BIZCOMMUNITY

Code did this

By Riaz Moola, issued by Hook, Line & Sinker

20 Jan 2022

The global tech sector is worth an estimated $5tn. It is estimated to employ more than 55 million people worldwide. Technology features in every aspect of our lives today, directly and indirectly. For an industry that only really took off in the 1980s, it's had a meteoric rise that is not expected to slow anytime soon.

How is this possible? With code.

We made it to the moon. Changed the way we shop, play and read. Created new industries and jobs by the millions. Turned dating on its head. We even digitised fast food. All with code. Without those lines and lines of words, symbols and numbers, modern life as we know it wouldn't be possible. You wouldn't be reading this. I'd not have a job.

Back in the late 1960s, a young woman named Margaret Hamilton at NASA was writing code on reams and reams of paper. The efforts of her and her team would send Neil Armstrong and his team to the moon in 1969. Software engineering was an unknown concept back then, and Hamilton is credited with popularising the term.

Fast forward to the 1970s and a game called Pong is launched. The world's first commercially successful video game, it paved the way for an industry that employs, entertains and educates billions across the globe every year.

The first Apple debuted in 1976. In 1985, Windows was launched by upstart technology company Microsoft. We all know how that worked out (many of you are using these products as we speak).

Buy, buy, buy

Roll on to 2021, and we've become incredibly reliant on things that were created by code. Take shopping. According to Statista, over two billion people bought goods or services online last year. Two. Billion. eRetail sales surpassed $4.2tn worldwide. And those figures are growing annually. Even ten years' ago, many of us wouldn't have considered buying groceries, let alone doing almost all of our shopping online. Today it's not even worth commenting on because it's so commonplace.

And then there's fast food. Smartphones, internet connectivity and the gig economy have revolutionised how we order food from restaurants. And they're even shaking up how restaurants operate.

Just eat it

The first pizza delivery (you knew it had to be pizza, right?) reportedly happened in 1889, when Queen Margherita of Savoy was on business in Naples and wanted to eat something the commoners ate. Naturally she and King Umberto I couldn't go to renowned chef Raffaele Esposito's eatery, so the pizza had to come to them. And yes, the ubiquitous margherita was named for her majesty.

From apps like GrubHub and Just Eat that centralised the ordering process but relied on restaurants' own delivery drivers, to Uber Eats or Mr D Food, which takes care of the process end to end, code has driven significant business changes in the food delivery sector. Without code, your pizza wouldn't arrive on your doorstep, just as you like it.

Now, restaurants are evolving into kitchens only. Known as dark kitchens, each kitchen produces food for a number of brands and delivery aggregators ensure it gets to the consumer. This model has existed for nearly a decade, but has ramped up considerably largely due to two factors. Firstly, the pandemic, which saw over 3,000 eateries shut shop in South Africa and led restaurateurs to seek out more cost effective means to serve their devoted eaters. Secondly, smartphones, delivery apps and internet connectivity are now ubiquitous enough to make it viable on a large scale. Enabled by code, of course.

WYD?

No human activity hasn't been affected by code. Including dating. Initially website driven, the smartphone evolution has taken romance with it. Tinder changed the game entirely with it's simple 'swipe right to like' system in 2013. Tinder has been joined by Badoo, OkCupid, Bumble (which changes things up by only allowing women to make the first move), Hinge and others.

According to BusinessApps, the global app market was worth a respectable $3.08bn in 2020, and is showing no signs of slowing. Code has, here, spawned legions of codes – specifically dating codes that serve to provide a shorthand means to give information on likes, dislikes, preferences and (often) not safe for work information that it's imprudent to type out fully.

(WYD, in case you're not fluent, means 'what you doing?')

Cue code

Code is running our lives and providing the basis for our futures. According to the World Economic Forum, automation is expected to result in a net increase of 58 million jobs. By automating repetitive, low skill work, automation frees up humans to do value-rich work.

The jobs of the future are enabled by code and programming, and many are reliant on it as a basic skill set. The move to 3D, virtual, interactive realities is being powered by code and affecting everything from manufacturing to entertainment and social engagement. Cloud computing is rapidly becoming the default (versus hosted, physical infrastructures that are tied to a specific location). Low-code or no-code tools are empowering non-coders to build things like virtual assistants which can, for example, guide customers through simple tasks, freeing up humans to engage in more complex customer service actions.

There is literally no human endeavour that is not affected by code in 2021, it is only the extent to which technology has been rolled out in any given organisation or sector that varies. This is true even in countries like South Africa where infrastructural challenges like access to electricity, connectivity and smart devices persist. A lot of these challenges can be solved by code, we just need the skilled human resources to do it.

If you haven't yet considered it, now may be a good time to learn to code. A World Economic Forum report on the Future of Work (2020) indicates that the time spent by human and machine workers will be equal by 2025. Humans that aren't upskilling into higher value roles will likely bear the biggest brunt of this shift. While the WEF expects workers across a broad range of roles and geographies to be displaced by work augmentation by machines, those jobs are going to be replaced by roles requiring coding skills, including cloud computing, engineering, product development, green economy, data and AI jobs.

According to Hyperion's Graduate Futures Report, two-thirds of employers in sub-Saharan Africa require digital skills in their job vacancies. Some 70% of all roles today require basic digital skills. For employers needing higher-level technology skills, there is a massive gap, the report notes. Eighty-seven percent of executives say they are or will soon experience skills gaps, according to a recent McKinsey Global Survey. At the time of writing there are more than four million unfilled technology positions worldwide, according to ISC.

Our education system isn't adequately addressing this gap, leaving room for private providers to do so. They will need to

expand fast if they are to fill the skills gaps already evident in the sector and help technology businesses to meet the need for their services in the coming years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Riaz Mbola is CEO of HyperionDev.

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