How to embrace AI in emerging markets like Africa

By Tyler Golato and Rob Green

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With the advent of AI, there is, perhaps understandably, great fear around the loss of work for many; however, some of this is misplaced due to a lack of understanding of what AI will truly mean for us all. And while the reality is that AI will no doubt take some jobs away, it will, in fact, create jobs too. So, what potential does it have to improve the lives of many in Africa?

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Africa will soon have the world's second largest population. As the pan-African economy develops, so does an opportunity that most developed economies lack: the collective choice to embrace emerging technologies and to generate the infrastructure required to support a robust and well equipped future work force.

The difference between developing and developed economies, such as the United States and Europe who are 'ahead of the technological curve' so to speak, is that they often resist systemic change due to their size and the potential of destabilisation or disruption. Developing economies, on the other hand, offer an alternative in this respect – because they are experiencing their formative period, decisions can be made by government and industry as to how these economies should progress and stabilise.

They stand to develop their own economies by disrupting the status quo elsewhere through innovation. Systemic changes, like those relevant to education, can make an entire generation, and potentially cultivate leaders on a global scale when it comes to new technologies. And Africa has the opportunity to lead the world in emerging technologies, for example, by taking steps to incorporate a culture of working with robotics and AI in the context of education.

AI and employment in Africa

Companies need to improve the way they screen, hire, attract, and retain applicants. Some, such as LinkedIn, have attempted to tackle this problem but, in many ways, have only further complicated it. Without proper vetting, and because the format is rigid, very little specific information is conveyed by LinkedIn users with regards to their suitability for a specific company. And this is especially true with regards to executive hiring.

Metrics such as university attended, work history, incomplete skills lists, and so on, are ultimately of little use at senior level. Instead, the focus must be on more intangible factors such as deal history analysis, level of responsibility in previous roles, management style, key accomplishments, personality, cultural fit, psychometric testing, and an individual's long-term career interest. When an individual's specific criteria across these categories are met to a high degree, and they are perfectly in line with a company's values and criteria, both parties will achieve a higher degree of success.

Therefore, using AI, companies are able to generate intricate profiles of both individuals and companies utilizing a blinded, relatively non-bias approach, and in doing so, match individuals to their perfect role, and conversely, employers to their ideal employee. Strategies like this optimise not only for performance, but also for the best possible cultural fit. Individuals perform better and stay at companies longer when they feel like they are a key part of a well-oiled machine. And this is one prime example of how AI is beginning to disrupt the HR space, particularly in Africa.

While many developing economies have made strides in incorporating technology into their day to day lives, emerging and frontier markets like those that exist throughout Africa possess the unique potential to advance further than their Western peers. Africans, again, have the unique ability to innovate as they are not restricted by barometers regarding the status quo and "how things should be done."

One of the most significant problems facing employers in the an-African region is a lack of understanding regarding prospective employees. The traditional CV falls flat in enabling an employer to understand young up-and-coming talent that may not have previous experience in a field of their interest. Without a CV or previous experience, how do we know that a prospective employee will be a good fit for a company? Those living in rural areas, for example, may harbor specific untapped skills, but lack a coherent CV.

One of the greatest promises of AI is the ability to create relatively unbiased assessments of prospective candidates – assessments that go well beyond the information that is traditionally conveyed in a CV. Machine learning-based analyses will allow us to predict, with a relatively high degree of accuracy, the likelihood of an individual's success in a role in which they may not have previous experience.

Further, a more intimate understanding of the individual and their unique personality traits will allow us to better ascertain whether or not they will be an appropriate fit for a certain company and the culture it projects.

Collective crossroads

Right now we stand at a collective crossroads regarding emerging technologies such as strong and weak AI. Our future, in many ways, lies at the intersection between those currently developing the technologies, and the ways in which future generations decide to internalize them - and put them to use.

With AI, we have an unparalleled opportunity. We could, for example, be dismissive and fearful regarding our approach to such technologies. However, instead of allowing fear and misunderstanding to consume us, we must choose to embrace technology and all of the known (and unknown) opportunities – both social and economic – that comes with it.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is just around the corner, and the consequences are vast. We have a responsibility to understand how these technologies will impact our life and work, and further, to train future generations to use them

responsibly and lucratively. In Africa, in particular, we have the gift of a tremendous opportunity: to lead the world in AI and to outpace the West economically by embracing such technologies.

In order to effectively shape this type of reality, it is vital that appropriate investments are made in the African region, so as to allow future generations to benefit from the immense opportunities available via these technologies. Perhaps the most important investment is one which will bring the internet to every citizen on the continent, empowering people to participate in the global economy that is made possible through such a distributed system.

Fiber internet is slowly becoming available throughout the developing world, but the acceleration of this process will, in turn, accelerate economic growth broadly. Further, investment in promising AI startups on the continent will foster competition and lead to ingenuity. It is vital – and likely very profitable – for companies with the available resources to invest broadly in promising tech startups on the continent, so as to allow them to compete with and potentially outpace those that are developing in the West.

Investment should be made by companies that have an interest in the end-product being developed by such start-ups.

With an understanding of and an appreciation for AI, along with strong investment in the African region, we can ensure that our future is more evenly distributed and that all stand to gain both economically and socially from these technologies. Add to this the right education and development of skills, and our African youth can be the pioneers of the digital revolution.

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