

Tech takes on travel

The last thing you're thinking about when putting your feet up on holiday is that you may be enjoying a break as a result of something as disparate to travel as data analytics, but, increasingly, that's the case. Behind the scenes, in tourism, there's a new wave of business strategy driven by technology processes, all generated to create a better experience for the visitor. At the forefront of this wave are teams of young IT geniuses, making the most out of the growth spurt in this dynamic sector.



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The technology infiltration is not a trend, it's here to stay. An outmoded way of thinking about the tourism sector is that it's spearheaded by front-of-house hospitality professionals, visitor-facing tour guides and operators and shuttle drivers with a mind map of their local areas. While those roles are central to the visitor experience, they don't tell the whole story.

Harnessing the power of big data

As the market develops it is becoming dominated by the younger segment of the population, aspirational, mobile-savvy travellers who research, plan and record their experiences from their devices. Up to 45 percent of all travellers are using their devices to do this, and this is what business operators are understanding. They have to stay ahead of their markets and provide the means for those travellers to travel according to their preferences. To remain successful in a competitive market, companies must be preemptive in their strategies.

Larger tourism organisations such as airlines and hotel groups are harnessing the power of big data, information generated by and about their customers. Online transactions can provide a wealth of detail about your customer, from cookies generated by their web searching habits to the information they provide on booking and feedback forms.

This data allows for targeted marketing strategies that are intimate and personalised. You can target customers based on their preferences – how, when and where they are likely to travel, based on their habits. The more they interact with you, and you with them, the more information is produced. Multiply that by thousands, and you can see how useful the cloud becomes for storing and accessing all of this data.

Then there are apps – for everything from research to booking and exploring in destination. Apps aid visitors by making their process of organising what they want to do much more efficient – the demand for easy-to-navigate apps to facilitate travel is huge. As are user-friendly websites that get results fast.

Rapid digitalisation presents rich opportunities

The point is, IT professionals, designers, data analysts, advertising and marketing specialists, social media analysts and community managers are all becoming more central to the tourism sector, these careers dominated by young, creative people who understand their market. It's often relatively easy to develop the skills necessary for those careers by doing free courses online, so they are accessible to a new workforce who may not have the resources to study degrees. Their skills are bankable, however, and, within the right context, they can go on to lead teams and access senior positions in an economic climate that would see them battle to find employment.

We're acutely aware that tourism is enjoying a period of growth in the Western Cape, despite many challenges. There's large-scale investment in hotel and conferencing properties, so the long-term prospects are looking good. Across the continent, even, international investment is following suit, and, as African nations join the race to get their countries connected, the pace is picking up. This rapid digitalisation presents rich opportunities for young people seeking to maximise the potential available by building businesses around strategies that are less about guesswork but around real-time data. We can study trends that show where areas of growth are and develop our strategies to meet needs even before our market is aware that those needs exist.

Forever young, constantly evolving

Of course, we're not saying that the wealth of accumulated knowledge of older tourism professionals isn't of value – we need the brilliance of seasoned professionals more than ever before, to channel this hunger for technology and the marketing power it offers, we need leaders with vision who can motivate and direct the creative energy into strategies that benefit travellers.

Those who will succeed are the forever-young who can relate to people of all ages, for those are our visitors, travel is an experience that rejuvenates and refreshes, always bringing new perspectives, so the people who work in tourism must have the desire to constantly evolve and maintain a fresh approach to life.

It's not certain where the industry will be in ten or twenty years' time: after all, at the rate technology is developing, it would take a visionary like Bill Gates to predict how travel trends will change, but, for young people in South Africa, there's an opportunity that will endure, both for those that are in love with all of the possibilities technology offers and for those brave enough to step out as entrepreneurs.

Next time you're on holiday, think of all the processes that got you there, from reading friend's posts on social media to booking online. Imagine the specialists working behind the scenes to make that happen. One doesn't always consider all the people whose contribution goes into you having a good time, but, if you do, you'll begin to see why there are so many career opportunities in tourism.

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