THE TIMELY DECISION FOR BUSINESSES IN UGANDA TO ADOPT MODERN TECHNOLOGY IN THE NEW WORLD SETTING

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By 2020, the whole world was locked down because of Coronavirus pandemic. Everything changed including the way businesses are conducted.

The World Health Organization declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30th January and a pandemic on 11th March (WHO, 2020).

Executive Statement

2019 will be remembered as the year the world was hit by an originally unknown and remorseless disease. By 2020, the whole world was locked down because of Coronavirus pandemic. Everything changed including the way businesses are conducted. However, the existence of modern technology seemed to have provided an answer to most of the businesses especially in the manner in which they are run and how they connect with their customers, suppliers and other stakeholders including regulatory authorities. The situation became abnormal but technology has become the order of the day in the new normal. The brief presents the potential role of digital technologies, focusing on their influence in the business world in the post COVID-19 era. There are

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many emerging issues and it is pertinent to find ways of using technology to address them considering the Covid-19 recess and the Post Covid period. How can technologies be advantageous in the emerging social challenges? Businesses should be able to adapt to new business models which embrace technology as the pivot for business management, growth and trajectory.

Introduction and Background

The corona virus outbreak was first identified in Wuhan-China in December 2019. The World Health Organization declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30th January and a pandemic on 11th March (WHO, 2020). Many aspects changed and among these, was the world of business. During the COVID-19 era, businesses in many countries could no longer operate save for those dealing in food, telecommunication, medical and a few other essential ones. Unless one was a strategist to put aside lamentation and be brave to switch from one business to another or find ways of using contemporary business techniques to remain in the market, businesses could hardly survive this tragic wave. There was a change from traditional selling and buying to digital-

trade. Online platforms such as social media and digital marketing have gained supreme importance. Traditional physical interaction with the customers has been largely replaced by e-commerce. With e-commerce, it is easy to know the price of a commodity before ordering. This is possible because one can inquire via online platforms. A gadget like a phone or computer with internet can bail you out in this cause. The internet has made the world to be a global village where you don't need to physically travel to America or any other overseas country to transact business.

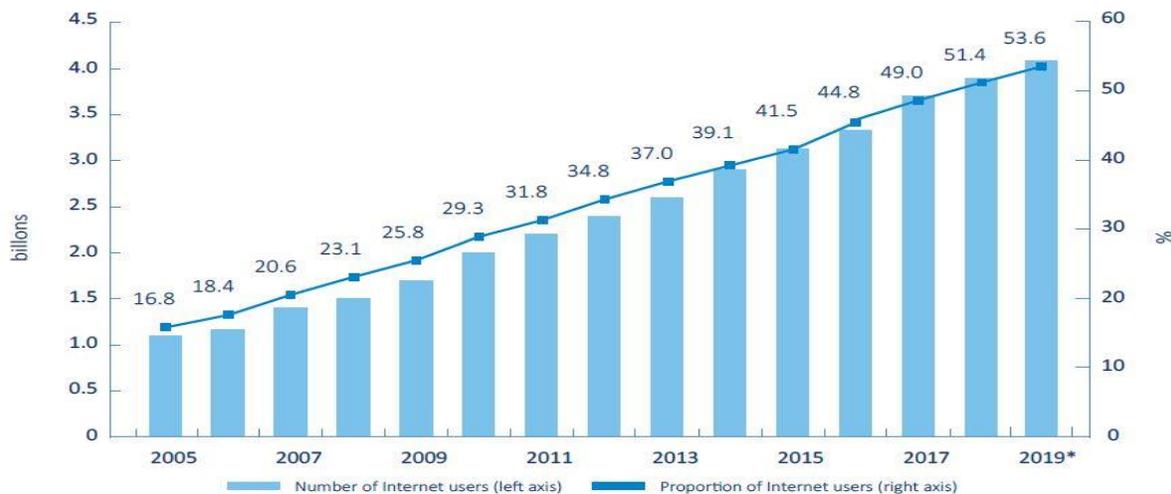**Which countries have the best communication technology?**

There is a big digital divide amongst countries in regard to information technology. Some countries' ICT sectors are developed whereas others' are crippling. It was in 2015 that South Korea was declared the World's best technology giant, followed by Denmark and Iceland. Today,

South Korea still leads the ICT race. The countries in the top 20 are in the high-income bracket with the major deciding factor being cellular and fixed internet broadband rates plus an 84% internet subscription unlike in Africa (Susan, 2017). Presumably, the leading indicator in the ICT growth race today is mobile broadband. A country's economy also has a bearing in the development of ICT such as the level of prices for telecommunication services. In most countries, cellular broadband costs are low but the rising cost of fixed internet services needs attention. The number of internet users in the world is on the rise though several barriers such as high prices move jointly with the improving technology. This is shown in figure 1. Internet users have increased all over the world for the period between 2005-2019. Almost everyone needs a communication gadget that uses internet or e-services for survival. Some parts of the World have even reached saturation levels in internet usage.

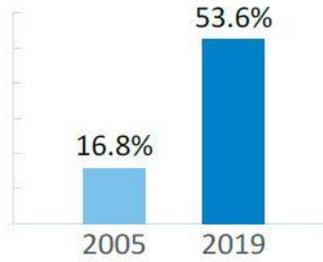***Figure 1: Internet users in the World between 2005-2019***

Source: ITU estimate. 2019
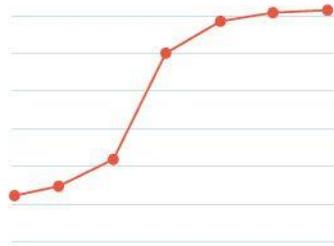
An estimated 4.1 billion people are using the Internet in 2019, reflecting a 5.3 per cent increase compared with 2018.

53.6%

16.8%

2005   2019

The global penetration rate increased from nearly 17 per cent in 2005 to over 53 per cent in 2019.

Between 2005 and 2019, the number of Internet users grew on average by 10 per cent every year.

10%

In recent years though, global growth rates are not as high as a decade ago because some parts of the world are reaching saturation levels.

Source: ITU Estimate, 2019

Communication Technology in Uganda

Uganda's ICT sector is still developing though internet costs are high. The government imposes high taxes on internet usage and social media data. In July 2018, Uganda's government introduced the "Over-The-Top" (OTT) tax on daily social media usage (Kiberu, 2018). The government intended to limit people from using social media platforms to malice and black mail its operations which by then were becoming rampant vices. Since then, accessing internet is quite expensive. However, Uganda's internet access differs substantially by a number of demographics including age and education. Most of the uneducated people are technophobes and hence less access to ICT whereas youths and educated people enjoy ICT especially in urban and semi-urban areas.

With the Covid-19 lockdown which started in Mid-March 2020, social media became one of the major channels of communication. Internet usage went high slightly as people wanted to be informed about the pandemic. The sales of telephone companies went up, a number of online businesses emerged, delivery of goods and cargo changed and all sectors decided to switch to digital communication and marketing. Eventually, business owners had to devise means of surviving in the market with ICT being the best option.

Technology in the Context of Post COVID-19 era

The Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has led to changes in our everyday life (UNHABITAT, 2020). The same is true for businesses of all stripes which have had to adjust on the fly as restrictions are put into place to slow the spread of the outbreak. In the process, much of the global economy has ground to a halt. There is one industry however that hasn't slowed down due to the pandemic. It's the

global IT industry which has shifted to a high gear to accommodate the sudden demand for remote working and collaboration solutions as the majority of businesses have gone digital. The use of ICT during and in the post covid-19 era dictates the following;

There is a rise in flexibility and remote working

Social distancing is among the measures recommended to slow the spread of the virus. With that, many businesses adapted to remote working. Employers are making efforts to enable their teams work in sync and are training them how to use collaborative tools to ensure that no one falls through the cracks. While remote working has been there for a long time, not many had embraced it. It has now become mainstream, those who viewed it as sluggish are now getting comfortable with it. They are even learning the advantages of working remotely under flexible schedules. Employees have also realized the possibility of working without necessarily moving to office. Remote working is becoming part of the new business management strategies especially where employees do not need to appear at work. Business meetings are now held remotely using zoom, skype and other media with a lot of ease. In the education sector, universities, colleges, secondary and primary schools are resorting to e-learning though the cost seems initially high both to the clients and the business managers. It is however cheaper than making movements to transact businesses or acquire services by physically being present. Music artists, bloggers, motivational speakers and trainers are resorting to selling digital content and earn money digitally such as from you-tube.

Automation of work

Man is likely to be replaced with machines at work. Automatic cranes are gaining larger market because of the fear of Covid-19. Some health activities such as temperature checkups are now done using modern technology such as temperature guns and there also software applications used to test diseases. Industrialists are reducing their man power replacing it with machines. This is expensive in a short run but cheap in a long run since it is a labour saving technique.

The payments have now become digital and contactless.

Online shopping

In the past, online shopping was viewed as though it was for the rich and highly educated social classes. With Covid, online shopping has been embraced by those who find it easy to use it and have quick home delivery without incurring transport costs. The payments have now become digital and contactless.

Digital international trade

Covid-19 has not only affected domestic marketing, but also foreign trade. International traders are only safe from the pandemic when they are able to interact with their business partners, suppliers and customers while online (World Economic Forum,2020). Deliveries are done after making digital orders but not risking to travel to high-risk producer economies like China, USA, Spain, Brazil, UAE, Italy, Germany and other economies. With the ban on human international movements and missions, digital foreign trade offers the best solution. The only caution to take is to avoid scams who are always online to exploit ignorant customers.

Key Policy Recommendations

- Governments should establish ICT learning centres at every village or parish. The intention is to train citizens in modern technology using the established community ICT laboratories.

- Develop locally contextualized ICT software applications and provide them at free or subsidized prices to local small and medium sized business owners. This would help them to transact business with their customers using mobile apps which fit even the illiterates with minimal ICT training to sell products in their small scale businesses.

- The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development should introduce an online job portal to link job seekers to potential employers. This would reduce the high rates of unemployment arising from involuntary laying off of staff due to reduction in sales during the Covid-19 recess.

- Prepare training manuals for young ICT learners to use during classes and shopping. For example, prepare and print hard copy ICT manuals to train children who can help their uneducated parents.

- E-commerce should be introduced as a compulsory subject of learning from secondary school to university level for all students. This is what would make them appreciate the usage and role of ICT in the new world setting.

- Introduce zonal online business sites for people in different areas; regions or trading centres to do online shopping. For example, a district or trading centre would have a link where customers can access sellers and communicate via telephones. This would reduce overcrowding of customers in markets.

- Scrap off Over The Top (OTT) tax to reduce the cost of social media communication to allow business owners to interact with customers online.

- Provide subsidized training to businessmen and their staff so as to learn how to use Business ICT technology in the new world setting.

- Promote a cashless economy where payment cards and online payment is emphasized in addition to mobile money payment transactions. This would totally erode the exchange of cash in form of paper money and coins which would spread Covid-19 or other diseases.

- Sensitization programs have to be conducted on all media platforms like TVs, radios, newspapers and social media to educate the public on how COVID-19 changed businesses and many different aspects of the world. This will be done in a bid to make people get assimilated to the prevailing situation.

Conclusion

In Post COVID-19 era, everyone must learn a new skill in case they lack one whether a technology skill, vocational skill, business skill or any other survival skill in order to cope up with the new world setting caused by the pandemic.

About the author

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Conclusion

In Post COVID-19 era, everyone must learn a new skill in case they lack one whether a technology skill, vocational skill, business skill or any other survival skill in order to cope up with the new world setting caused by the pandemic. Learning new skills and being versatile in whatever one does will make them stand out and rejuvenate to strike greater horizons. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to cause havoc on our lives, it also came with a lot of opportunities which business owners and managers ought to seize by embracing contemporary technology and new business models.

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