Mobile technology for Africa

By Ray Maota   18 Apr 2011

The University of Cape Town (UCT) and electronics giant Samsung have teamed up to develop unique mobile phone applications that will satisfy the needs of people living in Africa. The technology will be built in a multimillion-rand facility called the UCT Samsung Mobile Innovation Laboratory (SMILe).

The lab was established because Africa, and South Africa in particular, has unique challenges and opportunities regarding the innovation of mobile applications. Mobile applications come in the form of software that can be pre-installed or downloaded by various types of handheld devices like personal digital assistants, smart phones or mobile phones.

Prof Jean-Paul van Belle, head of information systems at UCT, came up with the idea to develop the project.

Van Belle said: "This initiative will bring together academics, practitioners and researchers to pursue innovative and meaningful research and to develop leading-edge products and applications that will be relevant to Africans in improving quality of life and providing novel solutions to uniquely African needs."

'Built in Africa, for Africa, by Africa'

The project, which will run for three years, is the first of its kind for Samsung. It has recognised the potential to develop applications especially suited to people living on continent considering its unprecedented growth of mobile phone users.

Other partners in the initiative are UCT's computer science department and Bandwidth Barn, an IT company.

Brett Loubser, product manager at Samsung South Africa, said: "We chose to partner with UCT for this exciting venture as certainly there is a clear alignment with not only corporate social responsibility programmes, but also with our visionary pillar of developing technology that is built in Africa, for Africa, by Africa."

Prof Gary Marsden, of UCT's computer science department, said: "SMILe has been established due to the awareness that the African continent in general and South Africa in particular, poses unique challenges, constraints and opportunities in respect of innovative mobile applications.

"There is a need for a creative application development space where innovative ideas responding to these unique opportunities can be explored."

Senior students at UCT's computer science and information systems departments will develop between 10 and 20

prototypes of these applications yearly, and those showing promise will be commercialised by Bandwidth Barn.

Van Belle added: "We are very excited at the opportunity to showcase the great innovative talent of our students. The department of information systems at UCT is recognised internationally as an ideal environment for nurturing the innovation professionals of the future and we are delighted that Samsung has selected our campus as its first research partner in Africa."

UCT an innovative hub

UCT and Van Belle never seem to disappoint when it comes to seeing innovative ideas turned into effective products. Earlier in 2011 UCT's faculty of commerce and Van Belle were awarded the international IBM Faculty Award for their development of a cost-effective and simple system that enables African organisations to add an e-commerce component to their operations.

The project, which was funded by NGO ConnectAfrica, led to Van Belle winning prize money of US$21 500 (R162 000).

The information and communication technology toolkit will be available on CD, DVD and online for free, and will help businesses implement their strategy after making self-assessment tests.

The continuing development of mobile technology for African needs will be discussed at Apps World Africa 2011, taking place in the Western Cape from 1 to 2 June at the Cape Town Convention Centre.

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