

KENYA'S TECHNOLOGY PUSH LEAVES INVESTORS COLD

NAIROBI: Kenya's technology rush gave hope that new ideas would help millions of Africans use their mobile phones to circumvent poor infrastructure but local start-ups are failing to draw major investors or create profits.

Lack of talent, problems in attaining seed capital and ideas that cannot be sold to a mass market or easily monetized have so far held back hundreds of Kenyan start-ups.

Many were drawn to the tech sector by the Kenyan government's push for a "digital future", plentiful Western donor funding and foreign media coverage about "Africa's Silicon Savannah".

"From co-founders of Facebook to the biggest tech funds you can find in Silicon Valley, they've all been here to look and they have all gone home shaking their heads," said Nikolai Barnwell, a Nairobi-based director of 88mph, a tech seed fund.

His fund, which has funded almost 20 companies in east Africa's biggest economy, is taking a break from investing in Kenyan start-ups to focus on Nigeria where he believes the tech ecosystem is more profit-focused and there is less "fluff".

At least 70 percent of start-ups in Kenya are "not earning enough to maintain business and living expenses for a small team," according to a recent "Digital Entrepreneurship" survey by GSMA, a global association of mobile operators. Its survey contacted more than 230 start-ups across Kenya.

Major exceptions include Wananchi Group, one of east Africa's biggest cable and internet-based phone companies, which is valued at over \$100 million. Another is Craft Silicon, a software firm believed to be worth tens of millions.

Safaricom, Kenya's biggest telecoms firm, is a model of how technology can be used to financially include millions of people with mobile telephones but without access to traditional infrastructure such as the banks that are available to the wealthy or those living in cities.

Safaricom in 2007 pioneered its M-Pesa mobile money transfer technology, now used across Africa, Asia and Europe. It proved that money can be made from people who earn a few dollars a day. It generated revenues worth 27 billion shillings (\$300

million) in the last financial year.

But similar ideas to harness that economic power have been elusive. Safaricom's chief executive, Bob Collymore, has urged entrepreneurs to innovate to solve Africa's inherent problems: access to water, health-care and education. "There's no shortage of innovation, there's just a shortage of useful innovation that meets need," he said in a recent GE Look Ahead interview.

"NO ROADMAP"

With mobile phone use nearing 80 percent, cheap data and soaring smartphone uptake, Kenya provides one of sub-Saharan Africa's most appealing environments for tech entrepreneurs.

Kenyan farmers receive updates on the latest crop prices via text messages, while coffee-sipping urbanites can shop and hail taxis through smartphone apps. Yet critics say only a small percentage of Kenya's 44 million people use these services. Forced to play catch up on development issues, engineers hope Africa can jump to the front of the technology revolution.

But Barnwell said talent tends to move

into real estate or banking, sectors which offer huge rewards with less risk, particularly since many African investors have little understanding of technology. "Tech is very risky and there are so many other low lying fruit for investment, why take the risk with tech," said Dorothy Gordon director general of the Kofi Annan centre of technology excellence in Accra, Ghana.

Jeremy Gordon, founder of Nairobi-based Echo Mobile, said recruiting is tough and tech start-ups spend a large amount of capital on engineering talent.

"Equity is less attractive to engineers in Kenya when weighed against salary, which is not surprising given the nature of the start-up space, availability of funding, and the Kenyan economy," he said.

Mark Kaiwiga, founder of Nairobi-based tech consultancy Nendo, said Kenyan techies broadly focus on the business-to-consumer market that grabs headlines even though most of the profitable start-ups serve the business-to-business segment.

"You have a swarm of developers who are looking at business-to-consumer apps but with no roadmap," said Kaiwiga. Shortage

of investment, a perennial African problem, is another impediment. Early seed capital provided by the likes of 88mph and a handful of other funds is scarce. And with interest rates on Kenyan loans often topping 20 percent, bank debt is expensive.

It is a familiar problem to Echo Mobile's Gordon, who is seeking to raise up to \$1 million for his cloud-based mass messaging platform that is used in eight countries, including Sierra Leone, where IBM is conducting Ebola-related community research through it.

Rather than pitching to Kenya's business elite, Echo Mobile is currently holding talks with U.S. investors. "East Africa hasn't seen huge tech acquisitions or other types of exits, the events that make early stage investments truly pay off," Gordon said.

But there is hope. African economies continue to expand rapidly, Safaricom has launched super-fast 4G internet and 19 million Kenyans are expected to own smartphones by end of 2017. "We will get another chance. People will come back when real money is ready to be made," said Barnwell. —Reuters



NEW YORK: In this Dec. 29, 2014, file photo, new recruits wear bands over their badges in honor of deceased officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu during a New York Police Academy graduation ceremony at Madison Square Garden in New York. The NYPD is sending its top brass to an in-house "Twitter school" as part of an effort to soften the NYPD's image and engage with the people they serve. —AP

NYPD SEEKS TO ENGAGE WITH 'TWITTER SCHOOL,' BLOG

NEW YORK: As city officials work to soften the New York Police Department's image and change how officers engage with citizens through reforms and training, part of the effort is happening online.

The nation's largest police department, once a slow adopter of social media, has created a blog and punched up Facebook use. And there are now 101 Twitter accounts department-wide after top brass were sent to an in-house "Twitter school."

"We've given the commanding officers the tools, the guidelines and the training, and most importantly ... the responsibility to do the work," said Zachary Tumin, the department's deputy commissioner for strategic initiatives. "Twitter is part of that work and part of those bridges we seek to build and reinforce." After the Dec. 20 shooting death of two patrolmen by a man who vowed online to kill "pigs," NYPD officers sent out and received dozens of messages of support for the slain officers.

Mayor Bill de Blasio and Police Commissioner William Bratton are trying to rebrand the NYPD to counter criticism that it tramples on civil rights. The crime-fighting tactic known as stop-and-frisk is being reformed. Officers are undergoing three days of training on use of force and how to communicate with the public after the chokehold death of Eric Garner on July 17, and police in several precincts are trying out body cameras.

New York had largely eschewed the Internet until recently, while other, smaller departments embraced it. Boston used Twitter to rebut rumors and spread updates after the Boston Marathon bombings. The Denver department has more than 20,000 likes on Facebook since joining in 2012. Toronto's police have more than 300 accounts, and officers must attend three days of training. In Dalton, Georgia, the department's blog tells readers about emergencies and other news and provides information on police - including praise and suspensions.

In the past year, the NYPD's public relations unit developed a blog. Bratton has his own Twitter account. And the department has expanded from one main account, @NYPDNews, to 101 covering every precinct and some special commands. Officers are encouraged to send out helpful, pithy messages and respond directly to the communities they serve.

"We want those voices out there," Tumin said. The department also has sent its commanders to a "school" taught by in-house social media experts who encourage humor and helpfulness and discourage releasing investigative details or starting arguments.

"Don't engage in a Twitter war with someone. You won't ever win," one trainer said. "I can investigate and arrest someone. I just can't figure out what to say in this tiny little box," one captain said. "I'm going to have to call my daughter and have her come help me."

During one hourslong tutorial at John Jay Criminal College this month, about a dozen commanding officers learned to set up handles and view messages, and were taught the difference between direct messages and regular messages. Trainers used as an example the online demise of former U.S. Congressman Anthony Weiner, who accidentally sent out a sexually explicit photo meant for private use. Commanding officers also sent out their first tweets. "The 63 Precinct is now officially on Twitter. Looking forward to sharing with the residents of our great community!!! #Brooklyn" The precinct links to a copy of the city's official social media policy, and now has 308 followers. The department has produced a 34-page "Twitter handbook" to help officers manage the Wild West of the Internet, where even well-meaning messages can be undone by legions online.

Earlier this year, @NYPDnews invited people to post feel-good photos posing with New York's finest with the hashtag #myNYPD. Instead, they found themselves awash in hundreds of images of baton-wielding cops arresting protesters, pulling suspects by the hair, unleashing pepper spray and taking down a bloodied 84-year-old man for jaywalking.

The NYPD community affairs chief sent out a message following the grand jury decision not to indict an officer in Garner's death that read: "The #NYPD is committed to rebuilding public trust. #Wehearyou" The effort was panned because Garner's last words were "I can't breathe."

And a commander in Harlem remarked on his private account about a woman who fell onto the subway tracks and died: "Let me guess, driver's fault right?" he wrote. Online activists lambasted him, and he apologized and removed the link.

There have been some successes, too. An image last winter of an NYPD officer giving boots a homeless man became national news. When a subway train derailed last spring, one precinct shared traffic information and alternate routes until the problem was resolved. And Community Affairs Chief Joanne Jaffe tweeted a photo of a handwritten note left by a passer-by that was tacked to the entrance of 1 Police Plaza: "It takes courage and discipline to do your duty in times like these. Thank you for serving and protecting these citizens with respect. Have a blessed day." —AP

SCORN GREET'S LG, SAMSUNG'S STORM IN A WASHING DRUM

SEOUL: South Korea's two top technology firms, Samsung Electronics and LG Electronics, have a history of bitter rivalry, but their latest spat over a handful of washing machines has prompted a barrage of public mockery.

"This is all so petty and juvenile," a reader on online portal Naver said of the dispute, which began in September when Samsung accused LG executives of damaging its washing machines at stores in Germany ahead of an industry event. LG agreed to pay for what it called accidental damage to four machines following mediation by German authorities, but couldn't resist taking a pot shot at its rival's build quality.

Samsung railed against those "slandorous claims" and filed a formal complaint at home, triggering a raid of LG offices by Seoul prosecutors on Friday and a travel ban on LG's head of household appliances. "This is a mudslinging match," said Park Ju-gun, head of corporate watchdog CEO Score.

"Both Samsung and LG will have a hard time getting the public to understand why things have gone on this way, and there is not a single thing for either party to gain from this." That bemusement, punctuated by a collective snicker, found a voice online. "If all that has been said is true, then this is nothing but a petty dispute you'd expect from street corner shops and not global companies," said a reader on the Nate portal.

On the streets, too, the comments were scathing. "This incident shows the problem with the corporate culture in South Korean con-

glomerates," said Lee Hyeon-woo, an office worker in Seoul. "The mentality of these companies is not 'We're number one' but 'We must take down rival X.'" The cross-town rivals compete on several fronts,

more, and who had a bigger share of the domestic air conditioning market, and current and former workers say they routinely spy on each other at trade shows.

Samsung declined further com-

ment. LG said it has been cooperating with prosecutors, who would not disclose details of the investigation.

Neither company appears ready

spent responding to the challenge from Chinese competitors, said another exasperated commenter on Naver. "What are you people doing?" the person asked. —Reuters



SEOUL: The logo of South Korea's LG Group is seen in front of the company's headquarters in Seoul on December 26, 2014. South Korean prosecutors raided the headquarters of LG Electronics in a probe into the destruction of rival Samsung's washing machines at stores in Germany, company officials said. —AFP

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THE NUMBERS TO KNOW WHEN CHOOSING A TV



DUBAI: The market has seen a number of TVs that are more affordable and better proofed for the future through innovative technologies. But, buyers beware: the choices are fewer than they seem. Whether you like it or not, room size, personal taste and even the walls in your home will beef up or pare down your options. To cut the confusion, Samsung Gulf TV division has laid out some patented, professional advice on how to ensure that your next TV is the right TV.

A common trap for consumers is size. Buyers with small spaces often load on bigger screens than they need, or budge their seats closer to the screen to save space. No matter the cutting-edge density of your TV's resolution, if you sit too close, the images on the screen will appear pixelated, cutting into your enjoyment and causing you to lose out on your high-resolution TV. To get the best bang for your buck, the experts at Samsung advocate for a normal viewing distance of four meters. They also encourage you to think against the adage that bigger is better. If you're working with a small room, stick to a set of 48" or smaller for the most detailed image and comfortable view.

When you have more space in play, Samsung recommends the following methods to determine their ideal screen size. After arranging your furniture exactly where you want it, whip out your measuring tape and find your optimal viewing distance, the distance between the viewer and the TV. Multiply this by 12.5, and get the best screen size for your home.

A major innovation to come out of 2014 is the curved TV, and it has created a new question for consumers. As a manufacturer of both curved and flat-panel TVs, Samsung leaves this to a matter of taste. On flat-panel TVs, the viewing angles are as high as 178 degrees, making it possible for viewers to enjoy high picture quality from almost any angle in the room. Alternatively, the Samsung Curved UHD TV's panoramic curvature is designed to create the most immersive experience in viewing from a normal watching distance, putting the viewer right inside the show. Not only does the curve offer a more equal viewing angle across the entire screen, but it also contributes to a higher contrast ratio and significantly less reflections.

When it comes to positioning your set, consumers should keep bezel, curve and the walls of their home in mind, the experts say. A thinner bezel gives a cleaner feel to the television, which allows viewers to focus on content without the distraction of the frame. This is especially important if you plan to mount your TV. According to one manager, "A mounted TV with a small bezel can look like a floating frame against a wall."

While many curved TVs cannot be mounted, the Samsung Curved UHD TV comes with Samsung Wall-mounts and compatibility options with general VSA Wall-mounts. Samsung's flat-panel UHD TV is equally versatile. No matter which set you choose, a final rule of thumb is to keep its back to windows, lamps and other light sources. If you've paid a premium for a quality TV, there's no point in ruining it all with a rookie mistake.

CHINESE PAPER BLAMES GOOGLE OVER GMAIL BLOCKING

BEIJING: Internet giant Google's unwillingness to obey Chinese law is to blame for the shutdown of its hugely popular email service, state-run media said Tuesday after the last easy way to access Gmail was apparently blocked.

"China welcomes the company to do business on the prerequisite that it obeys Chinese law; however Google values more its reluctance to be restricted by Chinese law, resulting in conflict," the Global Times said in an editorial. Gmail, the world's biggest email service, has been largely inaccessible from within China since the run-up to the 25th anniversary in June

of the Tiananmen Square crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators. Users could access the service by using third-party mail applications, rather than the webpage. But Jeremy Goldkorn, founder of Beijing-based Danwei which tracks Chinese media and the Internet, said those ways of connecting were also barred in recent days. Some access seemed to be restored on Tuesday afternoon, with some users saying they could download messages. Google's own Transparency Report showed a slight uptick in traffic compared with the past two days, although the amount of users accessing Gmail from China was still a

fraction of what it was before the block. China operates the world's most extensive and sophisticated Internet censorship system, known as the "Great Firewall". Foreign websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are routinely blocked and content that the ruling Communist Party deems offensive is often quickly deleted.

Google withdrew from China in 2010 after a fallout with Beijing over censorship issues. "The issue at heart is to what extent Google is willing to obey Chinese law, on which China's attitude is steadfast," said the Global Times, which is close to the Communist Party.

Access problems could be "caused by the China side, by Google itself or a combination of the two," it added. A company spokesman told AFP on Monday that internal checks found "nothing wrong on our end." If China did block Gmail, the Global Times said, "it must have been prompted by newly emerged security reasons" and users should "accept the reality."

"We only need to have faith that China has its own logic in terms of Internet policy and it is made and runs in accordance with the country's fundamental interests," it added. Nonetheless it acknowledged: "We don't want to be shut off, as it obviously doesn't serve

our own interests." But it may serve the interests of Chinese businesses. There was a surge in new sign-ups for a rival e-mail service run by NetEase, according to news website ChinaByte. NetEase saw new users at a rate three to four times normal in the past few days, ChinaByte reported, citing company officials. Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said she was "not aware" of the blocking of Gmail when asked about the issue at a regular press conference Monday. "I would like to stress that China always welcomes and supports foreign investors' legal business operations in China," she said. —AFP