



Image source: Leadership Accelerator Programme, 2024

Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of global economies, Africa stands at a crucial juncture, navigating the challenges and opportunities associated with youth employability. With a burgeoning youth population, Africa holds immense potential as a driving force for economic development, innovation, and progress. However, the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) poses unprecedented challenges and transformative possibilities for the employability of African youth. Mentorship could serve as a critical tool in bridging the gap between the evolving demands of the job market, the transformative power of AI, and the aspirations of the African youth.

Africa's youth demographic, characterized by a significant proportion of individuals under 30¹, presents a demographic dividend that can propel the continent toward prosperity. However, realising this potential requires addressing the pressing issue of youth unemployment and underemployment.

Findings in Europe have shown that, despite the advancements on many fronts, today's youth, in some cases, are likely to be poorer than their parents.² Over the last ten years, the unemployment rate for youth aged 15–24 has hovered around 11 percent in Africa.³

Role of Mentorship in Enhancing Youth Employability for the Future of Work and AI

¹ <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/news/young-people%E2%80%99s-potential-key-africa%E2%80%99s-sustainable-development>

² <https://www.if.org.uk/research-posts/will-young-people-be-poorer-than-their-parents/>

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1266153/youth-unemployment-rate-in-africa/>

Youth Employability in Africa and Artificial Intelligence: The Role of Mentorship

by Abisoye Ajose and Akolade Oladipupo



Mentorship could be pivotal in nurturing Africa's young talents and fostering their employability in spite of the many challenges. Mentors provide guidance, support, and knowledge transfer to mentees. With the advent of AI, mentors can help African youths navigate the complex world of algorithms, machine learning, and data science.

Mentorship could catalyse skill development and adaptability. As the demand for AI and tech skills grows, mentors can provide personalized guidance, helping young individuals identify and acquire the relevant skills needed for emerging jobs. They could also instill adaptability, empowering youth to embrace new technologies and adapt to evolving job requirements through their experiences and insights.

The complexity of career paths in the age of AI requires careful and informed decision-making. Over the last decade, tech jobs have gained a reputation for being lucrative, comfortable, and stable. However, that is changing. A growing number of tech companies, including Meta Platforms Inc. (Facebook), Alphabet Inc. (Google), and Microsoft Corporation, have laid off thousands of workers in the last few years.⁴ Companies are increasingly engaging tech experts on contract and need bases rather than offering them long-term traditional employment.⁵ Mentors, often having traversed varied professional landscapes, could provide valuable perspectives on the emerging trends within the AI and tech ecosystem, helping mentees make strategic career decisions.

Professional networks are instrumental in securing opportunities and staying abreast of industry trends. Mentorship facilitates the establishment of these networks and imparts the art of effective networking. With their established connections, mentors can introduce mentees to critical players in the tech industry, creating avenues for collaboration, learning, and career advancement.

While technical skills are crucial, the importance of soft skills cannot be overstated. Effective communication, problem-solving, and collaboration are essential in every industry. Drawing from their own experiences, mentors could guide mentees in honing these soft skills and building confidence and resilience, making them well-rounded professionals equipped to thrive in the ever-evolving job market.

As AI is being integrated into various industries, it is essential to prioritize ethical principles to ensure responsible and beneficial use. Mentors in this field could play a pivotal role in instilling moral values and accountable decision-making in using AI.

While mentorship is crucial, finding mentors, particularly for emerging roles in the age of AI, can be a challenging task, especially for African youths. The increasing global focus on AI and its potential impact on Africa has led to the emergence of some mentorship programmes and initiatives tailored specifically for African youths. Organisations are developing initiatives to connect African youths with experienced professionals in AI, creating opportunities for learning and growth. Young people should endeavour to maximise such opportunities.

⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2023-12-21/tech-workers-didn-t-worry-about-job-cuts-until-2023>

⁵ <https://www.vox.com/recode/2023/2/9/23591549/tech-freelance-contract-independent-work-layoffs>

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A case in point is Google AI Accra, a research center in Accra, Ghana, launched by Google in 2018, which focuses on AI research and mentorship programs for African youths.⁶ Similarly, AI First (Africa) is an accelerator programme that includes mentorship by Google for startups leveraging AI to provide Africa-centred solutions.⁷ Meltwater Entrepreneurial School of Technology (MEST) Africa, Andela Learning Community, and African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS) provide training and fellowship programs that include mentorship and support in areas such as AI and data science.

While these initiatives are recording successes, more efforts are needed to support more African youths. Meanwhile, while mentorship can enhance the employability of African youth for the world of work of today and that of tomorrow, it is essential to address the other challenging factors limiting youth employability in Africa.

Conclusion

The role of mentorship in enhancing the employability of African youth in the face of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the integration of Artificial Intelligence cannot be overstated. Mentors can offer valuable perspectives on emerging trends, guide mentees in honing relevant skills, assist with strategic career decision-making, and facilitate the establishment of professional networks. However, while mentorship is crucial, it should be complemented by efforts to address other factors affecting youth employability, such as skills mismatch, data ecosystem limitations, structural inequality, and policy reforms. By prioritizing mentorship and addressing these challenges, Africa can unlock the immense potential of its youth population, driving economic development, innovation, and progress in the age of AI.

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<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/12/28/how-google-is-using-ai-to-foster-deliver-innovative-solutions-in-africa-the-globe>

⁷ <https://startup.google.com/programs/accelerator/ai-first/africa/>