

Beyond the Chatbot: Why Agentic AI Is the New Growth Engine for African SMEs

In our previous articles, we explored two foundational pillars for the success of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Africa, namely, innovation for growth and competitiveness, and financial access. We argued that innovation is not only about new products, but about process and organizational change. We also identified that the credit gap for African SMEs is a primary barrier to scaling.

As we enter 2026, a new technological frontier has emerged that directly connects these two themes: Agentic AI. Where earlier discussions focused on what SMEs need, Agentic AI increasingly provides how those needs can be met.

From Assistance to Autonomy

For many SME owners, AI adoption has so far meant using tools like ChatGPT to draft emails or social media posts, a form of generative assistance that still requires constant human direction.

Agentic AI represents a structural shift. It refers to autonomous systems that can reason, plan, and execute multi-step workflows with minimal supervision. For African SMEs, this is not simply a more advanced chatbot; it is a digital business partner capable of continuous analysis and action.

1. Driving Competitiveness Through Autonomous Business Analysis

In our earlier work, we emphasized that process innovation underpins competitiveness. Agentic AI extends this logic by automating the analysis of business performance itself.

Real-world application: Consider the operations of a retail SME. Instead of manually reviewing spreadsheets, an AI agent can autonomously monitor inventory, correlate it with seasonal demand patterns, and proactively draft purchase orders or recommend pricing adjustments for slow-moving stock, all pending human approval.

2. Solving the Financial Access Puzzle

Our second article highlighted how information asymmetry limits SME lending. Banks often lack timely, verifiable data to assess creditworthiness.

The agentic solution: AI agents can now operate as autonomous financial analysts, securely aggregating mobile money flows, transaction histories, supply-chain data, and even digital reputation signals to generate real-time risk and trust profiles.

Case reference: Evidence emerging from fintech innovators within the SME Finance Forum network, the global platform established by the G20 and managed by the IFC (World Bank Group), shows a clear pattern that AI-driven underwriting is collapsing loan decision timelines. By automating document verification, analyzing alternative data, and generating

real-time risk scores, these systems are shifting lenders from slow, manual reviews to near-instant credit decisions.

3. Localization as a Competitive Advantage

A defining strength of Agentic AI is its ability to operate within local linguistic and commercial contexts. Platforms such as CDIAL AI in Nigeria are deploying agents fluent in languages like Yoruba and Hausa.

In practice, this allows an AI agent to interpret a voice note from a rural supplier, convert it into a structured invoice, and update accounting systems automatically, directly addressing the informal-formal divide that constrains SME growth.

The Chiton Perspective

Innovation and financial access remain fundamental to SME growth. Agentic AI is strengthening them by embedding intelligence directly into day-to-day operations and decision-making. When technology evolves from a passive tool into an active business partner, SMEs gain the analytical depth, operational discipline, and data credibility required to innovate continuously and unlock sustainable access to capital.

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