

Reflecting on the future of SA's digital shift

By [Ryan Jamieson](#)

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Although it is undeniably difficult to look back to February 2020 while still in the midst of a global pandemic, reflection can, in fact, reveal the many positive developments (and lessons) that the crisis has brought.



Ryan Jamieson, CTO at Altron Karabina

From a digital transformation perspective, February was significant in that it marked the month of South Africa's State of the Nation Address (SONA), in which government outlined key initiatives that would place the country on track to realise economic growth through large-scale digitisation. These initiatives included three key focus areas:

- grassroots development – bringing coding and robotics to primary schools;
- higher learning – including plans to build a new University of Science and Innovation in Ekurhuleni; and
- the development of a world-class smart city.

Now, as both the public and private sectors in SA look to adapt and adjust in line with the radical changes brought about by the pandemic and national lockdown, it is valuable to reflect on these digital initiatives – and to take proactive steps to ensure that business leaders and policy-makers remain firmly on course to drive economic growth through strategic digitisation.

A new (virtual) world of opportunity

To begin with, let's look at education and vital grassroots development within the new lens of coronavirus-related changes. In the face of the forced closure of schools and higher learning institutions nationwide, educators have had to scramble and find ways to continue their efforts using myriad digital channels. We have seen teachers fighting heroic battles to keep in touch with learners via email and even WhatsApp to maintain momentum for the school/varsity year.

At both K12/schools and university level, we have certainly glimpsed the possibilities of moving to a far more virtualised classroom environment – and seen that online learning is certainly viable, and highly beneficial in many ways.

On the other hand, however, the lockdown has revealed stark digital inequalities – with many learners unable to access the data, connectivity and devices that they need to keep up with their global peers. Importantly, the crisis also revealed the urgent need to train teachers around the use of virtual classroom environments – and to upskill around their own digital skills and capabilities.

So, for South Africa to make faster progress towards the SONA goal of introducing initiatives like coding and robotics in primary schools, for example, we need to invest in dynamic virtual learning platforms, connectivity and access – as well as rigorous digital training/upskilling for the nation's teachers.

Similarly, when looking at the SONA goal of developing a smart city, it is clear that fast and robust connectivity will be vital to such an initiative. While government has recently committed to investing in major capital projects (which are currently being identified), it is encouraging to learn that this includes a mass digitisation drive – so while government is not directly investing in a smart city (yet), new mass digitisation investments will hopefully be in close alignment with a future smart city...and the rapid digitisation of important metro areas.

Partnerships will be key

Despite the enormous hardships in the wake of Covid-19, the lockdown has in fact also accelerated key building blocks in the context of digital transformation: many companies and institutions are fully embracing Cloud computing and flexible, scalable digital solutions, for example; and the education sector has gained invaluable lessons into what is required to keep abreast with global developments.

Arguably, however, this is precisely the moment when business and public sector leaders must embrace the opportunity for change – and in fact, drive the further acceleration of digital transformation across all sectors in SA.

From a business and leadership perspective, the following will be critical:

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- Creation of more IT/digitally-focused internships and job shadowing opportunities.
- Mentorship programmes for school and university learners within STEM-based disciplines.
- Dynamic programmes and coding events hosted by businesses such as hackathons and free webinars.
- Businesses should consider pro bono work in key sectors with aspiring partners (these can turn into more formalised, commercial engagements over time) - but the emphasis is on skills transfer/knowledge share, and removing any digital barriers to entry into the SA and global markets.
- Channel significant investment into grassroots education (including online learning materials and devices/connectivity), and teacher skills development/training.
- Creation of more incubation hubs/accelerators for digital businesses to support innovation.

In essence, business leaders have a critical role to play in making SA more 'inclusive' in the digital sense. By taking a proactive approach and looking to build partnerships and drive investments that support widespread digitisation and digital skills training, we can turn the dark days of Covid-19 into a catalyst for long-term economic growth and grassroots innovation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Jamieson, CTO at Altron Karabina

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