

ANDY SEARLE | Digital skills can speed recovery in SA's jobs-rich tourism sector

SAs travel and tourism has a heavy weight to carry.

Given the country's abundant natural beauty, the sector has traditionally been a vital cog in SA's economic growth engine, and it is now expected to drive the country's economic recovery. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council's economic impact report, the sector is expected to grow at an annual rate above 7% over the next decade, far outpacing SA's overall economic growth rate and is also expected to create more than 800,000 jobs to reach more than 1.9-million by 2032.

However, the sector is still struggling to recover from the impact of Covid-19, which shuttered many hotels and had an outsized negative impact on small business owners in tourism and hospitality. Despite support from the government and financial institutions in a bid to keep these businesses afloat during the pandemic, it is expected the tourism sector will take time to rebalance, with a multiyear recovery to 2019 levels.

In addition, Covid-19 radically changed consumer behaviour. Digital connectivity and transformation accelerated rapidly during the pandemic due to successive lockdowns in many countries. Even prior to Covid-19, tourism services were gravitating to a digital-first model, with technology-driven platforms such as AirBnB and Booking.com, among others, changing the structure of the industry by altering barriers to entry, facilitating price comparisons and transforming distribution channels through the internet.

As a result, digital skills such as online marketing and communication, social media management and data analytics are becoming increasingly important to the sector and its employees. However, there is a significant gap in SA between supply and demand for current and future skill levels in these skills.

For small businesses, particularly, to capitalise on and help drive the promise tourism and hospitality holds, they first must be in the game. This means having a website, with tagged content, to be visible, connecting to and integrating their systems with booking aggregator sites, creating apps to improve the user experience of travellers, managing logistics, ensuring cybersecurity and data protection and analysing customer behaviour to maximise return visits and traveller satisfaction.

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