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The future is smart, and it's here

By Gerald Naidoo

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Government service delivery is once again in the headlines, with ongoing protests in some areas highlighting the desperation of those living in poorer areas for access to improved services.

While a lack of government service delivery is not a specifically South African problem, many countries are using the data generated by their citizens to make better decisions, anticipate problems to resolve them proactively and co-ordinate resources to operate effectively.

This approach forms the foundation of the IBM Smart Cities initiative, and one that is seeing results in cities as diverse as Rio, Memphis, and New York City. The basic foundation for smarter cities is to collect the data generated in these urban areas, analyse it, and use it to improve quality of city life - to make traffic flow more smoothly, to help police be more efficient, to ensure that water supply meets demand, and so on. Each city, country and region has different needs, but each can use technology to meet its demands.

Technology and information

The process of transforming services in local and national government around the world requires two main ingredients: Technology and information. Using best practices and technologies that have enabled the modernisation of other governments, South Africa could provide unthought-of choice, convenience and simplicity for its citizens.

With solutions for public safety, smarter buildings and urban planning, government and agency administration, energy and water, environmental issues, transportation, social programs, healthcare and education, smart cities offer choice in terms of having available, alternative service delivery channels to complement the traditional channels of walk-in office visits, written communications and telephone calls; convenience concerning when (and how) citizens could interface with government; and simplicity relating to the interactions between citizens and government.

The poor service delivery we have become accustomed to could be turned around with the right solutions in place, as data proliferates through sensors deployed everywhere - in buildings, roads, and utility grids - and as information-based processes increasingly form the basis of all interactions between government and citizens. This data is a significant resource that can be used to manage city life. Not just for governments, but citizens now have access to more information to make day-to-day decisions as well.

Evaluating data

It's all about the data, and the ability to effectively analyse it. The ability to evaluate the data around crime, for example, allows smarter police forces to look ahead and see the nature of incidents that are likely to happen and therefore plan how to handle them.

Many cities have made significant progress addressing the issues that plague them - changing demographics, increasing demand for services, and competition for investment and jobs. Megacities worldwide - with their mega problems - now understand that throwing more physical infrastructure at the problem is neither feasible nor effective, and it is certainly not sustainable. Leveraging IT is the only way forward - and effective - for the long-term.

President Jacob Zuma has said that government should make people's lives easier. Using the right IT systems is a way to make that happen. At a city, municipal, regional or national level, insights based on data analysis, followed up through efficient daily management, can grow citizen satisfaction and improve service delivery.

ABOUT GERALD NAIDOO

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