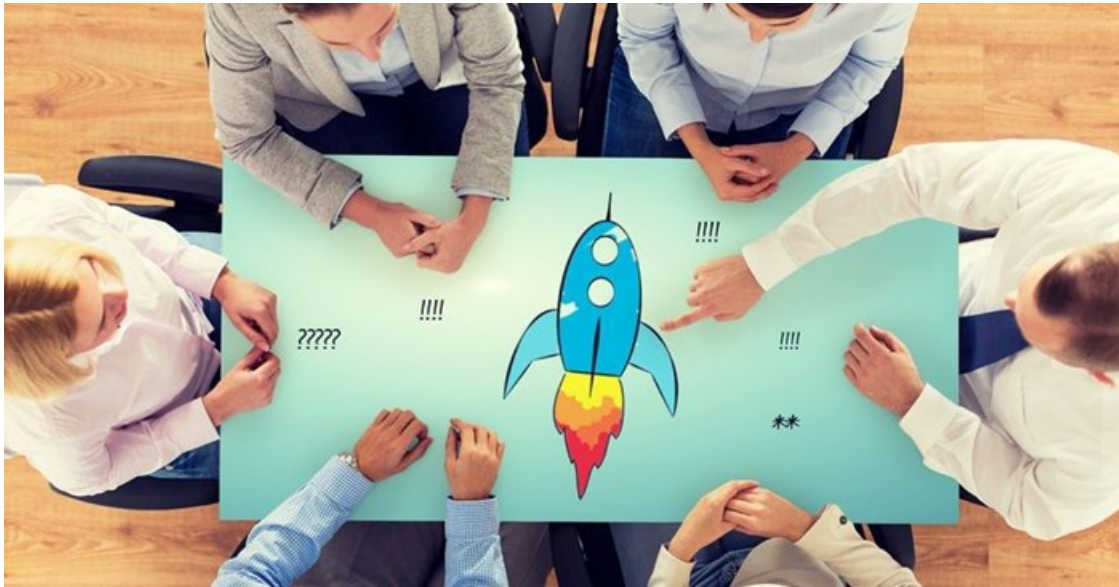


Driving sustainable development agendas through digital transformation

By [Joanne Shields](#)

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Africa is a diverse continent with unique market conditions. Home to seven of the fastest growing economies and seven of the world's megacities, and with millions of young people entering the labour force each year, Africa is fertile ground for investment and development.



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That being said, divergence in Africa's economies also means the region faces additional challenges to embracing the fourth industrial revolution that is dawning on the world economy – including growing youth unemployment, low commodity prices and off-take, climate change, and a lack of critical infrastructure, among others.

Faced with this myriad of challenges and increasing complexities, many governments and organisations across Africa are turning their attention to digital and disruptive technologies, to harness the transformative influence and benefits these can bring to the services and – ultimately the end-users – the people.

Connected communities

Digital disruption is already having an effect across Africa – and it will play one of the most significant roles in shaping connected and smart communities for the future.



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As internet access becomes increasingly pervasive on the continent - and with this rapid adoption in the use of cloud computing, social media and machine-to-machine computing - this continues to open up new digital possibilities for connected communities and the governing bodies, alike; to drive services and social change for the betterment of society and increase sustainability.

Establishing a connected community will require a lot more than an intelligent city network, reliable connectivity, or clever applications. Surely, these are all critical to the operations of a connected community, but it's the data that can be mined from the various connection touch points and/or devices that hold the greatest prospects for driving a sustainable, transformative growth agenda.

It will highlight what is working, what needs improving and what has to change.

Collecting, storing, managing authorised use of data

The key challenge, however, is to securely collect, store and manage authorised use of the data, as it will be 'owned' by a range of stakeholders. Though even this challenge presents a possible opportunity; to have a platform or a hub that allows all authorised parties to trade their information securely and potentially monetise it.

This monetisation may include anything from enabling the public sector to do more for less in times of austerity, to city officials deploying emerging 'smart city' applications that focus on health and social care, travel and transport, energy and environment, as well as culture and the public realm.

The aim should be to create something that is scalable and replicable elsewhere – as access to this level of data will become invaluable to making intelligent decisions in the future of our societies.

Closing the knowledge gap

We all know the old adage that "knowledge is power" and it still rings true. For the better part of the first two industrial revolutions, access to knowledge and self-empowerment had largely been limited to aristocrats or those born of power and influence. And, while significant changes took place during the third industrial revolution and aimed at driving more equality across societies, it is the fourth industrial revolution that will have the greatest impact on making this a reality.

“ Ubiquitous connectivity, software defined networks and cloud services are the building blocks of the digital age. Open standards and platforms create a level playing field for innovators and entrepreneurs, as well as established players. ”

In every industry sector, digital disruptors are finding new opportunities, exploiting innovative platforms and capitalising on new channels. They are data-driven, hyper-connected and super agile, looking to serve any un-met demand.

In light of the new models that these new and disruptive technologies are driving, the information technology (IT) sector and governments both have a role to play in co-creating a level playing field for the digital economy.

Government, for example, must set out a framework and infrastructure that enables innovation. Where the role of technology companies is then to create a sound platform for digital transformation to happen, which will involve collaborating with others to do things differently. For example, connectivity is fundamental to a level playing field – and large

companies can work with smaller innovators to develop and make available new ways to deliver connectivity in remote areas, using tethered drones, light waves, or other innovations.

“ The rapid rate at which technology is developing and driving new models of growth and services can bring greater prosperity. Ultimately, giving everyone access to these new economic opportunities is essential to a shared future – and we can judge digital transformation a success if it helps us reach this goal. ”

A more human kind of leadership

We often underestimate the scale and speed of change that occurred in the 20th Century. Wave upon wave of scientific discovery and technological advancements have transformed every aspect of society, largely for the better. Living standards and life expectancy have risen as a result.

As we strike out into the digital age, we must make sure that 21st Century technologies continue to have a positive impact for people.

The digital age will create tremendous opportunities for economic growth and social progress.

“ The big challenge for us all is to make sure that the benefits are fairly shared by all, and not just a few. Because the real purpose of technology is to make life easier and better for people. ”

People aren't just users of technology. In fact, people are the driving force behind the digital age.

The real importance of digital to society is not the emergence of new technology, but rather the empowering of people to do amazing things that previously weren't possible. We call this the digital possible. And, seeing this come to fruition is the leadership challenge for us all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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