

Tackling the IT skills crisis in SA



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Enterprise technology adoption in South Africa is developing at a strong rate.

However, a national shortage of skills in key areas is limiting the ability of local companies to integrate new technology and generate maximum benefits from it. Concurrently, young and technologically-savvy people are graduating from various academic institutions. However, there's a growing disconnect between this raw talent that is emerging, and the formal skills, qualifications and certifications so sorely needed by industry.

Three main approaches

While there may be no quick fixes to entirely solve the IT skills crisis in South Africa, there are a number of actions that can be taken to alleviate the pressure and build positive momentum. We consider three main approaches to tackling the issue:

Firstly, within the government, policy makers could prioritise the construction of high-end technology parks. There are currently centres that offer start-up incubators; however more needs to be done, such as the inclusion of training academies and settling grounds for international technology companies looking to establish a local presence. Collecting like-minded individuals in one place creates a very positive 'pollenating' effect where new ideas are shared and new opportunities created.

Secondly, within academia, there needs to be far closer alignment between the learning experience for IT students and the actual requirements from industry. Recent years have seen the emergence of training/graduate/internship programmes by almost every technology company in SA. The fact that these have sprung up reflects the fact that many academic programmes have lost relevancy with market demands.

Universities have shown an appetite to augment their curricula with specific certifications and qualifications - so achieving this kind of closer coordination with the private sector should not be difficult.

Thirdly, within the private sector itself, it is important for technology providers and their clients to evolve their outsourcing and recruitment models. By finding creative partnership models, the individuals involved can gain valuable industry/client experience, benefit from attaining formal qualifications, and even (in the case of global technology firms) receive valuable international training and experience.

There are certainly opportunities for a 'win-win-win' outcome, in this respect.

Pressures in the middle

Currently, the biggest pressures in South Africa lie in the middle tier of the skills layers, such as a Cisco-certified network professional, for instance. CIOs report that most of their unfilled vacancies are in this middle layer.

Therefore, the goal that all parties should galvanise behind, is to take many of those in entry-level IT positions (such as desktop support) and move them upwards to the middle layer, creating space in the entry-level for the latest batch of graduates. Achieving this goal requires widespread collaboration across the three areas of the government, academia and industry, as described above.

Global technology outsourcing companies can play a pivotal role in helping to achieve this goal. They are ideally placed to connect these three spheres better, bring international best practice to local shores, evolve client partnership models, and, ultimately, contribute to the national agenda of skills development.

Another key consideration is the impact of enhanced Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills on the burgeoning entrepreneurial environment in SA - which is another area of national focus for the government and policy makers. Global technology phenomena like WhatsApp and Uber have shown us how just one innovative spark of genius can upend entire industries. These powerful examples show the potential for technology-minded entrepreneurs to achieve explosive business growth. In time, this crop of tech start-ups - such as those coming out of the so-called 'Silicon Cape' - will provide employment and skills development opportunities for thousands of others.

South Africa, like the rest of the continent, is faced with the double challenge of high youth unemployment and skills challenges. And it is only through fully embracing the digital age that we can find ways to overcome these challenges.

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