

Mobile phone app developers take on Africa

October 25 2012, by Boris Bachorz



A man walks past an Airtel shop in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi in 2011. US communications and technology company DEMO on Thursday opened a two-day trade fair in the Kenyan capital Nairobi, to showcase innovations and the continent's advances in the telecommunications sector.

The scene might pass for a high-tech forum in California, but the young entrepreneurs presenting their products on stage are Africans, keen to show off low-tech applications for the continent.

US communications and technology company DEMO on Thursday opened a two-day trade fair in the Kenyan capital Nairobi, to showcase innovations and the continent's advances in the telecommunications sector.

Around 30 young exhibitors each had less than five minutes to convince an audience of some 200 people, whose attention was split between their

[smart phones](#) and tablets, that they are the next [Steve Jobs](#).

"We are on stand six, we hope you will put your money there because it will come back with interest," Jacob Mwema, co-founder of [mobile application](#) mTracker said at the end of his presentation, bouncing with enthusiasm.

mTracker allows drivers to use their [mobile telephones](#) to locate their cars, trigger the alarm system or switch off the engine, a useful tool in a city where violent car-jackings are common.

The fair focused on mobile telephone applications, a tool that has had perhaps more impact on daily life in Africa over the past decade than anywhere else in the world.

Africa has more than 500 million mobile devices—roughly one for every two people on the continent—and is partly credited with Africa's recent economic surge.

According to the World Bank, an average of 10 telephones for every 100 people is enough to increase a developing country's gross national product by 0.8 percent.

[Computer engineers](#) in Africa have thus been forced to adapt to the specific mobile needs of their market.

"We have many ideas that would do well in the 'first world' market but not here," explains 32-year old Mem Maina, co-founder of M-Kazi, a five-month old application that advertises jobs to subscribers via SMS text messages.

"In a country where only six million people have good internet access—and between 20 and 25 million have SMS access—it makes all

sense to go the SMS way," added the dreadlocked software engineer.

The rise in mobile usage has been boosted by M-PESA, a almost legendary money transfer service that has spread widely in Africa and beyond since its 2007 launch by Kenyan mobile firm Safaricom.

In a continent characterised by high unemployment levels and a young population, applications linked with the job market are numerous.

m-Pawa, another [mobile](#) based application, specialises in advertising jobs at the lower end of the salary range.

"Over 75% of the work force falls under the category of blue collar jobs," said Maxwell Kofi Efrem Donkor, who travelled from Ghana to showcase his product at the fair.

The young man says he was inspired by similar events in China and Brazil, and hopes to expand his product throughout Africa.

"Once you have the concept right, it is easy to extend it to the whole continent," said Paul Nguru, head of the business and investment firm PN Consulting.

But more experienced software developers warn many applications on show need more work before they turn financially lucrative, although few doubt the potential.

Shiv Shivakumar, senior executive for Nokia compares the young demographic and the Internet explosion in Africa with the US in the 1950s, when the youth were introduced to the motor vehicle and the television.

"There is something unique in Africa, and Africa is the place to be in in

the next decade," he said.

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