

What we can learn from the firing and rehiring of OpenAI's Sam Altman

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We'll talk about a swift swivel. Sam Altman's return as CEO of OpenAI signifies a pivotal moment in organisational governance, echoing a global cry for decentralised decision-making – one that resonates deeply in South Africa's rapidly evolving tech landscape.



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While reasons for his firing and rehiring differ depending who you read, the general sense was that he held too many big cards to his chest when it came to policy making and general management.

With our dynamic and diverse population, companies here stand to benefit from embracing such a model, which aligns with an ethos of collective progress and innovation.

Shifting structures and the benefits

This moment serves as a clarion call for local companies and institutions to consider a similar shift towards a more inclusive and democratic decision-making framework.

Altman's reinstatement at OpenAI transcends a mere corporate reshuffle; it represents a shift from traditional hierarchical models to a democratised, inclusive approach - a change that South Africa, can uniquely adapt, and implement. Under Altman's leadership, OpenAI is set to advance artificial intelligence while reflecting on the value of decisions driven by a diverse and engaged community.

Decentralising decision-making incorporates a myriad of benefits, each aligning with South Africa's goals of fostering innovation and inclusivity:

Our multicultural society can leverage decentralisation to harness diverse perspectives for creative problem-solving.

By reducing power concentration, it empowers individuals and communities, resonating with South Africa's democratic values.

Open decision-making processes can also bolster trust, a critical element in South Africa's growing tech sector and ensure that systems remain robust even amidst individual failures, vital in a country like South Africa, where varied regional challenges exist.

I'd go as far as to suggest that this approach allows South Africans to contribute globally without facing significant barriers, enhancing the nation's global footprint.

Other benefits include systems that can swiftly adapt to changes, crucial for South Africa's dynamic economic and social landscapes a nurturing of a sense of ownership among participants, aligning with South Africa's spirit of 'Ubuntu' - the belief in a universal bond of sharing.



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Finding balance

Embracing decentralisation also means navigating complexities, slower consensus-building processes, coordination challenges and potential security risks, all requiring careful consideration in the South African context.

OpenAI's blend of a non-profit and a capped-profit company offers a unique blueprint for South African organisations. This structure balances innovation with ethical considerations - a model that could inspire South African companies to align profit motives with societal benefits.

So how do we start? Adopting decentralised decision-making in South Africa requires a delicate balance between collective input and efficient governance. The potential for increased transparency and inclusivity is immense, but it must be carefully weighed against possible operational challenges.

In the business I lead, we have a clear purpose to use creativity to build shared value and while we are starting to embrace the concept, it didn't come before a careful risk assessment. Decentralised decision-making can create a high degree of ownership from our team members and similarly can introduce a higher level of complexity in coordination and management.

As decision authority is distributed among various units or individuals, aligning these decisions with the overall

organisational goals can be challenging. Ensuring consistent and coherent strategies across different units requires robust communication channels and a well-defined overarching framework. In the absence of such coordination, the organisation might face issues like duplication of efforts, conflicting initiatives, or misaligned priorities.

Drawbacks

One of the inherent trade-offs of decentralisation is the potential for slower decision-making. When multiple stakeholders are involved, reaching a consensus can take more time compared to a centralised system where decisions are made by a few or a single individual. This delay can be particularly detrimental in situations that require rapid response or in dynamic industries where quick decision-making is crucial for maintaining a competitive edge.

And decentralised decision-making can sometimes lead to inconsistencies in how decisions are made and implemented across different parts of an organisation. This inconsistency can confuse both employees and customers, leading to a lack of cohesion in operations and strategies.

Additionally, when decisions are made by a group or distributed entities, it can be more challenging to pinpoint responsibility and accountability for those decisions. This diffusion of responsibility might result in a lack of clear accountability, making it difficult to address issues or failures effectively.

Path to prosperity

All things considered though, Altman's reinstatement at OpenAI is more than a corporate event; it's a reflection of a global shift towards a more inclusive, decision-making model.

This shift holds promise for South Africa, a nation striving for innovative and inclusive solutions. As the world looks towards more resilient, transparent, and participatory systems, I believe we have a unique opportunity to lead by example, embracing decentralisation not just as a trend, but as a pathway to a more equitable and prosperous future.

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