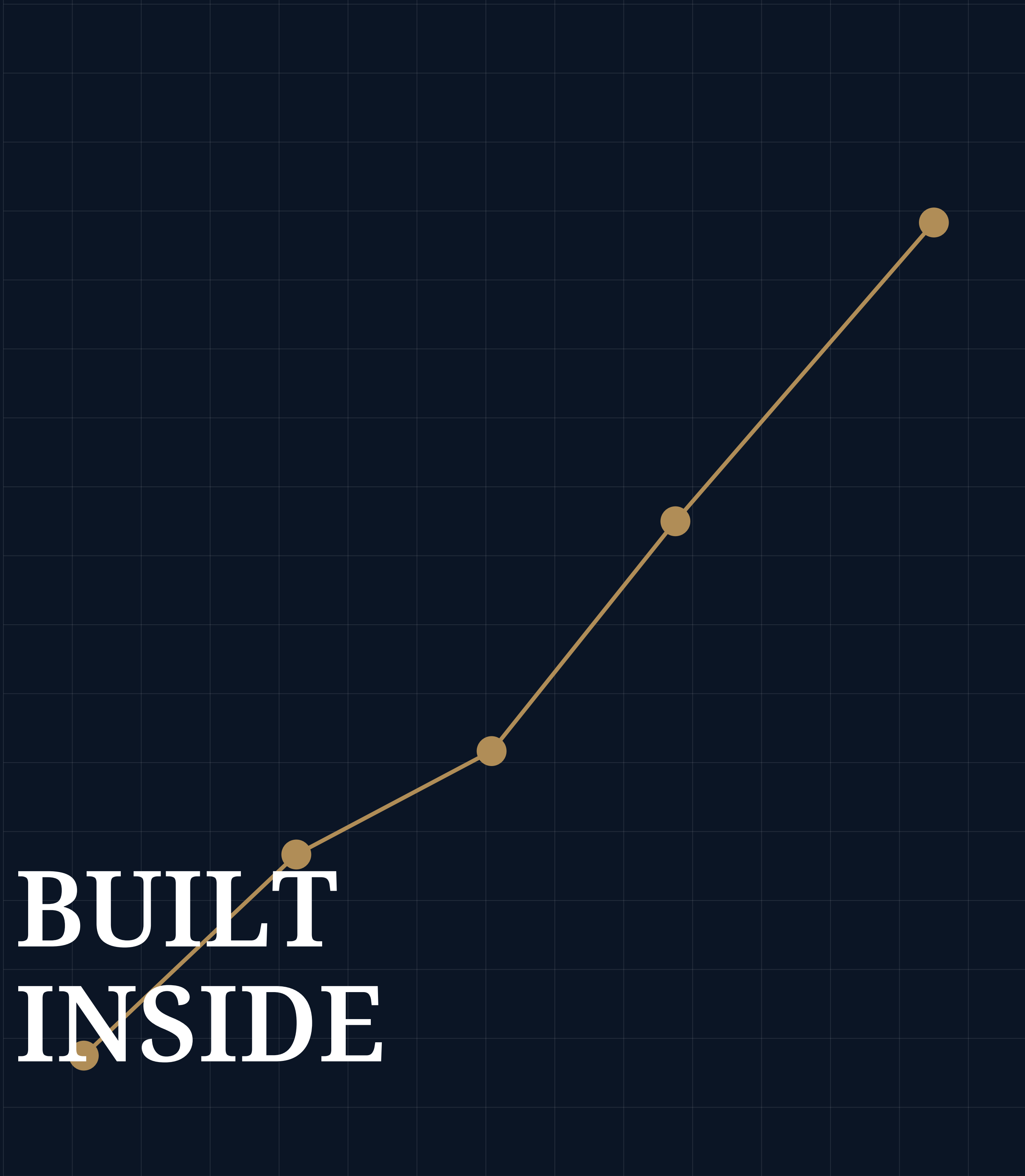
ISSUE 01 · OPENING ESSAY

ESSAYS ON INNOVATION, LEADERSHIP AND INSTITUTION BUILDING



BUILT INSIDE

Why Great Enterprises Build Great Technologies - But Rarely Build Great Technology Companies

OLAYINKA ONI

BUILT INSIDE

Essays on Innovation, Leadership and Institution Building

Built Inside is a continuing series of essays about the ideas, institutions and leadership choices shaping Africa's digital future - and the lessons that travel far beyond the continent.

It begins from a simple conviction: some of the most consequential innovations of the next decade will not originate in startups alone. They will emerge from capabilities already being built inside established institutions.

The series explores what leaders must do when technology, talent and organisational knowledge become strategic assets capable of creating value beyond the boundaries of the organisation that first assembled them.

OPENING PROVOCATION

Perhaps the world's most valuable startups are not waiting to be founded. They are already hidden inside our largest institutions.

IN THIS ISSUE

OPENING ESSAY

The question that changed my thinking

For much of my career, I believed innovation was primarily a technology challenge. Like many technology leaders, I spent years focused on architecture, engineering, platforms, infrastructure and digital transformation. Success was measured by systems delivered, capabilities built and programmes completed.

Yet the longer I worked across large organisations, the more I found myself wrestling with a different question: Why do so many established enterprises successfully build innovative technologies, but so rarely create enduring technology businesses from them?

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Organisations are designed to protect success

Every enduring institution is shaped by the discipline required to survive. Boards seek stability. Executives manage risk. Governance protects trust. Financial controls encourage accountability. Operational processes reward predictability.

These are strengths. Without them, organisations would struggle to scale, maintain public confidence or create long-term value.

Yet innovation operates according to a different logic. It requires experimentation before certainty, learning before optimisation, investment before proof and adaptability before standardisation.

The tension between these two realities creates one of leadership's greatest paradoxes: the capabilities that enable organisations to succeed today often make it harder to create tomorrow's opportunities.

PROTECT TODAY

- stability
- predictability
- control
- efficiency

CREATE TOMORROW

- experimentation
- uncertainty
- learning
- adaptation

We have become better at building technology than businesses

Over the past two decades, building enterprise technology has become dramatically easier. Cloud computing has lowered infrastructure barriers. Open-source software has accelerated development. Artificial intelligence is reshaping engineering productivity. Global talent has become increasingly accessible.

Technology itself is no longer the primary constraint. Yet commercialising enterprise innovation remains remarkably uncommon.

The question therefore shifts. Perhaps the scarcity is no longer technological. Perhaps the scarcity is organisational.

BUILD TECHNOLOGY	BUILD A BUSINESS
Architecture	Market
Engineering	Distribution
Delivery	Economics
Reliability	Governance

One creates capability. The other creates markets.

When capability becomes something more

One experience that informed my research at McGill University involved the evolution of a cloud-native core banking capability developed through institutional co-creation in Nigeria. The initial purpose was practical: respond to the constraints of legacy architecture, reduce dependency on externally controlled technology roadmaps and create greater freedom to innovate.

As the IP matured, however, the strategic question changed. It was no longer simply whether the technology worked. The more important question became whether a capability created for one institutional context could generate value across a much broader market.

That shift is subtle but profound. It marks the moment when leaders must stop evaluating an innovation only as an internal asset and begin asking what organisational form will best allow the capability to fulfil its potential.

The lesson was not about one bank, one platform or one venture. It was about a recurring leadership problem: what do you do when something built inside becomes larger than the problem it was created to solve?

1. **Internal constraint**

   A real operating problem creates urgency.

2. **Co-created IP**

   Technology becomes a differentiated capability.

3. **Wider relevance**

   The solution begins to make sense beyond one institution.

4. **Strategic choice**

   Governance must catch up with what the capability has become.

The capability changes. The governance often does not.

Every significant institution develops capabilities that extend beyond their original purpose. Most remain invisible. Some become strategically important. A very small number begin demonstrating value far beyond the organisation that first developed them.

This is the moment leaders often fail to recognise. Organisations continue managing these capabilities as internal assets because that is how they originated. Yet maturity changes their nature.

What began as an internal solution may now possess the characteristics of an industry platform. What solved one organisation's challenge may now solve many others'. The capability has changed. The governance has not.

THE CAPABILITY ESCAPE FRAMEWORK™

Five stages from internal necessity to ecosystem impact

01 SOLVE

Internal Problem

A real organisational challenge creates urgency and a reason to build.

02 BUILD

Strategic Capability

Repeated use turns a solution into reliable, differentiated institutional knowledge.

03 ESCAPE

Market Relevance

The capability demonstrates utility beyond the setting in which it originated.

04 RECONFIGURE

Governance for Scale

Leadership reshapes partnerships, investment or operating structure for broader use.

05 AMPLIFY

Ecosystem Impact

The capability contributes value across organisations, industries or national systems.

THE FRAMEWORK DOES NOT PRESCRIBE ONE OUTCOME

- RETAIN
- PARTNER
- LICENSE
- SHARED PLATFORM
- INDEPENDENT VENTURE

Leadership is not only about building

Leadership is often described as an act of creation. We celebrate leaders who build organisations, products, teams, cultures and capabilities.

Increasingly, I believe leadership also requires something more difficult: knowing when not to hold too tightly to what has been built.

Sometimes the highest expression of stewardship is creating the conditions for a capability to fulfil a purpose larger than the institution that first imagined it. That may require new governance, new investment models, new partnerships or a new operating structure.

The decision itself - not the technology - can become the real innovation.

> *Sometimes the highest expression of stewardship is creating the conditions for a capability to fulfil a purpose larger than the institution that first imagined it.*

QUESTIONS FOR BOARDS

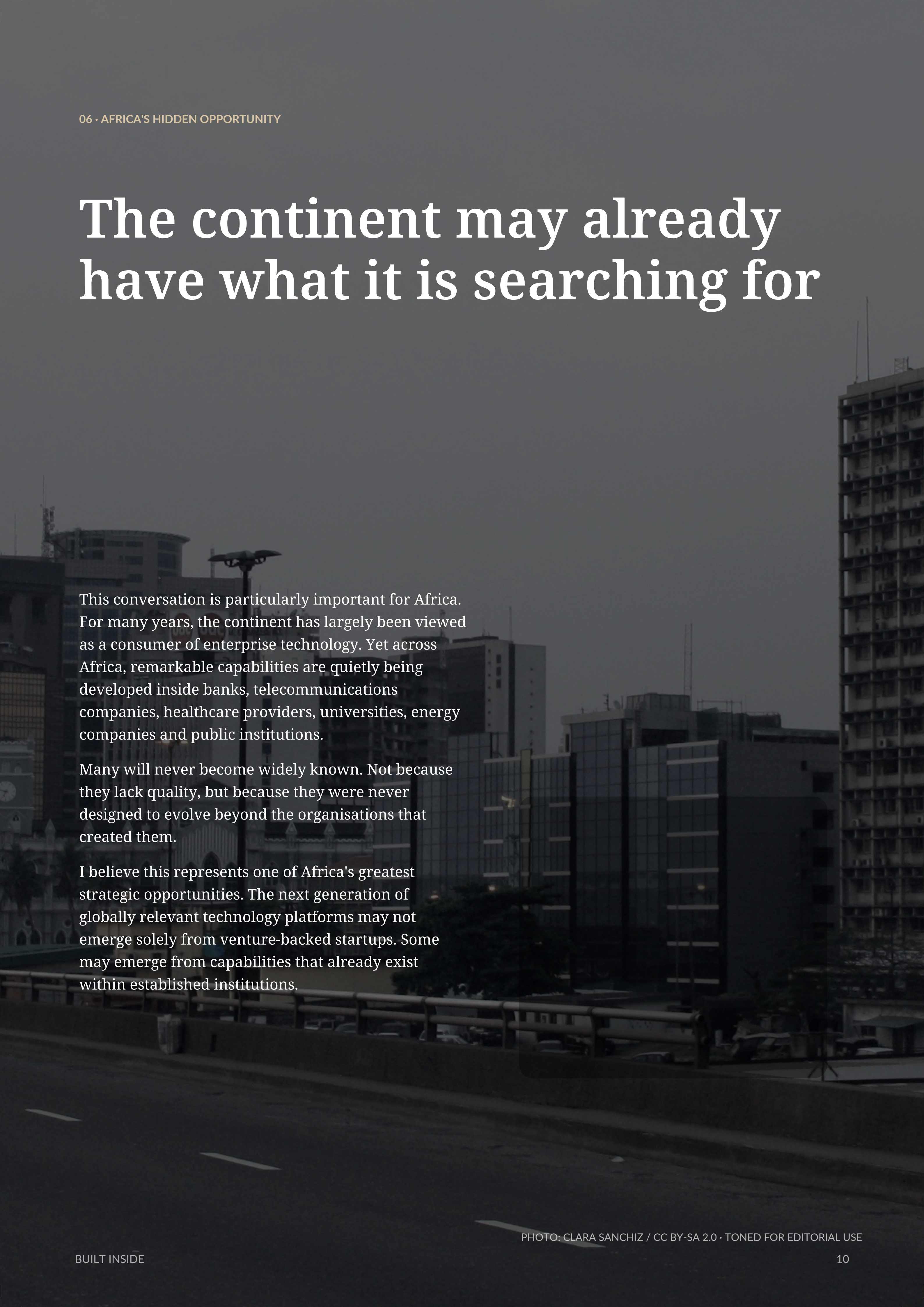
1. Has this capability solved only our problem - or a market problem?
2. Is our current governance enabling scale or constraining it?
3. Which risks genuinely require control, and which merely reflect institutional habit?
4. What would we do differently if we viewed this as strategic IP rather than an internal project?

The continent may already have what it is searching for

This conversation is particularly important for Africa. For many years, the continent has largely been viewed as a consumer of enterprise technology. Yet across Africa, remarkable capabilities are quietly being developed inside banks, telecommunications companies, healthcare providers, universities, energy companies and public institutions.

Many will never become widely known. Not because they lack quality, but because they were never designed to evolve beyond the organisations that created them.

I believe this represents one of Africa's greatest strategic opportunities. The next generation of globally relevant technology platforms may not emerge solely from venture-backed startups. Some may emerge from capabilities that already exist within established institutions.



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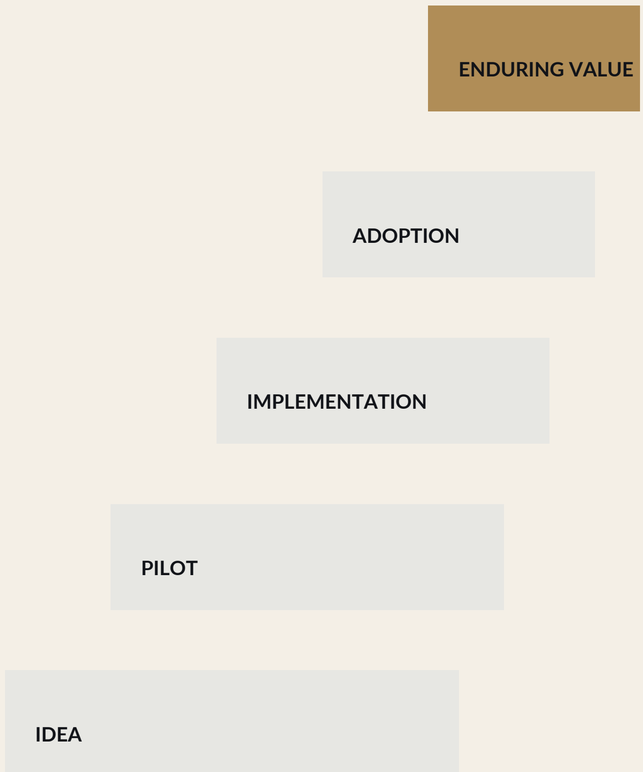
Implementation is not the finish line

Innovation is often measured by patents, product launches, transformation programmes or research investment. Those metrics are useful, but they are incomplete.

A more meaningful measure may be the extent to which an idea creates sustained value beyond the environment in which it was conceived.

By that definition, innovation is not complete when technology is implemented. It is complete when capability becomes enduring value.

Sometimes that value remains inside the organisation. Sometimes it transforms an industry. Occasionally, it contributes to a nation's digital future.



CLOSING REFLECTION

What if the next great company has already been built?

The organisations that define the coming decades will not necessarily be those with the largest technology budgets or the most ambitious transformation programmes.

They will be those that recognise when an internally developed capability has become something larger than the problem it was originally intended to solve.

Some of the world's most significant technology companies have yet to be created. I suspect many of them already exist - not as startups seeking an idea, but as extraordinary capabilities quietly built inside remarkable institutions, waiting for leaders with the vision to recognise what they have truly become.

Perhaps the real work of innovation is not only to build. It is to know when what has been built is ready to travel further than its creators originally imagined.

EXECUTIVE TAKEAWAY

Five ideas worth carrying forward

01

Technology is rarely the only constraint.

If execution succeeds but commercial impact stalls, inspect the institutional architecture around the innovation.

02

A capability can outgrow its original mandate.

Maturity may change what an internal solution actually is; governance needs to be capable of changing with it.

03

Separation is not the only path.

Retention, licensing, partnership, shared platforms and independent structures are all legitimate - if consciously chosen.

04

Stewardship can require release.

Leadership is not weakened by enabling an asset to create value beyond the walls in which it originated.

05

Africa should search inside as well as outside.

The continent may already possess valuable enterprise IP embedded in institutions that have never thought of themselves as technology producers.

The next generation of globally significant technology companies may already exist - quietly built inside remarkable institutions, waiting for leaders with the vision to recognise what they have truly become.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Olayinka Oni is Group Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer of Sterling Financial Holdings Company Plc. His career spans consulting, global technology and banking leadership, including senior technology roles at Microsoft, Wema Bank and Sterling. His work focuses on technology strategy, operational resilience, enterprise innovation and institution building.

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