

## **SA Property Sector Becoming Increasingly Technology Savvy**

*Communications technologies are beginning to have a serious impact on the South African property sector. The theory that the internet makes life easier and simpler is, it seems, finally coming to life.*

In the mid nineties, as the Internet was beginning to take real shape, wonderful pictures were created around a very virtual property sector, the kind where agents are shooting property pictures from the hip with their cell phones and uploading in an instant, while offering clients 3D tours of properties. So, has the reality come anywhere near the hype of fifteen years ago?

“Well, yes and no...” says Theo Mseka, product owner of Property24.com. “The multi media hype hasn't quite come true. You still see, for example, estate agents utilising an internal team in a set process to take a property to market, rather than doing it all with a few quick clicks. But, in the same breathe, in the last few years technology has clearly become a fundamental part of the South African property business – there's no doubt about that.”

Mseka highlights two major areas of technology influence on the South African sector: internet portals and information flow across the various role players within the industry.

“Internet portals have taken real root,” he says. “While the physical visit to the property is still definitive, portals give clients a valuable filter through which to assess and compare properties, in their own time and in a relaxed context. At the same time they offer estate agents a marketing tool that is far more comprehensive and three dimensional than a simple listing in a newspaper. As Internet connectivity expands to cell phones, we can expect the role of the portal in the property game to grow and grow. Already, it's hard for consumer and agents to imagine life without portals.”

Information flow – specifically the optimisation of information flow between various offices roll-players – has also recently impacted significantly on the way South African property transactions are carried out. “We've seen a pretty sharp shift recently towards technology-based information management,” says Mseka. “In a few years it'll be hard to imagine that we ever relied on such manually-orientated processes.”

Aside from software able to improve general efficiency within the workplace, estate agents and attorney's offices are now starting to share important transaction information as well. This, says Mseka, is a crucial development for industry players and customers.

“Business process solutions have been available and in use in the market for a while,” he says. “Generally, however, they have been in silos, with the attorneys using one system and the estate agents another. Now we're seeing integration come into play. Property24.com, for example, has just released a system which allows information to be sent seamlessly between estate agents and attorneys, effectively

bridging two disparate technologies. This is the beginning of a larger integration trend that will see the end of hand deliveries of documents, the duplicated capturing of information and so forth. It's a big shift, which will slash the cost of communication for industry players and should make customer service towards the end of the transaction far better ”

Mseka cautions that Internet connectivity levels (specifically the trouble South Africa recently experienced with breakages on the new Seacom cable) will also need to be factored into the technology equation. “Companies need to be sure they are not 100% reliant on the Internet, which, as we've seen, can go offline,” he says. “In the future the most effective information flow solutions will probably feature a mix of web based and off-line, desktop based solutions, to mitigate against connectivity risk.”

So, are we rocketing towards a brave new property world? Should technology averse people in the business be worried?

“Not at all!” says Mseka. “Really we're just talking about natural evolution. Shifts in technology occur at around the same pace as wider changes in behaviour - so as the Internet becomes embedded in society we see it becoming embedded in business as well. There are, of course, important moments and step changes - the integration of information flow looks to be one of those - but generally we can expect technology to evolve steadily, and to all our benefit, even the techno-phobes.”

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