

# Demand for African Talent Is Increasing

Strategies to share talent between  
Africa and France

By Kiné Seck Mercier



A young woman spends her youth in Nigeria, leaving to attend a university in London. She goes on to work in the United States, Ghana, South America, Kenya and Zambia, finally settling in Paris. In many ways, she is illustrating an increasingly common trend in younger generations—a desire to work abroad and to contribute to building the African economy.

We wanted to examine this trend in more detail:

- What's driving this new generation to work in Africa?
- What is the scale of this trend?
- What is the impact on other countries as rising leaders are drawn to opportunities in Africa?

To answer these questions, we held a series of 10 Africa Leadership Dinners and conducted interviews to uncover what is at the root of this slowly emerging trend and if there will be an impact on France, a country that relies on African talent

## Why Africans are returning to Africa

While previous decades were marked by a migration of Africans to other countries, commonly known as the “brain drain,” a slow reversal of that effect is creating a gradual “brain gain” on the continent. A 2013 report by the United Nations and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development found that one in nine Africans with a post-secondary education—about 2.9 million people—were living and working outside of Africa. While there is still a significant number of Africans leaving to seek other opportunities—about 20,000 professionals leave Africa annually, according to the International Organization for Migration—some talent is returning. A 2014 report by Adcorp, a South African staffing firm, revealed that since the global financial crisis began in 2008, 359,000 high-skilled South Africans have returned from working in other countries. A study by Jacana Partners, a pan-African private equity firm, found that almost 70 percent of African MBA students at the top 10 US and European schools said they planned to return home and work after graduation.

There are several motivating factors spurring Africans to return, but perhaps the most notable is the potential for a more stabilized and growth-oriented economy. Mohamed P. Ndiaye, Head of Capital Markets for Impaxis, who spent 16 years in France and now works in Senegal, notes that many Africans return with the desire to build. “They want to build a company, build an industry, build influence, build a family, build a country, build a continent,” he explained. “Those who choose to return may have more tolerance or appetite for risk, and tolerance or appetite for a less structured system.”

Some countries are more economically stable than others. The 2019 Africa Pulse from The World Bank dubbed the economy a mixed bag, with countries including Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire all reporting solid growth in 2018, but indicated that Nigeria, Angola and South Africa all underperformed. But the real potential, according to the Pulse, is for digital transformation to drive innovation, job creation, service delivery, and poverty reduction. The Pulse estimates that digital transformation could increase growth per capita by 1.5 percentage points per year and reduce the poverty headcount by .7 percentage points per year.

Another spur for the economy—and job opportunities—is the rise of start-ups in Africa. In 2018, there was an almost four-fold increase in funding received for African start-ups. These groups raised a record \$725.6 million across 458 deals, according to the 2018 venture investment report by WeeTracker. In addition, the rate of companies being created is on an upswing—22 percent of Africa's working-age population are starting new businesses, according to the African Development Bank Group.

Many of these start-ups are focused on solving pressing social challenges. One such company is Onduhome. Part technology company, part building materials company, it focuses on providing an environmentally-friendly solution to the looming housing crisis in Africa. Homes are built quickly (typically in about 8 to 10 weeks) using only local materials—and sometimes even in two days leveraging technology and partnerships. This rapid build is a much needed solution that provides speed, solidity and fair cost to a market that is rapidly in need of housing. Additionally, Onduhome has a developer training program, which allows it to address the affordable housing issue while simultaneously creating job opportunities. “In the long term, we hope to give the greatest number of Africans the possibility of integrating ecological and economic housing,” Charles Arno Ekoume, regional manager of Onduhome's sub-Saharan Africa Branch, said.

Also spurring the return home for leaders is the emergence of organizations such as MoveMeBack, a members-only community that connects overseas leaders to high potential opportunities on the African continent. Since launching in 2014, the company has grown to over 10,000 members and has established international partnerships with Harvard, Columbia, Cambridge and Oxford. Other similar organization also support African talent returning, including Talent2Africa and MBTN Global.

## How returning talent benefits companies

One of the major benefits an African who has studied or worked outside of the continent brings with him or her is a broader, global network that the company can tap into. “We need locals with global reach,” said Sangu Delle, Managing Director of Africa Health Holdings. “We need to be able to bring in best practices, business processes, global standards.”

This more globalized worldview is also helpful to the start-up companies which often struggle to finance projects in Africa. The stability and structure that these returning leaders can instill in their organizations can help attract and reassure investors. “Business is local, so the locals should be better placed to execute the business,” one entrepreneur in attendance at an Egon Zehnder Africa Leadership Dinner said.

Additionally, African companies are actively seeking African talent because they have a mutual devotion to the continent. One Ugandan entrepreneur we spoke with noted that he looks for an aspiration to work in Africa as a top quality in an employee. “I always choose heart over head. You can train skills, but you can’t teach loyalty,” he explained. “I go with people committed to the country, the business.”

French companies with a significant presence in Africa are also seeing the benefit of hiring African talent in Africa. At Orange S.A., a French multinational telecommunications company, 71 percent of Orange’s leadership roles in Africa are held by leaders of African origin. Additionally, 43 percent of newly named leaders in Africa (less than 3 years on the job) are of African origin. Executives of African origin gained 20% more presence on the country manager level since last leadership change.

## Challenges for returning talent

One of the biggest challenges for Africans returning home is that culture is often a stumbling block. After years of studying and working abroad, Africans can find it difficult to re-integrate to their native country. Locals sometimes consider them to be foreigners or they expect African expatriates to be more aligned with their home culture and are surprised when the expats behave differently.

“Locals sometimes treat you like a stranger,” explained Khaled Igue, president of Club 2030 Afrique, a think tank devoted to helping Africa achieve its full economic and social potential. “There is a sense of competition between those who stayed on the continent and those who come back.”



Another challenge is that the talent that returns may not be a match for the current jobs that are available. While the continent is poised for growth and opportunity if a digital revolution does occur, in the interim, it may be difficult to find the right opportunity considering the population growth. According to a McKinsey report, Africa will create 54 million new, stable wage-paying jobs over the next decade—but it won't be enough to absorb the 122 million new entrants into the labor force expected over the same period.

There is also often a tension between the traditional hierarchical systems of companies and the need for companies to be more agile to grow, which can be difficult for returning talent to navigate. “The people who come back and want to build, take risk and have more ownership of their future tend to face a conservative ecosystem, averse to risk taking and unconventional thinking,” Ndiaye notes. “This can be a challenge to the transition between a highly organized, highly hierarchical system and corporate culture in France and organizations and ecosystems that resemble start-ups in their maturity but tend to want to function like large organizations.”

One African executive cautioned companies that they must present the challenges of the environment along with the vision of change. “It's important not to romanticize Africa. Otherwise talent from the diaspora will come back and run back as quickly,” noted Delle.

## How Africa and France can build stronger ties through talent

As Africa may begin to lure more employees to return home, what will be the impact on France? The short answer is, it is too soon to tell. But a longer-term goal would be for Africa and France to have a more open talent-sharing pipeline. Several organizations have made strengthening those bonds a key priority. One such group is the French-African Foundation, which believes “the young people of Africa and France belong to a single generation and that they bear shared responsibilities in a world in common.” To that end, the foundation created a young leaders program in 2017 which annually convenes a group of high potential women and men under 40 to work together to deconstruct prejudices, raise awareness of common goals, create a community of leaders in Africa and France and share ideas. Those selected must demonstrate “the talent, passion and common values that can contribute to a profound change in Africa and France.”

One of the 2019 leaders selected for the program shared her vision of success for the foundation. “My great hope is that an executive in Zambia who is running a small bank is viewed in the world the same as an executive in France who is running a small bank,” she explained. “To see people be perceived, treated, valued and compensated in the same way whether you work in Africa or in Europe. The problems you are solving are different but they are both equally challenging.”

A shared talent pipeline would require some significant changes in both French and African companies to be successful. Ndiaye points to a digital solution where the interconnection between the nations would allow for collaboration across continents. This would allow for lower costs to France, offer opportunities for paid skill transfer by workers in France, training and new career opportunities for Africans. “I must emphasize that this comes with two requisites, a wealth redistribution mechanism of gains by private or public initiatives functioning this way—especially to those whose jobs would be threatened—and a focus on long-term excellence rather than short term, he added.”

As with any type of transformation, its success hinges on human engagement and commitment to implementing and committing to changing practices. But the benefits for both Africa and France would create sustainable value for employees and companies. “The future between Africa and France is very, very delicate, Ekoume said. “But the benefits are diverse: exchange of expertise and transfer of different technologies; optimize offers in the research and transfer of innovative techniques.”

Given these benefits, the time has come for companies to see the true value of African talent—both in local economies and in the world at large. There is much to be learned from their experiences and different world views that can unlock new ways of creating value for companies.



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