

Empowering Africa's youth to leapfrog towards a better future

By [Takreem El Tohamy](#)

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The fourth industrial revolution is underway and it is shaping up some of the most significant opportunities and challenges of our lifetime. The surging high-tech, sharing economy is transforming jobs, policies, industries and entire economies as we witness our digital and physical worlds continue to merge.



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At the core of this digital transformation is the ongoing adoption of new emerging technologies. It is imperative for technology companies not only to bring these technologies safely to the world but also equip societies and the workforce with the essential skills for this disruptive era.

In Africa, unemployment remains a core issue, affecting even those with tertiary qualifications in some parts of the continent. Many of our educational institutions are keen to teach students the skills required to operate in the digital economy. This is where the private sector must step in. After all, helping Africa's 1.2 billion people prepare for the fourth industrial revolution is good for the society and Africa's youth.

CEOs rank investment in people as the number one way to accelerate performance

In the next three years, as many as 120 million workers in the world's 12 largest economies may need to be retrained or reskilled as a result of artificial intelligence (AI) and intelligent automation. This is according to the latest IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV) study, titled *The Enterprise Guide to Closing the Skills Gap*. According to the research, the time it takes to close a skills gap through training has increased by more than 10 times in just four years.

In 2014, it took three days on average to close a capability gap through training in the enterprise. In 2018, it took 36 days. In addition, only 41% of the CEOs surveyed say that they have the people, skills and resources required to execute their business strategies.

In 2016, executives ranked technical core capabilities for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), basic computer and software/application skills as the top two most critical skills for employees. Looking at that statement now, it's obvious "basic computer skills" just aren't going to cut it any longer. A recent survey of business leaders by the World Economic Forum in South Africa says around 42% of the core job skills required today are set to change substantially by 2022.



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We know the challenge, but what are we going to do about it?

It is imperative to have a holistic approach to close the digital skills gap. We need to focus on reskilling our workforce through development that is personalised, multi-modal and built on data. Educational journeys that are tailored to experience level, skills and career aspirations will be the key to success. To fuel those journeys, private companies should take a cue from the emerging knowledge economy – they should take advantage of an ecosystem of partners to expand their access to content and leverage innovative learning technologies for their existing and future markets.

The IBV study recommends that those journeys be delivered through experiential learning. The course material must come to life within organisations through new ways of working, agile teams and hands-on practice served up in the flow of work. But it's not just employees who should benefit. Maintaining a dynamic and diverse workforce involves upskilling potential employees too – women, youth, recent graduates and school leavers.



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When we share our knowledge freely, we create both corporate and public good

Around half of Africans are under the age of 25. This presents an enormous opportunity for tech companies to equip young Africa with the digital skills necessary and prepare them for today's job market. Empowering people means growing economies, as well as a healthier and more productive population.

IBM's online learning platform, [Digital-Nation Africa](#) is one example of how big corporates can help close the skills gap across the continent. The cloud-based, online, self-paced learning and innovation platform is designed to empower Africa's youth to develop their technology and innovation skills and address three major gaps: skills, innovation and jobs.

That said, no one company can tackle upskilling African youth on its own. Partnerships are the fuel that will drive the

continent's development forward. The IBM Skills Academy, part of the IBM's university programme, is an example of collaboration with more than 340 universities across Middle East and Africa to focus on skills and careers that are in high demand in today's market.

IBM has already used its learning platform to power public-sector efforts in upskilling the workforce. IBM has also collaborated with both Egypt and Morocco's Pathways in Technology (P-TECH), to empower African youth with new skills for today's sought-after jobs. That includes "new collar" jobs, where having the right skills matters more than having a specific degree.

Africa's greatest resource is its youth and the continent's entrepreneurial spirit – born of necessity – is now ready to leapfrog towards a better future.

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