

Is industrial IT the next wave for Africa?

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Kenya, East Africa's industrial nerve centre is on the cusp of real growth and innovation. In fact, according to the African Economic Outlook in 2015, East Africa was again the continent's fastest growing region and is expected to continue its high growth path in 2016/2017.



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Infrastructure projects, manufacturing and energy and resource companies may be facing some headwinds, but they are undeniably driving GDP growth and as a result are in the midst of a technological renaissance that is transforming their look, systems and processes. And it's a transformation that they cannot afford to ignore.

ICT as an enabler

Much has already been debated around the fact that the African economy can/and is growing significantly as a result of ICT-enabled solutions – especially if these solutions are based in a platform of empowerment that provides access to education and job opportunities. And the industrial sector is no different. IT solutions have become an enabler to mobilisation, automation and improving decision making.

Traditional views on technology have evolved over the past several years, thanks in part to its consumerisation. Increasingly, technology delivers on more than just products. Instead, it is focused towards offering solutions that span the corporate and consumer spheres. Phrases like the sharing economy, digitalisation, and collaboration, are driving us towards a new era of digital possible. And this especially true in the industrial space.

Just take the mining sector for example where East Africa has several mineral belts. Establishing visibility over far-flung global operations is critical and while the long-term outlook is strong, the connected mine with integrated data flows is fundamental if miners are to meet the numerous short and medium-term challenges now facing the industry.

Infrastructure and cloud play

This, however, is easier said than done. Connectivity is a constant challenge for mine operators and as automation, process optimisation and integration with the Internet of Things (IoT) becomes critical for operational efficiency; an industrial IT centre with a solid IT infrastructure is required to support the amount of data generated. Just look at wearables. It not just a fitness step counter – apply it in the mining space and you have a device that interacts with you, showing your heart rate, elevated stress levels and even the gases you are exposed to. It's about a connected workforce – but more importantly, information that can be used to drive safety, learnings and operational effectiveness.

This data however needs to be stored somewhere and this is where the cloud comes in. For these industries, there are two cloud plays that can be considered. Firstly, with connectivity and IoT to really drive a competitive advantage, this information needs to be stored somewhere for analysis. The cloud is a perfect place for this and access is immediate for the analysis of trend leading indications and cross operational learning. Secondly, all non-mission critical applications can be strategically migrated to the cloud for consolidation and to reduce costs. Applied correctly and business will be able to obtain real insight and have the opportunity to understand its incremental cost of operations - and hence, it's incremental value - at any given moment.

Convergence of IT and OT

So then at a time of rapid change this sector quickly needs to examine, which technology investments will have the biggest positive impact on their business. And what is the value potential and return on investment of investing in these technologies? Furthermore, businesses need to start to look at how the convergence of IT and OT makes tech more relevant in the industrial space.

Industrialisation on the continent will be driven by three mega trends - natural resources, people, and infrastructure development. These industries are asset intensive and they need to be managed and driven effectively if we are to continue seeing growth across the continent – we need to bring all 3 mega trends together - making them perfect candidates for industrial IT which is driven by solid network infrastructure, connectivity, cloud, security and a partner that understands how these can make or break you.

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