IBM Launches “Digital - Nation Africa”: Invests $70 Million to Bring Digital Skills to Africa with Free, Watson-Powered Skills Platform for 25 million people

“IBM Digital - Nation Africa” Education and Skills Initiative Expands IBM’s Global Emphasis on “New Collar Jobs”

Program designed to reach up to 25 million people across Africa, supports development of skills required for career success in a knowledge-based economy

Johannesburg, South Africa and Armonk, NY - 08 Feb 2017:IBM (NYSE: IBM) is investing $70 million (approximately ZAR 945 million) in building much-needed digital, cloud, and cognitive IT skills to help support a 21st century workforce in Africa. The initiative, “IBM Digital - Nation Africa”, provides a cloud-based learning platform designed to provide free skills development programs for up to 25 million African youths over five years, enabling digital competence and nurturing innovation in Africa.

This is part of IBM’s global push to build the next generation of 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.

For the youth of Africa to be able to benefit from a cognitive future there needs to be a much higher level of digital literacy. At the top of the skills pyramid are developers, who need to know how to create solutions that can leverage the power of cognitive, and entrepreneurs who are aware of the potential. IBM Digital - Nation Africa is designed to help raise overall digital literacy, increase the number of skilled developers able to tap into cognitive engines and enable entrepreneurs and would be entrepreneurs grow businesses around the new solutions.

Through a free, cloud-based online learning environment delivered on IBM Bluemix, the premier cloud platform for business, the initiative will provide a range of programs from basic IT literacy to highly sought-after advanced IT skills including social engagement, digital privacy, and cyber protection.

Advanced users will be able to explore career-oriented IT topics including programming, cybersecurity, data science and agile methodologies, as well as important business skills like critical thinking, innovation, and entrepreneurship. The initiative aims to empower African citizens, entrepreneurs, and communities with the knowledge and tools to design, develop, and launch their own digital solutions.

Based on Watson, the cognitive online system will adapt and learn. It will review the multiple interactions the education initiative will have with students, to help direct them to the right courses and help IBM refine the courses to better adapt the material for the needs of the users. Watson will also create a depth of knowledge using anonymous information gathered from interactions with the students. This will help entrepreneurs and developers understand which current Bluemix solutions best meet their needs and refine their idea to help them design a solution that has greatest market potential.

With the aim of equipping as many as 25 million people with sought after IT skills over the next five years, the program will be launched from IBM’s regional offices in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Morocco, and Egypt. This will enable the expansion of the initiative across the continent.

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 labor 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 one of the major bottlenecks to growth. In South Africa alone, where more than a quarter of the workforce is unemployed, businesses struggle to find appropriate skills, particularly in the IT field.

“IBM sees effective, high quality IT education as a key driver of economic vitality in Africa. Through access to open standards, best practices, IBM tools, and course materials, the broad scope of this initiative will enable vital skills development”, says Hamilton Ratshefola, country general manager for IBM South Africa. “In order to find solutions to Africa’s challenges, industries across the spectrum need to enable the existing and future workforce to perform at the forefront of technologies such as cognitive and cloud computing. This will be the key to spurring economic growth.”

The initiative will provide access to thousands of resources, in English, free of charge, including:

- Ready-to-use mobile apps
- Guides - web guides, demonstrations, interactive simulations, video series, and articles
- Online Assessments – A range of self-assessment tests to track the progress of individuals, together with industry recognized ‘Open Badges’ aligned to digital competencies. The badges can then be shared with prospective employers
- Volunteers – Creation of a volunteer program to support and promote digital literacy within their communities
- App Marketplace – Provision of a platform on which new applications can either be made freely available or sold.

The initiative will be supported by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which has a special focus on fostering market-driven ICT skills in Africa and the Middle East. IBM will collaborate with UNDP on opportunities for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) skills delivery, certification, and accreditation. UNDP will work with their network of existing government partnerships to extend the program throughout Africa.

UNDP’s 2015 Human Development Report highlighted that technology is affecting the nature of work by introducing new ways of communicating, new products and new demands for skills. New technologies are also reinforcing and deepening previous trends in economic globalization, bringing workers and businesses into a global network through outsourcing and global value chains.

“These processes are reshaping work and testing national and international policies. In an attempt to address this global challenge here in South Africa, as well as in other priority countries in Africa. UNDP is pleased to leverage its global presence, development knowledge, and long standing partnerships to provide context, traction and scale to this collaboration with IBM,” says Mr. Walid Badawi, UNDP Country Director in South Africa.

IBM has a direct presence in 24 African countries and has made several significant investments on the continent in recent years, including offices, innovation centers and other advanced facilities. The company has a research laboratory in Nairobi, Kenya and opened a second research facility in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2016.

In 2015, IBM rolled out a major initiative to expand its Africa Technical Academy and Africa University Program, providing advanced skills in cloud, analytics, and big data technologies, reaching today to over 150 academic institutions, in the continent. In September 2016, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training and IBM Morocco, for the launch of P-TECH program (Pathways in Technology Early College High School) in Morocco. P-tech is an innovative global education model, designed by IBM, in close partnership with American educators. The company is also working with dozens of start-ups in South Africa.

IBM has been present in Africa since the 1920's, and has a long history of collaborating with educational institutions and providing transformational solutions focused on providing value to higher education and its contribution to society.

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.

*http://www.aaionline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/AAI-SOE-report-2015-final.pdf (State of Education in Africa Report 2015- The Africa America Institute)

About IBM

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