

Innovating for a better African future

 By Leigh Andrews

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Clear strategy and using technology to revolutionise tedious business processes we take for granted are essentials if we want to advance the state of the entrepreneurially minded continent.

Change your focus from how technology will change the continent in the future to instead the opportunities that exist right now, advises Luke McKend, country director of Google for South Africa.



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This was one of my highlights from the opening keynote sessions on the first day of AfricaCom 2015. It all kicked off with Informa's research director Julie Rey-Gore announcing we are officially now in the future but not quite meeting the technological foreshadowing of 1985's *Back to the Future*, which saw us having flying cars and fax machines in every room by October 2015. [Click here](#) for *The Telegraph's* overview of some of the movie's predictions that did come right.

The intention of AfricaCom is to discuss innovation and steering Africa forward. As a result 16 separate conferences happen at the same time. The first keynote of the day featured a panel discussion on supporting a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in digital Africa. It was moderated by Larry Madowo, technology editor and anchor of NTV Kenya; with panellists Christian de Faria, CEO of Airtel Africa; Markku Mäkeläinen, director of global operator partnerships at Facebook; Marc Rennard, EVP Africa Middle East and Asia at Orange Group; as well as Bright Simons, president of mPedigree.

Overall, the message was that we are not doing enough around innovation just yet. But there are lots of bright ideas out there and we need to channel all the talent along with proper financing.

The African innovation focus: Improving quality of life

While making it clear there's nothing wrong with image-editing apps, Simons pointed out that where African innovation stands out is that it's all about improving an aspect of life, such as healthcare, education or agriculture through mobile developments.

Looking at how the Western world then embraces this and aims to help, Madawo said: "It's about more than just opening an office in Johannesburg." Global corporates need to embrace the continent as a whole and create a meaningful ecosystem. We need to think "If someone has an idea in Africa, where do they go to get it off the ground?" Then do something to make that a reality.

Another important point is the need to take into account the size of the market you're targeting. Africa is very fragmented as a continent, and woe betide the well-meaning Western investor who sees 'Africa as a country'. Most of the continent's innovation has had no government intervention or enablement, so it's all about the idea originator and clever investment.

The true meaning of 'digital Africa'

Next up was Tumi Chamayou, Vice President of strategy, marketing and communications at Ericsson region sub-Saharan Africa. She spoke on the topic "what does digital Africa really mean?"

There's been impressive growth of mobile broadband and a huge chunk of new African mobile subscriptions recently, so while we do still have a long way to go, we're on the right track. From a technology perspective, Chamayou pointed out that GSM is still the dominant technology on the continent, at about 70%.

Connecting people was just the beginning, 'digital Africa' is actually about creating the technology for inclusion into business processes and transforming other industries, as well as empowerment. Businesses need to ask themselves how we connect the technological world to the physical world. We're sitting on a planet with finite resources, and our impacts can have wider reaching benefits than ever before, especially as the business trust element starts to change.

Chamayou concluded that we simply need to think of how technology has changed the way we create, distribute and consume music. We now need to apply this thinking to any and all industries.

There's still a massive opportunity for a 'technology revolution' on the continent, don't miss out.

[Click here](#) for further insights from the Ericsson Mobility Report, launched on 17 November.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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