

Digital Innovation: Adapt or Die

One of South Africa's foremost innovation specialists and digital thought-leaders has voiced concern about the country's lack of investment in digitalisation.



Laura Thomas-Gilks is managing director of Salt & Candy

Laura Thomas-Gilks, who heads up the international digital brand communication agency, Salt & Candy, believes that, as latecomers to the global digital race, South Africa is resigned to play catch-up unless it can harness the power of innovation.

Speaking at the Salt & Candy headquarters in Durban, Thomas-Gilks has cautioned that South Africa faces fundamental challenges that need to be overcome before businesses can benefit from digitalisation.

This, she says, primarily stems from the fact that many entities within South Africa's corporate-sphere resist change and do not see the value in investing in technology, innovation and digital. "We keep looking to more developed countries for the answers and using copy-paste strategies in an environment that is unique," Thomas-Gilks explains.



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"In short, it doesn't suit the needs of South Africa. We need a new approach from government and the private sector that prioritises collaboration to open the country up to digital inclusion and opportunity."

Innovation plays a crucial role

She firmly believes that innovation plays a crucial role in bridging the chasm between the haves and the have-nots in the digital world.

“Innovation helps redefine corporate game plans,” explains Thomas-Gilks.

“*“When companies move away from a pack mentality into the realm of creating, they experience super-charged productivity that ultimately results in rapid business transformation – and profits.”*”

Using innovation as a critical and key driver of digital productivity is the primary driving force for Thomas-Gilks', success both locally and abroad. Her ability to happily marry innovation with digital transformation landed her job as digital director with HBO series, Game of Thrones, Season 6.

Her knack for not just playing by her own rules, but inventing new games along the way is also the reason why blue-chip clients the world over, including British Airways, Sky and Coca-Cola, seek out her services. Her latest entrepreneurial venture, Salt & Candy, comprises a team of talented individuals from around the world who present an infusion of ideas, innovation and technology.

Solving problems

Thomas-Gilks points to the direct correlation between the ability to innovate within the digital space and the potential to solve numerous perennial problems within South Africa. So why are we not innovating as prolifically as we should be? The answer, she says, is simply because we have not been taught how to think divergently; in other words, we do not know how to elaborate and think of diverse and original ideas with fluency and speed.



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Thomas-Gilks and her Newmella Holdings business partner, Wendy Mahoney, have been entrenched in solving South Africa's how-to-innovate dilemma. Both women are qualified Neuro Linguistic Practitioners who have created the globally accredited business innovation certification programme, the Purpose Driven Impact Series (PDI), where businesses and high- performance individuals are empowered with practical and proven techniques, skills and strategies that lead to real excellence.

It is essentially a mindset overhaul, explains Thomas-Gilks, “In school we are told ‘Don’t copy other people's work; don’t talk to each other in class.’ Because in school that’s called cheating, whereas in the real world that’s called collaboration. And collaboration and inclusive diversity when collaborating is what will be a catalyst for growth, personally and professionally.”

Bringing change through impactful innovation

However, Thomas-Gilks emphasises that the ability to bring about meaningful change through impactful innovation, requires gender diversity.

“Men and women both have different value to bring to the table and we have to encourage this. Not only do we need gender diversity, but diversity on all levels - age, socio-economic backgrounds and experience. I truly believe that if you ask the right questions, everyone has something different to offer that can be of value to create a wonderful, well-rounded idea.”

Understanding how digital and innovation works

While South Africa faces what appears to be a formidable challenge in addressing its digital deficit, Thomas-Gilks positively notes that there is growing groundswell of individuals and companies who are step-changing the local industry.



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“I am seeing some great initiatives that are helping our youth understand how digital and innovation works. This is crucial for our country where small business and entrepreneurship is so important. Knowing how to harness the power of digital has the potential to drive new ideas for revenue streams, decrease operational costs and improve productivity. In order to adapt to change we need to be able to innovate. If you don’t, you are sure to be left behind.”

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