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Bridging the ICT Skills Gap

21 May 2015

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Emma Okonji writes that the recent collaboration between Oracle Corporation and MTN Foundation to train Nigerians in relevant ICT skills, is a welcome development

Nigerians are gifted at identifying challenges. They are also gifted in dissecting and analysing issues, as well as formulating policies that look beautiful and attractive. But they lack the will power in implementation. For several years, Nigeria has played the role of a talking drum, without taking a step forward to begin actual implementation of certain technology policies that will turnaround the country for the better.

Could it be that government is not aware of several campaigns to leverage technology for national development or that government just decided to turn its back to such campaigns because of insensitivity?

For several years, Nigerians have been clamouring for a change in school curriculum and have developed some fantastic curriculums that address the employment needs of Nigerians, yet government has not deem it fit to implement it. Today's school curriculum, which has been in existence for ages, is a misfit and total disconnect from the current realities, hence Nigerians turn out unemployable school graduates annually. Most of them can not fit into the job market except they are retrained by those who want to employ them. This situation, largely accounts for the dearth of ICT skills, yet technology is driving global developments.

It is for this reason that two multinational companies that are significant employers of labour in every country where they operate, decided to collaborate to train Nigerians in relevant ICT skills, designed to bridge the existing skills gap in Nigeria.

The initiative

Last week, Oracle Corporation, a software and hardware solution provider, in collaboration with MTN Foundation (MTNF), the corporate social investment vehicle of MTN Nigeria, announced a joint initiative to train MTN scholars in relevant ICT skills. The initiative was borne out of the desire of the private sector to assist Nigeria in bridging the identified ICT skills gap in the country.

The MTN scholars, who will eventually become beneficiaries of the private sector initiative, are young school graduates that have been selected from across the country by MTN, through its partner, Dragnet Solutions, to provide requisite Science and Technology skills that will enable them add value to technology development and advancement of the country.

The collaboration will see two projects come to fruition. The first is a bursary, funded by Oracle for one student to attend the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN) openlab Summer School in Switzerland, and the second is the plan to train up to 2,000 MTNF scholars in database design and SQL and Java programming skills, calculated at bridging ICT skills gap in the country.

MTN, in collaboration with its partner, prepared some select students from across Nigerian tertiary institutions to participate in a global academic competition, organised yearly by CERN openlab, where a computer science student, Mufutau Akuruyejo, from the University of Lagos, emerged the best student from Africa and one of the best 25 students globally that have been selected for a nine week training programme on ICT in Switzerland.

Akuruyejo, an MTNF scholar, will be the first Nigerian student to participate in the nine week programme, which CERN openlab runs annually, and he will be funded by Oracle.

CERN openlab was created more than 10 years ago to tackle computing, data, and infrastructure challenges, and summer school also focuses certain research and development activities in the ICT space.

The second initiative focuses on teaching database design and SQL and Java programming skills to MTN Foundation Scholars, using Oracle Academy curriculum and hosted on-line learning materials. Students will be taught by two Oracle Academy trained faculty from the Ajayi Crowther University and Aived International who have attended and passed the formal Oracle Academy faculty training courses.

MTN's View

Corporate Services Executive, MTN Nigeria, Mr. Akinwale Goodluck, said the initiative was borne out of the need to give back to the society where it operates, and that having identified shortfalls in the acquisition of technology skills, the telecoms company decided to collaborate with Oracle to help Nigerians acquire relevant ICT skills that will help develop Nigeria rapidly. According to him, "At MTN, we believe that education is pivotal to the growth of any nation, which is why we are delighted with this collaboration that will see Mufutau Akuruyejo, an MTN Foundation scholar, leave for Switzerland to participate in the nine-week CERN openlab programme."

Commenting on the Oracle Academy programme, Goodluck said it would help to further boost the ICT skills in beneficiaries and avail them of valuable opportunities after completing the database design and SQL and Java programming courses.

The MTNF Scholarship Scheme covers tuition, books and pocket allowance. It is renewable provided recipients maintain a minimum of 3.5 Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) in their course of study and an overall 2.5 CGPA. In 2012, the scholarship was extended to visually impaired students in public tertiary schools across the country who meet the requirements.

The MTNF Science and Technology Scholarship Scheme (STSS), with its 5th Phase recently concluded, was introduced in the 2009/2010 academic session to assist high performing Nigerian students to pursue their academic education in tertiary institutions across the country.

From inception of the scheme, over 4900 scholarships have been awarded to students from Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education, with each awardee receiving an annual scholarship of N200, 000.00 to cover tuition, book allowance and stipend.

Advising Akuruyejo on the need to remain focus and do Nigeria proud while in Switzerland, the Director, MTNF, Mr. Dennis Okoro, said the initiative would not only boost ICT skills of the beneficiaries, but would also open up numerous opportunities for them beyond database design and Java programming skills.

"As an educationist to various educational organisations, I am really excited about the potentials of this initiative, which is aimed at providing extensive ICT training to select MTNF scholarship beneficiaries," Okoro said.

"Apart from ICT developmental programmes, MTNF also has other projects in health and economic empowerment. In all the foundation has invested over N11 billion in projects across 341 states in the 36 states of the federation and the federal capital territory," Okoro added.

Oracle's View

Country Manager, Oracle Nigeria, Mr. Adebayo Sanni said there was need for Nigeria to bridge the identified ICT skills gap in the country. According to him, the support from Oracle in funding Akuruyejo to Switzerland for ICT training, would assist Nigeria in bridging ICT skills gap in the country.

He said Oracle has been involved in several partnerships with state governments to further drive technology development across the country.

"With the rapid adoption of technology in Nigeria, it is imperative that students are equipped with the right skills to take advantage of career and entrepreneurial opportunities. We support the country's efforts to undertake a digital transformation to help secure its place as a leader in the global economy," he added.

Speaking on the joint initiative, Sanni said was need for more joint initiatives between the private sector, government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), in order to bridge the ICT skills gap in the country.

Enhancing Teachers' Skills

Commending Oracle and MTNF for the initiative to empower fresh university graduates and undergraduates with technology skills, the Dean, Students Affairs, University of Lagos, Prof. Tunde Babawale, also called on Oracle and MTNF, as well as other private organisations to extend such gestures to university lecturers, whom he argued must be empowered also, in order to impart the relevant ICT skills to their students.

"If lecturers are exposed to new technology skills, universities will graduate several of Akuruyejo within a short period of time," he said.

The Need for More Private Participation

Dragnet, the Science and Technology partner to MTNF, is of the view that more private sector initiatives should be encouraged to invest in bridging ICT skills gap in the country.

"Nigeria needs more private organisations to address the ICT skills gap in the country because government alone cannot do it," the firm said.

The collaboration between Oracle Corporation and MTN Foundation to train Nigerians in relevant ICT skills, should be commended and emulated by other private organisations that are operating in Nigeria. The need to give back to the society is now, in order to adequately address the identified ICT skills dearth in the country.

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