

Digitising: Why we need to leverage and invest in AI

INTERVIEW

DOROTHY
NAKWEESI

Digital skilling remains one of the most critical requirements for unlocking the digital economy, which offers vast opportunities and holds the promise for the future. Uganda, compared to other coun-

How would you define what Refactory Uganda is doing in the digital space?

We have been doing extensive skilling, particularly in the digital space. However, we have carved out a niche in software engineering, offering programmes that range from basic software development to advanced programming.

We also provide training in artificial intelligence, blockchain, and data science, to improve young people's skills and support Uganda's job creation agenda.

Can you share insights on digital skilling and the opportunities it presents?

The digital space is a vast ecosystem that requires serious focus as a driver of economic development. As Refactory Uganda, we have trained more than 1,000 young people over the years. While this is a significant number, opportunities in the digital space are far greater, meaning we are far from exhausting them.

If you look at opportunities around remote work alone, there are more than five million roles globally. This is massive.

However, there is a new kid on the block: the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) has both created new opportunities and displaced others. The opportunities exist, but they need to be deliberately unlocked.

Given the rapid advancements in ICT and AI, what trends do you see shaping Uganda's job market?

The foundation of work may not change significantly, but what will change is the speed at which tasks are completed efficiently. To be efficient, one needs the right knowledge, skills, and tools.

Simply having a computer connected to AI systems does not make someone an AI specialist. A level of domain knowledge is required to use AI effectively and to improve turnaround time.

I am personally excited about AI, but we must ensure that we use its efficiency to transform the way we work and the economy at large.

What are the main challenges in providing digital skills?

The key challenges are largely infrastructure-related. While there is increas-

tries in the East African region, has been slow to fully adopt digital technologies due to infrastructure challenges. Michael Niyitegeka, the chief executive officer of the Refactory Uganda Chapter, says that while the country has made some gains, much more needs to be done to fully harness the digital potential.



Michael Niyitegeka says that while AI will not significantly change the digital foundation, it will influence the speed at which Ugandans are able to work more efficiently. PHOTO/FILE

ing discussion around improved digital access, much of it is limited to mobile internet. Yet, for learning purposes, mobile internet is often inadequate because training requires large volumes of data, which are quickly exhausted and relatively expensive.

Whereas infrastructure remains critical, access to devices, stable power, and reliable internet connectivity are essen-

tial. We need to invest in resources that are accessible and relevant to communities.

Uganda Communications Commission has made efforts to expand ICT programmes and infrastructure in schools, which is commendable, but more needs to be done.

How important is collaboration be-

Artificial Intelligence

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It is very important to build forward-looking partnerships that enable academic institutions to establish linkages that benefit young people and future generations.

Some companies have been slow to adopt digital technology, while others have taken the bull by the horns. Is digitisation finally taking root?

Where we are headed, the demand for digitisation will only continue to grow. Several sectors, including banking, taxation, and business registration, have already been digitised. As digitisation becomes the norm, organisations must align their processes accordingly.

We are seeing private sector organisations pushing for more efficient digital systems. Commodity-heavy sectors such as coffee and agribusiness are also adopting digital tools, particularly in traceability.

Efficiency can only be achieved through technology. Organisations without a digital footprint will struggle to compete in global markets. There is also growing interest in data as a strategic asset, with businesses investing in knowledge management and data acquisition.

Overall, the AI space will continue to expand, requiring greater skills that go beyond basic tools such as Microsoft Office.

How do you ensure digital skills training is inclusive and accessible?

It is an ongoing journey, and we are not there yet. While we have conducted several training programmes, they represent only a small fraction of what is needed.

However, this process has helped us learn, particularly about the ecosystem support structures required to scale inclusion.

How do you sustainably finance digital skilling initiatives?

You can never have enough resources for the kind of work required in digital skilling. Both technical and financial support are critical.

For example, one of our programmes runs for about three months. In Kenya, a similar programme costs around \$1,500 on the open market. We offer the same programme over three months at about Shs1.5m (\$416).

If we charged rates similar to Kenya or higher, participation would be very low.

Kenya has a more mature digital market, with many companies operating globally, which drives higher investment in skills.

In Uganda, the appetite for such investment is still developing. There are times when we struggle to enrol even 30 trainees in a cohort.

Despite this, our focus remains on skilling and linking people to employment. Over time, they can demonstrate impact rather than just aspiration. We are also actively partnering with several institutions, which has provided strong corporate endorsement.

tween the tech industry and academia in delivering relevant digital skills?

Collaboration is essential. The industry's success largely depends on its ability to work closely with academia. Through collaboration, we gain shared insights and identify skill gaps that need to be addressed.