



“People working in global contact centers will have more exposure to the global frontier of innovation than will their peers who work in the domestic or even analogue realms.”

-Elvis MELIA

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African pathways in the cloud: From contact centre to the creative economy?

In an age of ubiquitous internet connectivity, the COVID-19 Pandemic's layoffs and work-from-home measures have led many former employees to pursue alternatives to their old jobs, and this, in turn, has contributed to labour shortages in high-income countries. Now global business services (GBS) firms are looking for workers in new locations around the world, including in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Thus, more Africans could soon be working in global contact centres, conducting various virtual service tasks – helping a Canadian shopper return an order on an e-commerce platform, or helping a Belgian traveller change their flight booking. This can absorb many young Africans who come onto the labour market each year. But can this help these workers find pathways into fulfilling careers, entering the global creative economy? A critical literature exists on Indian and Filipino contact-centre and business-process-outsourc-

ing work, lamenting poor working conditions and low wages in dead-end jobs.

At MeliaCRED, two colleagues and I conducted research on behalf of GIZ, containing two studies on the future of IT-enabled services in Rwanda. Study 1 examined place-based IT-enabled services in Kigali's urban mobility sector, asking freelance drivers in the ride-hailing and delivery platform economy how they felt about their working conditions, skills development, and career trajectories. Study 2 examined cloud-based services, asking current and former contact-centre employees the same questions.

We conducted ten focus group discussions with workers, and a glance at our colour-coded transcripts reveals a clear picture: place-based service providers – i.e. the ride-hailing and delivery platform drivers – are much less happy with their working conditions, see fewer opportunities for skills development, and see no career trajectories; on the other hand, cloud-based service providers – i.e. contact centre agents – are distinctly more positive on all fronts.

This compares motorcycle-riding apples with headset-wearing oranges, but in the least, we were able to show that Rwandan contact centre agents generally cherish their work. In the global business services industry, contact centre work is among the less complex and lowest paid work. Yet, Rwandans see good chances for personal development and upward mobility.

If the lowest rungs on the digital services ladder are already desirable, more opportunities exist if this sector can be used to plug African virtual workers into the global creative economy.

A widely held notion about IT-enabled services is that the upper rungs of the task complexity ladder are more technical – dealing with software development, data science, or cloud computing. But many fulfilling and highly paid jobs are in the creative economy – mixing technical tasks with various forms of film making, advertisement, life coaching, music, consulting, gaming, and other forms of entertainment. As the virtual and analogue worlds become further intertwined, more of the creative economy will spread in the cloud.

But can wide-scale job creation in the globalized cloud services sector provide a springboard into the creative economy? As the physical and virtual realms continue to merge into one space, we find that upward mobility occurs in three forms – an essential earnings cushion, new skills, and exposure to new opportunities.

First, our study showed that Rwandan contact centre workers, serving global markets, are in the top 5 to 20% of income earners in Kigali. As most Africans work in the informal economy, being formally employed and earning comparably high wages comes with a host of worker benefits, which gives workers a chance to breathe, think about their dreams, and pursue their preferred careers.

Second, more concretely, as contact centre workers operate in a global digital realm, they are exposed to state-of-the-art digital tools and global procedures and norms. And contact centre work helps workers develop the communication and other soft skills that are most critical in today's global knowledge economy. Not every cable-tv-bill conversation with far flung customers will bring contact-centre workers closer to the creative economy. But according to our respondents, such interactions do build confidence, problem-solving skills, intercultural understanding, empathy, and a general knowledge that one is able to make friends and influence people across the world. These are foundational tools and future skills for careers in the creative economy.

Lastly, direct opportunities also arise as African contact centre workers will have more exposure to the global frontier of innovation than will their peers who work in the domestic or even analogue realms. As more of the global creative economy shifts to the cloud, this exposure opens ways for digital workers in Africa to find their own niche or passion.

Many conclusions can be drawn from this. But before we begin to think of a world of virtual-reality goggles and haptic suits, we can imagine how labour migration from the Global South to the Global North happens ever less via embassies, green cards, boats, and student visas, and ever more via Zoom calls, VPNs, YouTube tutorials, and TikTok clips. Contact centre work may lay the skills foundation for successful careers in the growing cloud of creativity.