

SA embracing hackathons but are local companies capitalising?

It is expected that the internet of things (IoT) connections, such as smart cars, smart cities and connected health devices, will more than double in five years.



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While South Africa may lag behind more tech innovative countries, the rise in locally hosted hackathons demonstrates that the country is increasingly experimenting with digital data and seeking innovative and practical tech solutions to capture this data.

Robyn Farah, owner of KATO – a South African company pushing hardware and tech growth to better Africa – says that it is a positive sign that local companies are starting to realise the potential of introducing tech solutions to capture data and solve business needs and serve customers more effectively.

Crowdsourcing solutions

“Over the last six years, South Africans have suddenly become aware of what hackathons are, and local companies are starting to be aware that they can now crowdsource solutions, says Farah. Just recently, hackathons have been hosted to create awareness and develop solutions to Cape Town’s water crisis, such as the Water Hackathon and Siemens SA #DigihackAfrica2018.



Team Siewasser wins #DigihackAfrica2018

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Farah adds, “All companies, across all industries – ranging from finance and agriculture to medicine and advertising – can save both time and money by developing solutions for their industry or business.

“Particularly in South Africa, we need to change the mindset that hackathons are for security solutions or large global issues, such as climate change. For example, the 2018 Global Legal Hackathon is being hosted across six continents, including Johannesburg, with the vision to develop solutions for improving the legal industry worldwide, both for public and private benefit.”

Apart from a hackathon creating great marketing exposure for a specific company - showing they support the local economy, empower local entrepreneurs/businesses and in some cases, help to bridge the gender, race and class gap – this process is also the best option when tackling a problem or when seeking to innovate.

“ ‘Hackathon hosts are likely to receive on average 20-100 solutions to a challenge. This means 20-100 new products, devices, or solutions to invest in,’ says Farah. ”

But, the ability to collect and analyse data from these solutions is what truly creates opportunities for these companies. Having recently attended and managed the Government hosted ‘UAE Hackathon – Data for Happiness’, Farah says that this is what South Africa needs to strive towards.

Analysis of big data

“Through the use and analysis of big data across various sectors, 781 participants set out to improve the country’s “happiness” by designing solutions to the challenges of the identified topics of health, education, traffic congestion, social relations, lifestyle, and gender balance.”

Farah says that while the uptake of hackathons locally is encouraging, companies are not adopting innovative tech solutions as fast as the industry is growing.

Driven by IoT, Cisco’s recently released annual Global Cloud Index (2016-2021)^[1] revealed the total amount of data created (and not necessarily stored) by any device will reach 847ZB per year by 2021, up from 218ZB per year in 2016. It states that the data created is two orders of magnitude higher than data stored.

“This shows the immense, growing opportunities available to capture data, and businesses should be tapping into this – and in a way that truly drives competitiveness and sets them apart,” says Farah.

For South Africa to embrace this movement, Farah believes there are a few challenges to overcome. “Local inventors are often overlooked, despite these people creating amazing, ground-breaking solutions and products. This is often attributed to a lack of awareness or understanding of SA’s tech industry. For example, many don’t know what the maker movement is, or understand what hackathons and meetups involve.

“ ‘To improve this and in turn build South Africa’s tech economy, we need to continue working hard to create an understanding amongst all South Africans about the impact tech can have on the world and how ordinary South Africans can make a difference. We need to show people we can invent our own futures,’ concludes Farah. ”

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