Key tech trends for businesses in Africa

While international trends are often mirrored in Africa, the unique operating environment and challenges on the continent result in some very interesting applications in the business technology space.

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"As the SMME sector across Africa continues to thrive, business software and technology are increasingly important competitive differentiators," says marketing director for SYSPRO, Meryl Malcomess. "As a proudly African, global business software company headquartered in Johannesburg, SYSPRO is uniquely positioned to understand the ways key trends are playing out on the African continent."

Cloud control

While cloud computing remains a top industry buzzword the world over, Malcomess says it is clear that it is still going to take a long time for SMMEs in Africa to be fully comfortable with putting their data in the cloud.

"Security is a major concern while a lack of reliable connectivity continues to act as a major deterrent for many African businesses switching to cloud-based infrastructure," comments Malcomess.

"There is, however, a very strong business case for using the cloud for mission-critical applications in order to reduce operation costs. We are seeing some SMMEs increasingly use cloud services in order to reduce their IT costs specifically as this allows them to save on hardware and software licences and of course expensive hosting costs."

According to Malcomess, while core data generally continues to be hosted on-site in African companies, there is a growing trend toward cloud usage as light and mobile users demand easy access to business data.

Mobile promise

"When it comes to mobile technology, Africa has actually leap-frogged many other markets," says Malcomess. "Even in the

most rural areas where people have very little income, the one thing they do have is a mobile phone. This means that they are connected and can connect to the commercial reality."

According to Malcomess, mobile technology is the key enabler for connecting simple and complex supply chains on the continent. "The increasing ubiquity of cross-platform business software means that even small spaza shop owners can now use their mobile phones to stay in the loop with master production areas and distribution networks," says Malcomess, adding that this is revolutionary for small business owners who are now able to access information anywhere, anytime.

Non-IT customisation

Globally, there is an increasing demand for the customisation of business software to be left in the hands of the user rather than being the sole responsibility of a company's IT department. "In Africa especially, users want a no-frills approach to business software - they want to be able to add or strip functionality as and when they need it," says Malcomess.

While development costs remain fairly expensive, programmes using single source-code are increasingly critical for catering for multi-device deployment. "Many SMMEs in Africa may not be able to afford the highest-end devices for their workforce, so it's integral for business software solutions to not only cater for the high-end devices but to also offer optimal functionality on the simpler devices that are more prevalent in these areas," says Malcomess.

She concludes, "Africa is all about adaptability and flexibility, and those are exactly the traits SMMEs are demanding from their business technology solutions."

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