

Future-focused public sector organisations in Africa are...

Delivering affordable, interconnected, innovative services



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In *The Second Machine Age: Work, progress and prosperity in a time of brilliant technologies*, authors Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee hypothesise that among the forces shaping human development, technology has had the greatest impact in the shortest amount of time. Computers and other digital advances are doing for mental power what the steam engine and its descendants did for muscle power.

What does this mean for future-focused public sector organisations? The rate of change driven by technology will influence the affordability, interconnectedness and innovation of public services going forward.

Affordability

In Africa, public services can still end up being too expensive for many citizens—even when those services are subsidised. This is because the total cost to the citizen includes long travel times particularly for those in rural, less connected areas and long waiting times, such as

for initial diagnoses, which also reduces take-home pay.

Many citizens choose public services based on what they can afford. They are the caretakers of their own information, carrying their files and experiences from provider to provider. The burden is on the citizen, rather than any institution or system, to manage cost and information.

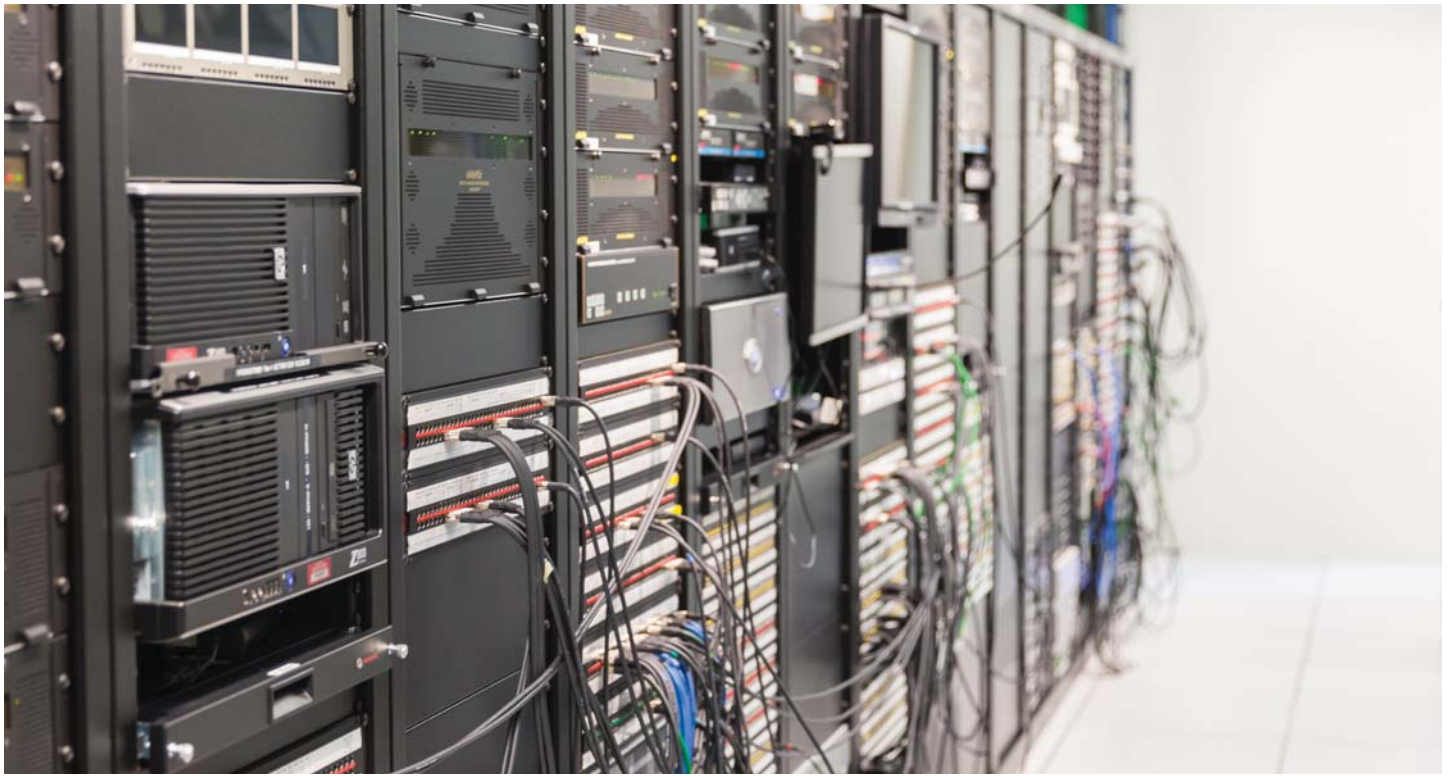
Another challenge is the way that governments collect revenue and disburse it based on budgets. For most budgets, the biggest line items are salaries and benefits. What if, instead, funds could be allocated based on reliable data about need? Information about maternal birth rates or malaria in particular regions, for example, could inform prioritised allocations and funding for third-party providers, helping to build an institutional framework based on need not bureaucracy—and putting citizens first.

Interconnectedness

For this to happen, future-focused public sector organisations must operate in a more interconnected manner. Over time, Africa's government and public sector organisations have acquired a huge amount of data. Data points are many and varied; information is often duplicated; patchwork systems are punctuated with one-time research and decisions informed by a lot of guesswork. But the data we have is a virtual treasure trove.

The challenge for these organisations is to connect the dots between service centres, so that we can clearly see how information systems are interlinked—a holistic view that has the added benefit of putting citizens and their needs first. If systems were more closely integrated, we could save lives and improve security at the same time.

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In my view, it is government's role to implement a comprehensive policy framework that connects the dots between providers to drive decision-making. For that to happen, we need to do two things: first, data has to be captured in a rational way. Second, we need a framework to provide data analysis, interpretation and decision-making capacity to benefit the public.

To improve interconnectedness, service providers must have proper systems and ways of serving citizens and second, they must be able to make enough money to be self-sustaining and disciplined to provide services and solution sets.

If government or donor funding is tight, public service providers must also look at different ways to deliver services. These could include PPP arrangements where services are provided in exchange for revenue sharing and creating a system where providers specialise and citizens get the services that they require.

Embracing the cyber world means opening up systems and processes to external suppliers, customers, partners and employees, and accepting culturally and psychologically that the old boundaries are being swept away. This culture change needs to be driven from the top, with the need for greater executive-level awareness of the challenge. To combat resistance, government must be clear about the benefits of a comprehensive information system.

Innovation

Technology will also influence innovative service delivery. There are two aspects of innovation of importance to the future public body: operational, at the level of service

delivery, and strategic, in terms of local, regional or national innovation capacity.

Operationally, delivering the promise to the citizen entails having the right (new) service delivery models for the right results, with an eye on measurable outcomes and real impact. Additionally, the future public body needs to consider its role in local, national and regional innovation strategies, based on areas of competitive advantage.

Future-focused public sector organisations that manage data more effectively and efficiently are able to discern trends over time to target service delivery where it will have the greatest impact. Imagine dynamic updates about public service needs in real time: our decisions and investments would have a profound impact. Affordable, interconnected, innovative service delivery will also help to reduce fraud and corruption.

Many have called for the deployment of world-class ICT to automate everything in sight, as a cure-all for all ills. But ICT is not the prescription for every malady that besets economic growth and development in East Africa. Instead, we can look at the trajectory for technology change and plan for a better future.

Many countries in Africa have successfully created an environment with fibre-optic cable and information technology to drive their economies. The telecommunications sector effectively connects with citizens and facilitates connections between them, benefiting all areas of the economy. Now, it is the public sector's turn to provide connected citizen-centric services.