and will build on the information, education and entertainment role envisaged for public broadcasting. The human development on which all this is premised will have created an e- literate (online) public able to take advantage of these technological advances and drive demand for services.

In spite of the NDP ambition, the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that we are still quite a way off from achieving this objective and that it is extremely urgent that we do so.

Take for example how we have been found wanting in aligning the needs for physical distancing and the physical payment of social grants. We have experienced a situation in which millions of South Africans have had to stand in crowded queues to receive payments whilst still being required to practice physical distancing. Despite the disparity in access to digital services, this gives the government an opportunity to drive greater adoption of remote service delivery.

Similarly, access to essential public services including public education has ground to a halt, and a huge majority of students and providers have not been able to access services and facilities remotely due to a lack of online access, requisite devices, high data costs, reliable and pervasive infrastructure etc.

The recent work of the Competition Commission regarding the reduction of data costs is excellent and commendable, as is the work by the Department of Communications and ICASA to release emergency spectrum for ICT operators.

As things currently stand, the government's vision to "digitise government while transforming South Africa into an inclusive digital society and economy" is right. But it can benefit from no greater impetus than our current pandemic reality.

E-Government strategy and fiscal efficiency

While the national e-government strategy and roadmap (published as early as November 2017) paints a vision for this, its implementation has now been shown to be too slow.

On the business side, the enabling of quick, simple and efficient processing of new company registrations and related compliance through the recently launched www.bizportal.gov.za by the CIPC is an exciting step forward in digitising services in the private sector of the economy and improving ease of doing business.

However, more still needs to be done in the e-government space. We need to ensure in the public health care system, for example, that we can activate electronic healthcare records for all patients. This will improve not only service delivery in that space but also improve the quality of the information that goes into National Health Policy development. It will most certainly improve efficiencies in the provision of chronic medication specifically.

We know that the world is different for South Africa. We don't have a fully enabled e-government strategy and we need to find a way for technology to be more pervasive, practical and accessible. Most critically, this must not be limited to urban centres, where technology is seemingly more ubiquitous.

The digitisation of the public sector is even more critical in an environment of a low and very constrained fiscal budget.

But – there is an opportunity to do something.

When Finance Minister Tito Mboweni announces expected changes to the original national budget (suggested to be imminent in the next few weeks) governments has the chance to close this gap and implement programmes that support service delivery and retain the tenants of social distancing.

While we can never be naïve to the social needs of our society (and expectations that the budget may need to be adjusted by as much as R150 billion), the minister has already stated that there will need to be a realignment of spending priorities to bolster the work of the Department of Health in addressing the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. But it shouldn't just be in this space, and we should avoid a too narrow view on what spending priorities need to be.

There are three significant opportunities to improve the access to and impact of our e-government strategy:

- **Accelerate the broader ICT sector's role in monitoring and tracking of Covid-19 positive cases**

We can learn a lot from countries such as South Korea. Key to its efforts to flatten the curve as well as manage the flow of cases in the broader healthcare system was a coordinated public–private partnership to build capacity to track, manage and prioritise the ever-evolving requirements of the pandemic. It can't be done by government alone, and it isn't the government's responsibility to solve alone either. As a sector we stand ready to play our part as an essential service – and provide what we essentially need to.

- **Engage in opportunities to unlock underlying ICT infrastructure**

Government is often criticised for a lack of policy certainty. As history continues to move past us all, it is not the time to be stuck in a policy quagmire. We can enable tremendous benefits across our society and enable a significantly smoother transition to our “new normal” if we focus on what should be done. There is a need to make red-tape a lot more amber in colour by addressing immediate shifts in areas where current IT infrastructure can be unlocked to support greater access and opportunities.

- **Accelerate disadvantaged youth digital access**

As many schools give access to class guides for continued learning, many are on the sidelines of continued access to class. From access to data to the tools that enable the opportunity to learn whilst at home our country has been exposed and the inequalities need to be bridged.

If there was ever a time when the government has needed a massively transformative purpose to change the way they work and engage with its citizens, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided it with one. While technology is not that purpose, it is certainly one of the ways of achieving that purpose can be sustainably accelerated.

Failure to recognise this and respond appropriately to this strategic inflection point would be a missed opportunity. To quote from a recent article I read, the “opportunity” to reform the system after a shock occurs perhaps outweighs the initial danger presented by the shock itself.

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