Tech trends that cannot be ignored in 2021 and beyond

By Emanuel Osanga
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The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated reduced physical human interaction with more people engaging online now than ever before. This is unlikely to fade anytime soon and will see the increased datafication of our lives.

Every click leaves a digital or data footprint – a trail of information that we have viewed or created. These digital footprints will only become greater as 5G roll out is accelerated. Beyond speed improvement, 5G allows for autonomous and remote control of robotics and other types of Internet of Things (IoT) devices. As these technologies feature more prominently, the rate at which new data is generated will become even more frightening.

For organisations, preparing to be a part of these plays will be critical to ensuring future survival.

Unstoppable tech trends that will rule in future

Intelligent automation is transforming our workplaces. Every organisation should embrace automation; it holds the potential to increase efficiencies and productivity across industries, and greatly contribute to economic growth.

Interface innovations like Amazon's Alexa and Apple's Siri have enabled the ease of interaction with technology, and as these interfaces advance, the symbiotic relationship between technology and humans will become more of a reality.

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Big data is one of those megatrends that will impact our lives in one way or another – both negatively and positively. There are major concerns around data privacy, security and sharing that need to be addressed collectively. Blockchain technology however address some of these concerns because it will overhaul how we store, share, and protect data much more efficiently.

Finally, platform models will continue to drive new ways of doing business. Embodied by the likes of Alibaba, Uber and Amazon, these businesses have shifted the way business is done in their respective sectors. We should see a similar pattern in financial services, and health, among others.

Meeting the challenges of disruptive technological change

While these advancements and trends offer the potential to transform businesses and the lives of their clients, there are important challenges to consider.

For organisations to participate in the platform space, as drivers, orchestrators or platform users, they must be well-positioned from a technology point of view. Many companies with legacy IT systems will face hurdles in this regard and will be forced to invest in transformation or risk losing out in value chains created.

Another key challenge that cannot be ignored is data mistrust. Individuals want to know that their data is not being misused or abused. It remains to be seen how regulators will respond regarding ethical issues with data, and those organisations that operate within highly regulated industries will need to begin engagements with regulators sooner rather than later.

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The geopolitics of data will also have an impact in the future. Recently, we have seen some countries implement total internet shutdowns. When that happens, how do you access data sitting in, say, Ireland? Data will become a national asset and certain platform providers such as Amazon are now opening data centres on the continent in response.

As technology advances at a rate never seen before, the skills gap continues to widen. There is a major shortage of data science skills not only on the continent but globally. These skills will continue to be in high demand and the challenge for companies is to find ways to mitigate this risk. As leaders, we need to make sure we create a big pipeline of these skills that are required to be able to mine and extract insights and drive data science initiatives.

How organisations should position themselves to remain relevant

As African organisations, we must embrace digital commerce and finance to remain relevant on the global stage. This will be critical as the continent transfers to a services economy. With its young population and absence of legacy issues Africa is well placed to become the next sourcing centre from which the rest of the world can procure services.

Further, as economies recover post the pandemic, we must be as close to consumer interactions as possible. Gaining insight into what your consumers are saying must be prioritised. But to be able to mine and extract insights and drive data science initiatives, a big pipeline of skills is required.

Organisations will have to invest in building a data-driven culture and invest in initiatives such as data science academies to ensure the availability of appropriate skills. The more companies automate, the less traditional skills are required but that does not mean there isn't a place for them within the organisations. Those resources can be repurposed by adding additional skills such as data and digital literacy.

With the increasing demand for these skills not only on the content but across the globe, developing data science academies has the potential to create employment on the continent but this will largely depend on the strategies of government and organisations.

Those organisations that can get this right will win in their industries. We need to build a data-driven culture and engrain it in the way we do business and execute, there is no way else to remain competitive now and in the future.

The opportunity for the African continent

The African continent has greenfield advantage in that it is not weighed down by legacies that other parts of the world would struggle with. African countries and organisations can innovate and create from scratch and become early adopters of disruptive technology.

Of course, the continent is not without challenges. But impediments should inspire us to become more innovative by engaging with these advancements. The challenge of internet access, for example, has been solved in part by mobile networks. Mobile money was innovated out of mobile penetration in the continent. If we waited for internet access to provide financial services, we would still be waiting.

Over and above the young population dividend, we should take full advantage of initiatives such as the AfCFTA, which enables the entire continent to be able to easily trade with one another and will accelerate our ability to transfer innovations across the continent. Such policies have come at the right time, and we need to embrace the implementation very positively.

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