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The world needs African solutions

By Wesley Lynch

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African software has had some qualified global successes, but more often than not our home-grown innovations don't 'take' well in other territories. To overcome this, we need to think wider. While African solutions are often preferred in dealing with African problems, our software developers must also identify global applications for their solutions, if they are to have global success.

Decoding failure

M-Pesa, the global mobile payment solution was launched in Kenya in 2007. Since then it has become one of the most famous and successful mobile money services to date. At last count, more than 17 million Kenyans were using it to 'send money home', as part of a growing and evolving range of transactions.

But the model has not taken hold nearly as well anywhere else. In neighbouring Tanzania it has faltered, and in South Africa a re-launch of the business became necessary when pricing, distribution and other problems hampered rollout.

By contrast, Fundamo, the South African mobile banking, has had more predictable success in emerging markets, mainly in the East. But this, too, has not been unqualified. Fundamo's solutions have had such success that they have been acquired by Visa Inc.

It is the inability of some African technologies to acclimatise globally while others flourish, that we need to decode and address.

Solution without a problem

The problem, in my view, is an unjustified focus on transplanting successful solutions in other territories. We need to examine whether an African success story will find global application, or whether it is so far removed from first world problems that tweaking it for success would make it a totally different product.

Another mistake is to take our most ambitious solutions to other territories, only to see them fail in more competitive, technologically-advanced markets. We should focus on the ones that find great traction anywhere, for example mobile games and entertainment, because of their universal appeal.

Perhaps the question shouldn't be *'How do we take a uniquely African solution onto a global stage?'* but *'What unique pressing problems do we have for which we can find solutions with wider application?'*

Obviously, the application need not be the same. An African problem, for instance adherence to TB or AIDS treatment schedules, might only find European success if it is tweaked for lifestyle-related applications.

Will it fly?

Determining whether a solution addresses a universal problem - or at least a commonly encountered similar problem -we need to critically examine not just its domestic launch failures, but also its successes. Are we taking the conditions that guaranteed its success for granted? Are they present or at minimum replicable in the target market?

Virtuous cycle

Only when African innovation finds global success more regularly will we begin to build on the gains of breakthrough innovations.

Foreign earnings will flow in, contributing to growth in the service industries, and we will gain greater standing in global software communities with our exportable innovations and increased participation. This in turn will stimulate more innovation, and a virtuous cycle of innovation-led growth will be set in motion.

But first we have to know what we're working towards.

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