IBM's Hamilton Ratshefola talks 'Digital Nation Africa'

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An event recently held at the Turbine Hall in Newtown Johannesburg, saw the official launch of IBM's 'Digital Nation' initiative - an initiative aimed at increasing digital literacy in Africa. According to the technology giant, the launch of this skills initiative is part of IBM's push to build "New Collar" careers for the youth of Africa.

Hamilton Ratshefola

ITNewsAfrica met with country general manager for IBM South Africa, Hamilton Ratshefola to discuss the program in detail.

Q: How will the IBM digital nation initiative impact economic growth in Africa?

A: In today's global economy there is a heavy dependency on the availability of a digitally enabled workforce and citizens. This initiative is focused on the millennial generation and is designed to equip them with basic digital literacy skills through to more advanced IT skills and then to entrepreneurial enablement. The success of this initiative will be illustrated through the creation of more high value jobs, which will have a positive impact on the economic growth of the African countries in which it is available.

Start-ups and developers can partner with IBM to help develop innovative solutions using digital skills obtained from the IBM cloud and cognitive technologies offered through this initiative. This initiative will drive new businesses. It will also support the creation of local digital communities, which in turn can help support new and existing businesses embrace the new economic opportunities.

Q: What role does education play in shaping society?

A: Africa has approximately 200 million people between the ages of 15 and 24. By 2040, the continent is expected to be home to the world's largest labour force, with an estimated working age population of 1 billion (*State of Education in Africa Report 2015). Yet many African companies cite a local skills gap as a major bottleneck to growth. IBM sees effective, high quality IT education as a key driver of economic vitality in Africa. IBM engages with communities around the globe by offering its technology, services, and expertise to solve some of the world's most complex problems, applying technology and expertise to societal issues such as education development.

Q: How can interested individuals sign up to become part of the programme and what is the selection criteria?

A: The programme is freely accessible through an online portal available on IBM's Cloud platform Bluemix, accessible via www.digitalnationafrica.com and will provide a vast range of enablement resources ranging from fundamental areas of digital citizenship to highly sought after advanced IT skills.

The programme is not only for students but targets young people between the age of 15 and 34 (any high school students, students in university and people who are unemployed). It targets all citizens in Africa who belong to all levels of knowledge in digital literacy. Anyone can access the content in the portal without the need to login, but if they decide to login there will be additional benefits, including tracking of learning hours and accumulation of Blue points, that can be used to unlock additional advanced educational content, paid cloud services, open badge exams, and even purchase IBM memorabilia in the IBM Store. All registered users will have access to their Achievements Dashboard where they can see all the learning achievements unlocked, and be able to participate in forums and communities with other members of the programme.

Q: How will IBM ensure the initiative is sustainable and continues to make a difference?

A: As we have been doing over the past couple of years with the Job Skills Programme, the initiative is designed to create enabled communities together with a volunteer programme which will help foster all levels of the programme from basic acquisition of digital skills all the way to establishing innovative software companies. So, whilst IBM will both maintain the portal and update the training material, much of the programme will be self-sustaining.

The programme is designed to provide free learning to help improve citizen's digital competence for work and employability, learning, leisure, consumption, and participation in society. We hope to advance the digital competency of citizens at learning hubs, professional spaces, and otherwise that will enable them to connect, collaborate, and participate actively in society. This is also part of IBM's global push to build next generation skills needed for "New Collar" careers. "New Collar" is a term used by IBM to describe new kinds of careers that do not always require a four-year college degree but rather sought-after skills in cybersecurity, data science, artificial intelligence, cloud and much more.

Q: What plans does IBM have in further developing the trained candidates and please tell us more about the IBM Code off?

A: The candidates that complete the training can apply for jobs anywhere, including at IBM. The primary purpose of the programme is to help bridge the skill gaps that exist in the job market today, and to prepare the Millennials and the countries for the needs of the future. Through this programme, IBM believes that it will be providing the foundations for economic growth and success. Our current programme extends to helping graduates create professional CVs and find suitable jobs. IBM is offering training that will assist candidates to be employable within the new environment and therefore they can apply for suitable jobs anywhere and not just at IBM.

The IBM Code Off was a competition run by IBM where Developers from various backgrounds – students, freelancers and start-ups were challenged to develop a prototype Chat bot in 3 hours, using IBM's Bluemix platform. The participants were judged based on a diverse criteria including creativity, viability, intuitiveness, feasibility and unique-ness.

The Code Off was aimed at allowing them to experience, in a fun and dynamic way how easy it is to create a simple chat bot on IBM's Bluemix.

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