

# Digital transformation 2021, the year that was

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Since the outbreak of Covid-19, a lot has been said about how the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital and contactless solutions by both corporate entities and consumers. It is now evident that this global pandemic has created a paradigm shift away from how companies previously saw digital solutions as simple add-ons to their current offerings, towards a reengineering of the value chain to digital business models that have digital at the heart.



Khaya Mbanga | image supplied

As more companies and organisations implemented a work from home policy over the past 18 months or so in a bid to minimise the spread of the contagion, the facilities management industry has had to be agile and adapt to these changes by developing customised solutions to support its clients to manage their facilities more optimally with a lower occupancy rate.

This entails developing and implementing smart solutions such as building information modelling (BIM), which provided clients with multiple benefits to enable them to better manage their assets, improved business continuity during power outages, maximised the usage of workspaces and enhanced cyber security. Artificial intelligence (AI) and sense detecting metrics have been effectively adopted across the board, an indication of increased transformation from physical spaces to digitisation.

South Africa is in the midst of an energy crisis, as the available electricity generating capacity cannot meet the supply. This has led to many asset owners investing in backup generators to ensure business continuity during increasingly frequent power outages.

To efficiently manage the backup power supplied by diesel generators, the facilities management industry has deployed Internet of Things (IoT) solutions that work with sensors to detect metrics such as the pressure applied to the generators. The data collected informs our management hub, which intervenes by spreading the pressure load among the farm of generators. This ensures the longevity of the generators and minimises outages.

As more people work remotely, they require a more reliable connectivity and secure VPN to create a secure tunnel to work systems. Security of information for employees working remotely remains one of the biggest pain points, as remote working means being disconnected from industry-grade firewalls at the office. Working with telecommunications providers and other service providers, the facilities management industry stepped up to the plate and became a one-stop shop that offered its clients bespoke solutions that meet power, connectivity and cyber security requirements.

## **Completely immersed in the digital age**

The world has fully entered the age of digital immersion, where the line between the physical and the virtual is increasingly being blurred. The IoT solutions that the facilities management industry has designed and deployed to its corporate clients are increasingly finding consumer application. These include the use of hot desks and meeting room reservation systems to manage workspaces. This system allows for the reservation of resources such as hot desks, common areas and meeting rooms using contactless and virtual applications.

We envisage that solutions such as a visitor management system, which tracks the number of visitors in a building and allows for the digital approval and signing of documents, will also be customised in the future for consumer application. In addition, BMI, the building of virtual spaces models to create better means of architecture of buildings and space assets will eventually become the order of the day. Drones will increase domination across sectors, in particular in buildings and security surveillance.

As we continue to develop and deploy these solutions, we should always be mindful that we should not alienate the user in our efforts, but rather ensure that the solutions we implement add value and enhance the customer's user experience. The ideal experience should provide value from a cost savings and revenue generation perspective and simply make it easier to operate one's business.

## **What we expect looking ahead**

Looking ahead, we expect the digitisation momentum to continue to steamroll ahead on the back of customer satisfaction, the need to contain costs, and the deployment of high performing networks such as 5G. We will continue to see a demand for more reliable connectivity, more secure VPN to create secure tunnel work-to-work systems, new remote working policies to ensure adherence to typical work behaviour at home or elsewhere. Cybersecurity will remain critical for the

hybrid work system, and companies must invest in the governance and protection of systems and people to ward against ill intent by hackers.

It is encouraging to see that our banking and financial services industries are leading the pack in digitisation, and they are creating cutting-edge financial solutions that foster financial inclusion while still adhering to strict banking laws.

The telecoms industry has laid the foundation that allows us to enjoy the benefits of fast and reliable cellular connectivity. The ubiquitous availability of new age networks such as 5G will bring faster connections and more bandwidth that, in turn, will drive the digitisation of many industries.

Looking ahead, we expect increased automation to be used in facilities management. This will include a rapid adoption of drone technology to provide surveillance and the use of IoT to extract more value from building assets.

Interesting times lie ahead, and it is encouraging that the facilities management industry has already caught on to these winds of change.

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