

Smart cities need to include the concept of smart citizens

By [Dave Stevens](#) 12 Apr 2016

By 2050, it's expected that nearly 80% of South Africans will be living in urban areas. This massive acceleration in rural-to-urban migration was highlighted recently by Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs Deputy Minister Andries Nel.

For South Africa's cities, this influx brings new opportunities, but also a host of new challenges. To serve increasing numbers of inhabitants, cities will need to become more efficient with their service delivery and more engaging with citizens.



Many are touting the concept of smart cities, where new technology is used to connect and enhance many of the basic services; like electricity, water, transportation, road networks, waste management, crime prevention, and billing services, among others.

But to truly realise this vision, the conversation needs to evolve from being just about smart cities, to include the concept of smart citizens. As with the introduction of any new technology, the catalyst for adoption is always the end-user. As more and more users start expecting technology solutions in local government, cities will have no option but to prioritise the development of smart initiatives.

Lengthy wait times

With their expectations now set by high-quality digital solutions from the likes of companies paving the way for future technological advances, citizens are demanding that local government keeps pace with these trends. Our collective patience is wearing thin when it comes to lengthy wait times on calls, long queues, inaccurate billing and poor services.



© denis cristo – 123RF.com

In fact, today's digital citizen expects an omni-channel experience - where they can report service delivery issues from the convenience of a mobile app. They expect queries about their property rates to be resolved via a direct message on Facebook or Twitter.

It's this awakening demand from the millions of residents in South Africa's metros that will stimulate transformation at a local government level.

In the economic heartland of Johannesburg, the first signs of this are already taking hold. Already we have mobile apps for motorists to report faults on the city's 7,000km of road, instantly report crimes and suspicious activity, check for scheduled power cuts, find bus routes and schedules, and see upcoming public events.

Crowdsourcing information

These apps empower citizens with the digital tools to engage with their city, and generate a culture of shared accountability and transparency. By receiving tip-offs from citizens on issues ranging from illegal dumping, serious crime, or burst water pipes and broken traffic lights, the city is able to crowdsource insights from millions of people.

A simple example like the City of Johannesburg's infamous Twitter representative 'TK' shows how a metro can become more engaging and helpful - helping to spawn a culture of public-private partnership and shared accountability. Over 200,000 people now follow tweets from the @CityofJoburgZA account.

By tuning in to the constant chatter buzzing around social media, cities can understand the most pressing pain points, and start addressing the critical issues first.

But the next step for local government leaders is to integrate these new digital tools into the core of their operations. Crucial to this is the creation of a 'single view of the citizen' - giving the city visibility of the individual's various relationships with different municipal entities - and enabling tailored responses to solve any queries or problems.

Geo-located reports

To get a sense of just how important this is, the Johannesburg Road Agency's Find 'n Fix app already see

over 1,000 motorists sending in geo-located reports and photos of potholes, damaged roads, broken lights and other infrastructure issues - every single week.

Attending to these issues in the most efficient way is the crucial next step in improving citizens' overall experience and continuing to enhance the reputation of the service provider.

The ultimate dreams of smart cities, crowdsourcing, and collective responsibility can only come true if the smaller, focused projects gain traction; and if users continue to play the role of catalyst in getting local government to adopt new technology and new ways of delivering services.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Stevens is Head, Customer & Data Insights.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>