

How the software industry can help combat youth unemployment



By Ilse van den Berg

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Gareth Hawkey is the CEO of redPanda Software and his drive as the head of the company is to bridge the disconnect between business and IT and change the landscape of custom software development in South Africa. We chat to him to get some insight on the role the software industry can play in combating youth unemployment in South Africa.

■ ***Celebrating the youth of our country is always inspiring. However, unemployment is soaring under the youth of South Africa. How can the software development industry play a role in combating this?***

The software industry is showing massive growth, and as a result, there is an urgent need for skilled individuals.



Gareth Hawkey

Despite the growth in the industry, this has not been mirrored by the number of software developers coming out of tertiary institutions: software development is still listed as a scarce skill. And, while the jobs are in fact out there, the challenge now is to fill those jobs with candidates in order to maintain and develop the momentum for the growth to continue.

The software industry has a crucial role to play in combatting youth unemployment in South Africa, by unlocking the jewels that exist in our youth. Simply put, we need to encourage our youth into careers in software development and provide the platforms needed to develop the skills for these careers.

■ ***Is there enough support/interest to get more trained coders to meet the massive demand? How can it be improved and who needs to come to the party?***

Currently, there isn't enough support for, or interest in training more software developers. This largely sits on the shoulders of individual businesses who are willing and able to initiate their own in-house training programme.

It is our responsibility to attract talent, something which has not been done well in the past. Software companies should visit schools to host career days and workshops, to showcase the industry and explain why it should be the career of choice. It is up to us to make our field a more attractive option.

At redPanda Software we have an internship and mentorship programme. We work with the Media Information and Communication Technologies Sector Education and Training Authority (MICT SETA), and each year we take on five to ten interns. During their time with us, we run them through an informative and educational mentorship programme that trains them to become valuable and productive citizens in our industry. In essence, we hope that when their internship is complete, they are able to find gainful employment.

Further to this, we are in the process of establishing the redAcademy, a training centre for careers in software development. Aimed at school leavers, the redAcademy will provide comprehensive training in software development, and the candidates will, within six months, be working on live projects within the redPanda Software environment. We feel that apprenticeship-style programmes such as this are necessary to bridge the gap we have between skills and opportunities.

▣ ***Why is the investment in training and mentorship of the youth important to you?***

Cultivating success in our youth is vital to the growth of this wonderful country. It's a cliché, but the youth are our future and it is our responsibility to prepare them to become valuable contributors to the South African economy.

The solution to youth unemployment is skills development, and although this will take time I believe it can be done. It means that we, as businesses, need to stick out our hands and work together to create a successful workforce through training and mentorship.

This investment in skills development is vital, as not doing so will have serious repercussions on our economy. Businesses are reliant on software, and the lack of available skilled people is driving up the cost of software development. This will eventually have the knock-on effect of making all products and services more expensive, which will lead to more unemployment and less investment in the country.

▣ ***What does Youth Month mean to you and your team at redPanda Software?***

Youth Month is a reminder for us to refocus on our mission to create success within South Africa. My passion is about creating success within the touchpoints of my life. Wherever I can affect change, I would like to contribute to the success of the people that I touch.

To be able to reach out to the youth to change their lives, and give them the hope and belief that they can have a successful career in a well-paid industry, means a lot to me. Youth Month refocused not only me personally, but also our management team on pushing forward with our goals of creating a redAcademy, which is a vehicle to cultivate success.

▣ ***The youth of South Africa...***

Cultivating success in our youth is our only hope.

ABOUT ILSE VAN DEN BERG

Ilse is a freelance journalist and editor with a passion for people & their stories (check out Passing Stories). She is also the editor of Go & Travel, a platform connecting all the stakeholders in the travel & tourism industry. You can check out her work [here](#) and [here](#). Contact Ilse through her website [here](#).

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