Young South Africans are shut out from work: they need a chance to get digital skills

By Walter Matli   13 Aug 2020

Most young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in South Africa continue to be denied access to information and communications technology because of poor infrastructure and the digital divide.

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The cost of mobile data is part of the problem. For example, compared with its fellow members of the BRICS group of nations, South Africa has the highest average price for 1GB of mobile data.

One gigabyte of mobile data costs an average of $1.01 in Brazil, $0.61 in China, $0.52 in Russia and $0.09 in India. It costs an average of $4.30 in South Africa. As a result, many young people in low-income communities don't have instant access to the internet.

This situation is compounded by the lack of uneven technology infrastructure and adequate skills on how to use digital platforms. Though network operators continue to invest in infrastructure to provide quality network coverage, the cost of accessing the internet remains too costly for most citizens.

People know the importance of having information and communications technology skills and these are critical to their daily lives. As a result, most families have some level of digital skills and technology in their households. Young people gain much of their digital literacy outside the classroom in an informal context.

But we found in our research
that most job seekers don't have the skills required to effectively search for employment information on digital platforms.

The number of South Africans aged between 15 and 24 years who were not in education, employment or training was recorded at 34.1% of this age group (3.5 million) in the first quarter of 2020. When the age cohort was expanded from 15 to 34 years, the number of people in this category increased to 41.7% (20.4 million people) during the same period.

Information and communications technology skills are becoming essential in an environment that's shifting from industry and manufacturing to a knowledge and digital economy. Information and communications technology literacy skills are therefore critical in making young people more employable in the economy.

Failure to address the implications of digital illiteracy may negatively affect young people who aren't in education, employment or training. It keeps them from earning a living and contributing to the country's economic growth.

The research

Our study sought to explore how digital literacy skills can advance the lives of people looking for employment. The first phase of the study was carried out in the Gauteng province of South Africa using interviews for primary data collection. The participants comprised young people who weren't engaged in any education, employment or any sort of training.

We found that there are many challenges which prevent people from efficiently using information technology for this purpose. These include the high cost of internet connections and the lack of knowledge about how to use digital platforms.

We found that looking for employment comes at a cost, so accessing online services was a challenge. Some of the respondents said they couldn't search for employment by using the internet because they didn't have access to internet or because they were digitally illiterate.

We also found that not all young people who aren't in education, employment or training have sufficient digital skills. Only 56% of the participants had attended some sort of digital literacy skills programme at some stage, while 44% indicated they had not attended any such initiative. Most of people from poor families have no means to unblock the barrier that prevents them from getting training and accessing digital platforms – and this is often because of the financial cost attached to it.

What was interesting from the results was that there were young people who hadn't received any training but had taught themselves to navigate and search for information on jobs, educational and other developmental opportunities on digital platforms. This was because they had access to digital resources. What's interesting about it is that some of the young people are willing to learn on their own (trial and error) on how to use various online services.

The results also showed that those who have no access to smart computing devices and internet connection subsequently lacked the skills to search for information on work and development in virtual spaces.

Going forward

In a developing country like South Africa, the government must provide supportive structures and policies that prepare young people and enable them to actively participate in the economy. In the South African context, it's worth highlighting that because of persistent historical inequalities, not everyone has had the same opportunities to access information and communications technology, so solutions need to be tailored.

Young people need an enabling environment to continuously refine their skills through either formal or informal programmes. The government must provide services for them so they can use skills centres and quality internet connection points. This will assist young people in keeping their skills set relevant to market needs.

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