

Wi-Fi is changing Africa says Ruckus Wireless

The introduction of affordable smartphones designed specifically for emerging markets has been a game-changer for Africa and has made an impact on Wi-Fi demand, says Ruckus Wireless, Inc. In fact, according to published reports, mobile penetration in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to increase from 52% in 2012 to 79% in 2020, making it the fastest-growing region globally - with mobile broadband connections anticipated to quadruple from its 2012 figure to reach 160-million in 2016.



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"Wi-Fi technology has the potential to play an essential role in helping achieve universal access via ICTs for people in rural areas and territories where telephone or cable infrastructure is not currently deployed," says Michael Fletcher, sales director for Ruckus Wireless sub-Saharan Africa.

The evolution of Wi-Fi in Africa

"In fact, this was reiterated by South Africa's Minister of Telecommunications and Postal Services, Siyabonga Cwele, who highlighted that low-cost Wi-Fi installations could mean the difference between no ICT access of any kind and an affordable service as it can be used as a complementary medium to enhance the operators' offering - allowing them to get cost-effective access to consumers in these areas. In fact, South Africa's government committed to support and develop free Wi-Fi in rural areas in its election manifesto - which stands testament to this. For high-density areas such as cities, improved connectivity will be the building blocks and driver for smart cities and economic development in the digital age, where Wi-Fi is a critical complementary medium for 3G offload and connectivity."

Fletcher continues: "The evolution of Wi-Fi in Africa has been slow in comparison to international counterparts, but as demand for access has risen, good progress has been made, and businesses and consumers are starting to see the benefits."

Sectors jumping on board with Wi-Fi

Wi-Fi in Africa has predominantly been reserved for businesses and airport business lounges, but this has fast changed says Fletcher. "Lagos's Murtala Muhammad Airport Two (MMA2) was the [first airport terminal in Africa](#) to offer its passengers a free Wi-Fi Hotspot at the end of 2012 and since then, Wi-Fi has spread across the continent's biggest airport hubs."

Hospitality is another sector that jumped on board - where guests would pay for vouchers or have Wi-Fi access added to their room bill. In fact, mid-tier hospitality chains (e.g., 3 - 4 star rated hotels) were one of the first to offer free Wi-Fi in their rooms as part of their accommodation packages but today Wi-Fi is considered an essential in-room amenity.

"Previously no roaming between access points and re-authentication woes stifled the growth," adds Fletcher. "However, as roaming and streamlined SSID authentication became possible, Wi-Fi access has now become simple to access and so has spread across airports, hotels, coffee shops and restaurants, universities, and more recently, public venues and cities."

Smart cities

According to Fletcher, Africa is likely to see more Wi-Fi being deployed in cities and metro areas now than ever before, that connect more and more people. "Six to twelve months ago, I would have said South Africa was ahead in terms of these deployments, but now other African countries are implementing some impressive Wi-Fi initiatives, where even fixed line operators are offering Wi-Fi. What's more, looking at neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, the speed is incredible as in some cases they are backhauling Wi-Fi to fibre, resulting in very high download speeds. They are also being incredibly smart about the use of WiFi - either monetising their investment by partnering with various business interests or better mobilising communities via improved ICT."

"WiFi has certainly evolved here, and so too has its uses. As we see more and more metro and city type deployments across Africa, so-called "Smart city" deployments, it will become truly evident that this communication enabler adds immense economic value to our African cities and will be a key driving force to development," concludes Fletcher.

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