GovTech roundtable investigates the creation of an ICT research council

During a roundtable at GovTech, attended by students, academics and government ICT officers, the creation of an ICT research council in South Africa to drive integrated ICT research and development was put back on the table. The Honourable Deputy Minister of Telecommunications and Postal Services, Professor Hlengiwe Mkhize stated that government was interested in ensuring inclusive participation in policy formation and other issues of relevance to the sector and was considering the feasibility of creating an expert advisory group to inform the agenda on research and innovation.

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Her belief was that data, research and scientific evidence were essential in policy formulation - hence the idea of a research council. The roundtable session was held to discuss a potential partnership for broadening the knowledge economy and information society, and all sectors of society including the public sector, private sector and academia were significant role-players in investigating the feasibility of providing a formal platform for this to take place.

In facilitating the session, Mothibi Ramusi, CIO of the National Lotteries Commission, highlighted four key themes for roundtable participants, namely - the thought leadership needed to achieve South Africa's e-government aims, the need for a baseline study to establish what is needed, the type of partnership that would be preferable, and the regulatory and policy issues that need to be managed in attaining a knowledge economy and information society.

Areas for further investigation

A robust discussion followed, with contributions from ICT students from the Durban University of Technology, attending GovTech as part of Sita's outreach activities, professors of several local universities, ICT entrepreneurs, and government ICT leaders.

Eight clear areas for further investigation came out of the discussion:

• The need for a government structure to address the research and development needed to drive South Africa's development into a knowledge economy
• The issue of whether legislative change is needed to enable this development
• The need to ensure that universities are producing skills needed to drive the move to a knowledge economy
• The need to develop infrastructure to ensure South Africans in rural areas and townships have access to the information economy so they can participate
• The cost implications of implementing a partnership
• Incentives to drive research and development in the private sector
• The need for an integrated ICT research and innovation council
• An engagement model to ensure women, SMMEs, people with disabilities and others are included

In closing, the deputy minister acknowledged the apparent correlation that existed between the quality (and quantum) of in-company vocational training and youth employment and committed to taking the consultative process further, although she was unable, at this early stage, to provide time frames. The issue of establishing such a council was first posited in 2007.