

A modern tech workforce is both locally & globally minded

Much like India positioned itself as a global IT hub 20 years ago, South Africa has the same opportunity now - it is just matter of our commitment to create the supply of skills so we can meet the demand of opportunity both in-country and beyond.

Economic recovery, unemployment, skills deficits - these are not new issues in South Africa. You would be hard pressed to find an era in which these weren't a common headline items. Yet, today's unique circumstances mean these age-old issues are more pressing than they have ever been.

With digital transformation providing the backbone of modern workforce efficiencies, the tech skills gap in South Africa becomes more tangible as demand shoots past supply - especially after the pandemic digitally altered workforce norms and business processes at a rate beyond our wildest imaginations.

The changing nature of tech skills

When we look at digital transformation, it has strengthened significantly the shift of managing new initiatives from a traditional to a more agile way of working. Today we run much shorter projects with quicker turnaround times so we can learn what works in the market, and quickly rewire our products where required.

This requires a skill shift within the industry, from pure developers to an engineering skillset. When you work in these giant teams made up of small squads, each squad is tasked with delivering a specific feature of a larger product. Engineers involved need to understand where they fit within the greater ecosystem and they need to understand the entire life cycle of a product and how it all fits together - which is what we call software engineering.

Having said that, one person can rarely have end-to-end skills, but they should have a broad knowledge of two or three core concepts and then branch into more specialist skills. What this means is that the capability demand in today's tech-centric environment is growing and continues to become more demanding.

This begs the question: Is South Africa capable of delivering these skills?

Skill capability is not the problem

South Africa is definitely not lagging behind when it comes to capability. In my experience, I am quite confident in the quality of skills being fostered in-country. The real issue is in fact the availability of capability - there are simply not enough of these capable hands (yet?) to meet the workforce demands of today's tech.

The demand is there. More businesses are modernising their legacy platforms, leveraging cloud capabilities, building data driven business models, engineering new experiences for their clients and COVID-19 has catalysed the need for this to such a degree that we can't keep up. This is where I see the greatest challenge and an opportunity for South Africa.



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Part of the solution lies in bridging the ever-growing gap between graduates and the businesses in which they seek employment.

As the IT landscape evolves exponentially, it is almost impossible for learning institutions to keep up with the rigorous demands of tech within enterprises. It is up to the enterprises themselves to employ workplace readiness programmes that train graduates and get them up to speed on the technologies they will be working with in those very enterprises.

In South Africa, more effort is required from corporates to prepare candidates through these readiness programmes. Right now, the whole ecosystem is not mature enough in-country, and - simply put - not enough skilled workers being produced.

On top of this, the ever-present attrition will continue to see skilled workers leave the country in search of bigger and better opportunities.

Brain drains vs a global workforce

'Brain drain' is, unfortunately, part-and-parcel of this industry. Like it or not, when demand outstrips supply on a global scale, businesses are going to source talent from wherever they can find them.

The IT landscape had essentially demolished the barriers between borders and especially after COVID-19 years, it is a seamless working world where one can work from anywhere, any country and be just as productive.

We cannot stop brain drain, but we can take the notion of a global workforce and turn it to our advantage.

We can't deny that the allure of living or staying in South Africa is driven by social issues. Geopolitical issues aside - the only answer is to focus on building our supply of skills to such an extent that they can work for any company in the world and do it from South Africa along with us leveraging global skills where it makes sense for us.

And given that, South Africa has positioned itself as amongst the world leaders in business process outsourcing (BPO), we could extend that and become an important element for tech talent outsourcing too.

Right now, Business Process Enabling South Africa (BPESA) estimates that the BPO sector accounts for around 200,000 jobs in the domestic market. In the international market, where we service clients in countries around the world, the sector employs 72,850 South Africans. That's a total of around 271,850 employed South Africans. With the tech sector, this number can only grow.

Sadly, IT outsourcing has not picked up much, but we have faith and have invested in building local capability and a South African delivery centre not just for our South African customers, but also for our US and UK customers as well.

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