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The Fourth Industrial Revolution: Africa needs to keep up

By Jan Coetzee founder of Headway

The world is on the verge of a major revolution; while developed countries are keeping pace with major technological advancement, developing countries, mostly in Africa, are still making efforts to industrialise their economies, trying to map their way out of the extractive sector.

Nonetheless, not all is lost, given the fluid nature of technology; there are opportunities for developing countries to catch up. The good news is that there is realisation in developing countries of the vital role technology can place in alleviating some of the teething development challenges weighing down their prospects for growth. Stakeholders and the Namibian Government are keenly aware of the crucial role the ICT sector can play in speeding up development in Namibia.

In his book, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, Professor Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, acknowledges that the world is at the beginning of a revolution that is fundamentally changing the way we live, work and relate to one another.

Ubiquitous, mobile supercomputing, intelligent robots, Self-driving cars, Neuro-technological brain enhancements, Genetic editing, are all evidence of dramatic change around us and it's happening at exponential speed, Klaus acknowledges.

It goes without saying that economically superior countries are those who have embraced and enhanced technology in almost all areas of economic activities.

**Africa's Roadmap to the Fourth Industrial Revolution:
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Like many African countries, Namibia's Vision 2030 could have been conceived before major technological advancements, it's however, increasingly clear now that its realisation can be accelerated and enabled by the use of technology, but only if Namibia, at policy level, can jump onto the band wagon and move in the direction technology is driving the world.

The industrial revolution, liberated mankind from animal power, made mass production possible and brought digital capabilities to billions of people. This Fourth Industrial Revolution is, however, fundamentally different.

The advancement in technologies now offers opportunities for low and medium income countries to make use of ICT; these technologies have been experiencing progressive diffusion at various paces in different countries and for different tools. In the case of mobile phones it has been surprisingly fast and socially widespread.

Currently Namibia is experiencing increased interests in locally developed and based ICT applications that are catching the interest of the Government. What is left is seeing how the Government through the line Ministry can help such start-ups in the ICT gain access to finance for further development and interest generation in the ICT sector in the country.

Namibia is focused on creating a knowledge-based society where technology, innovation, entrepreneurship at every socio-economic level becomes the norm. Vision 2030 and the Harambee Prosperity Plan are both working towards this goal. This means that we have to do things differently and we have to do them fast, 2019 is upon us.

Being able to see and act upon potential opportunities and possibilities for change through innovation is the only path to success. This means that the business environment needs to change. It can only survive if Namibia can successfully compete and even flourish in the face of the range of emerging adverse and fluctuating business and economic conditions. We need to become service orientated, this does not just mean offering good quality services, but adding value to the economy by selling services.

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Whether we offer ICT-services, hosted services or even solutions like call centres for large international corporations. We have English and German speakers, Internet is relatively fast and stable and the labour force plentiful. The opportunity is there.

We can fully embrace new technology, embrace cloud services and avoid mistakes that the early adopters made. We can engage and implement best practices and adapt them for our own needs and circumstances. We will engage and implement the best possibly solutions, hardware and people to continue to improve our ICT rankings in the coming years as well as gaining a competitive edge in the region since we are willing to use technology and innovation to our advantage.

There is need to develop home-grown talent through internships with relevant companies and by stimulating tertiary institutions to continue focusing on ICT-skills development for the knowledge-based economy. If we look at other emerging nations that have made giant economic strides, it's because they have embraced the service-industries in all their forms.

Namibia has a chance to build networks, acquire and develop tailor-made technology that suits our particular set of challenges and issues, using the latest technology available. Consider the West Africa Cable System (WACS) or our 4G networks that has connected our large but sparsely populated country. This is not a pipe-dream and certainly not impossible.

It almost sounds too good to be true and often seems a long way off. We can establish an environment where everything is set up to stimulate an innovative economy and be a catalyst for an innovative economic sector.

This environment is facilitated by high-speed Internet that is always on, stable and available nationwide. As well giving organisations access to the right advice and making sure that knowledge and experience is developed, harnessed, shared and retained within the borders of Namibia This is how we fulfil Vision 2030.

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Printed for Africa CyberSecurity Conference