

COSY programme aims to boost entrepreneurship, foster innovation

Growth of the entrepreneurial sector is key to addressing South Africa's unemployment crisis, especially amongst the youth. Young people, however, face many barriers to success. Amongst these is a dire lack of digital literacy and access to internet and data.



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The British Council's Creating Opportunity for South Africa's Youth (COSY) project partnered with Digify Africa to impart digital skills to young people, particularly young women, in rural and peri-urban areas in South Africa, as part of its broader entrepreneurship programme.

Other partners such as LIFECo and Business Arts South Africa also partnered with COSY to deliver core skills to enhance young peoples' entrepreneurial knowledge and boost their employability.

Gavin Weale, founder of Digify Africa, says a big focus for Digify Africa – and the reason why it wanted to be part of COSY programme – is to bridge the digital divide in South Africa. “Although there is a lot of excitement around the digital economy and the opportunities it creates, the big risk is that we end up concentrating on improving the lives of people who are already digitally connected.

“This means people who are not connected to the internet get left behind, resulting in a widening of the digital divide as opposed to it becoming a democratising influence and opening up opportunities for everyone. It magnifies the inequality that already exists.”

Weale believes that a massive percentage of South Africans are not digitally literate. “I would estimate that almost 80% of the population is not digitally literate. By this I mean they do not know how to use digital resources as a tool to unlocking economic potential for themselves.



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“South Africa’s lack of digital literacy goes hand in hand with its education and literacy challenges. In the broadest sense, I think it mirrors those challenges, that is, people in poorer communities have less access to resources and often receive a poorer standard of education. Similarly, they have limited access to key aspects of digital such as connectivity, devices and skills,” he adds.

While kids in rural or township schools may have devices such as computers, tablets and cell phones, Weale says they are usually not utilised properly. “This is because there may be no connectivity or limited access to connectivity in the area. If there is access, it may be beyond peoples’ means to afford it.”

He says in the formal education context, the teachers themselves often don’t have the skills to be able to capitalise on technology. “While cell phones may be more prevalent than other devices, they are currently fairly limited in their ability to drive learning and education.

“Frankly, it is difficult to deliver basic skills such as how to use Microsoft products or spreadsheets or even email using only a handset. This means poorer communities may have a more restricted horizon in terms of the platforms and tools they can use.”

However, this is changing and the prospect of being able to deliver education via cell phones is improving.

Digital skills are fundamental

Weale says today digital skills are as important as maths and science. “Digital skills are needed in almost every job, whether it’s a purely digital job or more conventional jobs in every sector from retail and financial, to construction and agriculture. Every enterprise, large or small, is going through some kind of digital transformation, whether it’s a highly sophisticated advertising agency or the local plumber.

“If you have a business, it needs to be searchable on Google. If you understand search engine optimisation, and how to be discoverable on Google and to list your business on Google, or to have a basic Facebook page, you’re going to improve your chances of getting new customers.”

He says the big advantage for entrepreneurs who are digitally savvy is how much they can do for free on the internet. “In addition to finding free ways to market their businesses, there are many inexpensive accounting and finance tools available, such as stock tracking tools for those running a retail or distribution business. We see digital skills and digital platforms as a way for people to run businesses on their cell phones with very low running costs.”

Weale says to improve digital literacy in South Africa, two factors will make the greatest impact. “Firstly, South Africans

need free and available, or cheap, internet access, and secondly there needs to be a complete overhaul of the basic education system, with digital skills included as a core tenet of the curriculum.

“There are many people playing in the connectivity space and there is a weird patchwork of connectivity around the country. I've attended government forums on the subject and it's not that the infrastructure doesn't exist. It does seem to exist. My impression is that with the right sort of effort and coordination, we could have full coverage.

The future of work

Weale says there needs to be a coordinated effort around understanding digital skills and the future of work and skills. “We cannot just focus on basic education. Tertiary education also needs to be fit for purpose. Universities are not keeping up with the level of skills demand. In a way, our organisation wouldn't exist if universities were doing their job.

“People come on our 10-week boot camp and sometimes tell us it is more useful to them than a four-year degree when it comes to getting a job. A lot of disruption is also required in terms of HR departments and corporate hiring practices.

“And then, of course, the nature of work, the gig economy and the expectations of what a job looks like for this generation means there are many different moving parts. Everything is constantly shifting. It's not easy to get a handle on things in this ever-changing environment. That's why an agile mindset is critical,” concludes Weale.

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