

The digital divide will cease to exist.

The global economy is made up of information haves and “have nots” – those with, and those without, immediate access to knowledge, skills or technology. The trend today is that those with more money have access to the Internet and technology capabilities and the working class and poor can't afford this access. As our jobs, entertainment, retail and healthcare move online, millions are at risk of being left behind.

There is a new paradigm shift occurring within the mobile industry. The price of mobile devices is coming down and access to these devices is more prominent. Today, half the world's population uses a mobile a phone and more than a quarter of the population utilizes the Internet.

Mobile technology is how the digital divide is being bridged. Just five years ago, phones were seen as voice devices, not data or information devices with applications as they are today. Those who have quick access to these tools are poised to be more self-sustaining and successful economically.

Spurring investments in communications and information technology infrastructure can not only provide a short-term boost to world and regional economies, but also lay the groundwork for long-term economic growth and significant improvement in overall quality of life. In the U.S. for example, a broadband stimulus package that supports \$10 billion of investment in one year in broadband networks will support an estimated 498,000 new U.S. jobs for a year.

In the short term, digital stimulus investments will expand broadband Internet access in rural areas and create immediate jobs in construction. In the long term, IBM supports the theory that investment in broadband networks, including the technologies and services that support them, will lead to the creation and expansion of new industries, effectively driving net new economic growth.

But the digital divide will slowly erode across continents as well. Currently, mobile phones represent more than 90% of all telephone lines in Africa. For many African nations where large numbers of the population live in rural areas, mobile phones can serve as a tool for bringing education, health, information and other services close to home. In addition, applications designed specifically for the needs of these countries, such as applications to help manage chronic diseases and other health issues, are emerging as mobility spreads further around the continent.

In developing nations, significant improvements in national and international fiber infrastructure and the emergence of wireless broadband in recent years are now bringing the Internet to a wider parts of the world's populations, and this is opening the way to advanced online applications and services and a convergence of telecommunications with digital media.

One most also consider the future of the mobile phone. One day, it will serve as your pocket GPS, a wallet, a portable hard drive, a camera, an entertainment center, a phone book, personal shopping consultant. It will have evolved completely into a personal concierge as well as conduct business transactions for you.

Because of this reliance on mobile phones, we will see a drastic change in the world. As

emerging economies move online at earth-shattering rates, and mobile phone adoption continues to rise, in five years there will be no digital divide.. Increasingly, the world will turn to mobile for all needs – governments will communicate with the public, health workers will be able to make diagnoses remotely, office workers will conduct virtual business meetings, and consumers will make payments and conduct shopping from their mobile phones. By bridging the digital divide, we will have enabled new solutions and business models such as microfinance and mobile banking and differences between cultures and economies will disappear as we're working together in a smarter, more connected planet.

IBM is working in partnership with clients, businesses and communities to expand mobile phone services around the globe. Over the past two years, IBM has been engaged in a major program of geographic expansion across the continent, announcing a number of strategic office openings and customer engagements, placing it in an excellent position to leverage the explosion of growth in this market. Last fall, India's Bharti Group and IBM announced that IBM will work with Bharti to integrate and run IT operations for mobile phone services in 16 African countries, including operations in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania and Ghana. Among other things, it likely will hasten the spread of affordable mobile phone services to millions of people who today can't easily make or receive a phone call.

Last year, IBM was selected to increase broadband services for Australia – a vast and geographically complicated and diverse continent. By tapping into IBM's broad range of technology and business solutions for communications service providers – software, hardware and services across analytics and business intelligence, service delivery, and asset management - the National Broadband Network is poised to reach its goal to connect 93 percent of all Australian premises with high-speed, fiber-based communications services by 2018, and wireless and satellite to the remaining 7 percent.

IBM is working hand-in-hand with the world's providers to close the gap and bridge the divide that currently exists between the haves and have-nots.