How brand South Africa can digitally be elevated, reimagined

By Farhana Safedien

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There is a renewed emphasis on skills development and community upliftment now that the government is firmly focused on economic recovery. The key, however, to this recovery and economic stimulation will be to revisit digital transformation objectives and empower public sector employees and leaders with digital tools and platforms that introduce efficiencies while spurring much-needed innovation.

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Furthermore, with service delivery becoming a hotbed issue as elections loom, strategic digital transformation can pave the way for streamlined e-government solutions that will remove many of the manual processes - as well as managing governance and compliance in a more efficient way - which currently hamper service delivery in many areas.

This journey does not have to be resource-intensive and complex, but it is a journey that has to be embarked upon with a clear direction, an ultimate objective, and savvy technology partners.

Notably, the pandemic has already instigated key shifts in behaviour and mindset - with more people working from home where possible, and government employees relying on some cloud platforms such as Microsoft Teams to communicate during the lockdown.

In other words, a degree of forward-moving momentum and technology adoption has been created by the health crisis, and now is the time to embrace this momentum and lay the foundation for grassroots digital transformation in the public sector sphere.

In my view, there are three key areas that must be addressed along this journey.

1. Develop a cloud roadmap as a pathway to data-driven services

While many decision makers within government continue to be cautious about the use of public or hybrid cloud environments, it is critical that a robust cloud strategy is developed and implemented in order to be able to offer efficient e-government solutions.

When developing this strategy, the government must examine its processes and ask important questions, such as: What percentage of processes are still manual? Is your departmental reporting automated or manual; and how much real-time information/data are decision makers and employees receiving?

The answers will likely point the way towards a more wholesale adoption of cloud-based technologies, and in many instances, this shift begins with moving email to the cloud - before this expands to include storage, productivity tools, and much more.

Once departments and key service sectors are up and running with more automation and digitised processes, it then becomes easier to harness many of the tools and platforms that are driving innovation and efficiencies at many of the world's top companies and also public sector organisations.

For instance, the government can begin using predictive analytics to forecast trends and anticipate service delivery needs; automated reporting and executive dashboards can highlight where greater intervention is needed to improve services - or a new approach is required, and real-time information and data feeds can reveal where more resources are needed to assist employees and citizens at any given moment.

In essence, by moving to a more digitised, data-driven approach to government services, departments and decision makers will be closer to the pulse of the nation – and what citizens really want and need on a day-to-day level.

2. Elevate brand South Africa; prioritise upskilling and attracting young talent

While a cloud roadmap and the adoption of the digital tools highlighted above is the first step, this step has to be supported by an equally rigorous approach to re-skilling and upskilling existing employees – as well as supporting digital and IT skills development amongst graduates and school-leavers.

As part of this skills drive, the government must work more closely with the private sector – and take a leaf out of its play book by hosting events such as hackathons, conferences and expos to showcase how coding and IT skills can be a bridge to new and exciting experiences and global opportunities.

The goal is to create a supportive digital ecosystem, which should include many more bursaries, learnership schemes and job shadowing opportunities in partnership with the private sector and higher learning institutions.

Arguably, a critical part of attracting and nurturing much needed digital and ICT skills and talent in the public sector will require the government to begin paying salaries in line with what the technology/ICT sector is paying.

Simultaneously, the government has to find ways to brighten and radically improve the brand association of working in the public sector sphere, and make it prestigious, respectable and engaging to be a part of brand South Africa.

3. Enable remote working; empower staff with digital tools

As the pandemic has revealed to decision-makers worldwide, a key part of any business continuity plan – as well as talent and retention strategies – is the ability to allow staff to work remotely and flexibly where appropriate. The same applies to large swathes of the public sector, particularly in the drive to attract top talent from the private sector and create an engaging ecosystem that prizes innovation and creative thinking.

Increasingly, up and coming ICT talent will demand flexibility and access to leading-edge technology, and public sector organisations need to be able to rise to this challenge in order to attract and retain top talent.

If there is some form of cloud strategy and cloud infrastructure in place, public sector employees can be empowered with advanced collaborative tools that enable real-time document sharing, for example, as well as access to real-time information and data flows for key decision-makers and departments.

Looking ahead, it is important to remember that South Africa has a depth of technological expertise, coupled with resilience and the instinct to innovate, which are elements that can quickly be harnessed if the right public sector strategies and technology partnerships are in place.

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