CONNECTION TO OPPORTUNITY

Hands-**on**
Learning from our implementing partners

Learning Brief 13

Career Planet: Connecting youth to opportunity using mobile technology

Youth unemployment has become one of the most pressing socio-economic problems in South Africa today. Given that unemployment is "associated with social problems such as poverty, crime, violence, a loss of morale, social degradation and political disengagement"[1] connecting youth with opportunities for job creation and enhanced employability/self-employability not only makes economic sense; it is vital for the social stability of the country.

However, "many of the skills needed to improve a worker's employability – punctuality, discipline, the ability to work with others, and so on – are most easily acquired on the job. This is especially important in South Africa. Millions of people are the products of South Africa's dysfunctional education system and have had few opportunities to acquire skills."[2]

In fact, according to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), there are 3 million youth aged 15-24 who are not working and not studying – with current interventions tending only to reach small numbers.[3] Add to this the fact that young work-seekers lack job search capabilities, networks relevant to the labour market, as well as the resources and mobility to look for a job.[4] Our challenge is therefore to create platforms that bypass traditional barriers of cost and accessibility to opportunity so as to equip youth with the skills/

information they need to seek out opportunities or create their own in the context of limited opportunity.

Mobile technology provides an effective and cost-effective platform through which to connect youth with a wide range of opportunities. Worldwide, mobile phone subscriptions among young people now outstrip PC ownership by as much as 123 percent.[5] In South Africa, mobile penetration has grown to over 100%, highlighting the extensive use of multiple SIMs by mobile users in such countries.[6]

To fully harness the power of mobile, however, we need to carefully consider barriers to opportunity access. For example, "a large percentage of the South African youth market access the web from a mobile source, but are hindered by obstacles such as the high cost of data, or a phone which is not powerful enough to handle the mobile content which the advertising agencies are pushing out."[7]

Hyper-localised and complete content is also lacking. "Africa has only one web domain for every 10,000 people, versus a global average of 94 domains for every 10,000 people. In other words, information that is important and valuable to Africans is not yet available online."[8] And much of what does exist is often incomplete, out-of-date or

1   As quoted in the National Treasury's Discussion Paper entitled "Confronting unemployment: policy options for South Africa". February 2011. Available for download at http://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2011/Confronting%20youth%20unemployment%20-%20Policy%20options.pdf

2   "Jobs for Young People: Is Wage Subsidy a Good Idea", CDE Roundtable No. 17, August 2011. Available for download at http://www.cde.org.za/article.php?a_id=401

3   "HSRC focuses on the bigger picture", Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Media Briefs 2010. Retrieved at http://www.hsrc.ac.za/Media_Release-407.phtml

4   Altman, M. "Youth Labour Market Challenges in South Africa". Human Sciences Research Council: 2007

5   Brown, G. "Young people, mobile phones and the rights of adolescents." The State of the World's Children 2011. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), February 2011. Available for download at http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/pdfs/SOWC-2011-Main-Report_EN_02092011.pdf

6   "African Mobile Observatory 2011: Driving Economic and Social Development through Mobile Services". Prepared by GSMA and ATKEARNEY, 2011. Available for download at: http://www.gsmworld.com/our-work/public-policy/mobile_observatory_series.htm

7   "How young South Africans are really using their mobile phones". Vomo.co.za, 17 March 2011. Retrieved at http://www.vomo.co.za/how-young-south-africans-are-really-using-their-mobile-phones/

8   "Africa's ICT sector growing sharply". Moneyweb.com, 02 August 2011. Retrieved at http://www.moneyweb.com/mw/view/mw/en/page292681?oid=318135&sn=2009+Detail&pid=294690

out of reach financially for youth users, who do not always have the means or digital literacy skills to sift through multiple sites, which may in turn result in frustration, or worse, complete abandonment of the opportunity-seeking process.

Our Strategy to get young people connected

Innovative technology:

To complement and extend Career Planet's existing career development services to a larger audience in a more accessible and targeted manner, we are utilising mobile technology to:

- Provide young people with cost-effective ways to locate relevant, detailed and up-to-date employment, educational and self-development opportunities - in their areas.
- Allow employers and service providers to effectively promote their opportunities and other useful information, such as Open Days or new courses, to young people through opportunity-matching technology and features such as an events calendar, splash screens, etc.
- Provide a CV creation tool to assist youth users to market themselves to prospective employers, recruiters or admission staff.
- Offer mobile career counselling for individual study- and career-related concerns.
- Provide career profile information and interactive quizzes designed by career counsellors and psychologists so users can make informed choices about career paths/

qualifications to pursue.

- Provide self-employment resources, contacts and a searchable directory for start-ups, entrepreneurs and SMMEs to list their businesses and own job creation opportunities.
- To reach scale and be accessible to as many users as possible. Users will be given the choice to access these services via USSD (very basic access to job opportunities), a mobi-site (with full functionality on both smart- and feature phones), and online via personal, home or school computers (through potential partnerships with libraries and initiatives such as Streetwise computer terminals).

Content with a difference:

Delivery mechanisms (technology) can mean nothing without content. In fact, even the most efficient technology delivery methods can fall flat without the same amount of effort being put into the content to be delivered by that technology.[9]

To inform our content generation methodologies we conducted formative research, collecting information from both Opportunity Providers (OP's) and Opportunity Seekers (OS's). Our research findings informed the development of a number of key strategies:

We have adopted a multi-pronged approach to sourcing content, not just in terms of general training and job openings, but also career and training-related resources such as basic skills development tips, articles and advice in the context of an ongoing lack of formalised (and relevant) career guidance and support. We know that at the tertiary level, a major contributor to high rates of failure and drop-out has been the lack of information and guidance about enrolment and course requirements[10]. We are therefore working with career development experts to develop and share content on such themes as CV skills, artisan career options, further study and training options without a Matric, etc. that are relevant to local users with varying levels/no qualifications.

9 "Content is still king by Paul Parrie". AVtechnologyonline.com, 2010. Retrieved at http://avtechnologyonline.com/blog/50116.aspx

10 "Media statement by Higher Education and Training Minister, Dr Blade Nzimande, on Nelson Mandela Career Guidance campaign". South African Government Information Service, July 2010. Available at http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2010/10070714451001.htm

Learners forming part of our research group revealed great despondency - even boredom - at looking for work/opportunities. We are therefore working to devise motivational messages to encourage users not to become discouraged in their search for matching prospects. Together with ongoing tips and articles, these will ensure users can work on personal development and resilience-building skills in the absence of immediate opportunity-matches. Based on the success of motivational messages used by Cell-life to encourage HIV-testing through SMS, this presents an opportunity to explore if the same approach can encourage action (to apply for jobs, start a business, learn a skill) in a culture of immediate gratification among youth e.g. 'did you follow-up on your job application today? Call the HR department to ensure your application was received'.[11]

We are also taking several measures to ensure that the content provided is complete, well described and easily accessible for OS's. We are not only doing this to prevent discouragement with dead-end opportunities, but also to ensure that OS's can get to the relevant information as quickly as possible, bringing the cost down and making each search worth the money that they are spending on it. One such measure is to ensure that OP's also include information on hidden costs or costs the user simply has not anticipated on paying e.g. registration fees or accommodation exclusions on bursaries that often force young people to abandon their studies, even with funding".[12]

In terms of actual opportunities and job openings, large and small-scale opportunity providers can register their own opportunities for open or closed promotion/matching to corresponding candidates – at no cost. Open opportunities are those that the OP wants to expose to as many people as possible and to which Opportunity Seekers (OS's) can apply directly. Our research has found that there is also a need for closed opportunities, where the OP is looking for a limited number of CVs very specific

in their requirements. In these cases the job-matching process takes place in the background and the OP is presented with a list of CV's for possible candidates that match their search criteria. Candidates are informed by Career Planet that they are on the short list and that they may be contacted by the OP.

A number of older OP's viewed mobi-sites as belonging to youth culture, therefore signalling the need to ensure we promote ways to make the platform user-friendly for this segment of our market. This will be critical for job creation and skills development in smaller communities across SA. As such, a targeted marketing and awareness campaign has been developed to introduce and educate OP's on the benefits of using a mobile platform to connect with young people eligible to take up their opportunities, including a Road Show and promotional/instructional material (posters and brochures) for free use and distribution in local libraries, community halls and churches.

Another critical gap is content relevant to context. As one learner told us during our formative research interviews, his biggest challenge is not problems to access the internet; it's not having an ID book; for another, it is "the subject that (I) am doing" – which points to the need for relevant content, and simple accessibility. Our research confirmed well-established obstacles to youth employment, namely lack of skills and qualifications, financial means (cost of travel for example), networks ("opportunities goes with connection, who do you know that could help you get ahead") and "support" to get a job. It also shed light on other useful dimensions to consider when connecting youth to opportunity in a meaningful way. For example, one young person commented that 'job-hunting is not fun' and another told us: 'I am not qualified for the jobs that I want and the only available ones would be to be a sweeper and that is not me'.

Lastly, our career counselling and referral service (ASK US) allows young people to submit individual questions with a response from trained experts in the absence of other support structures or existing answers on the platform. This invaluable mobile tool is able reach those who would otherwise have no access to a career guidance counsellor,

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11   According to Cell-Life's research on getting people to go test for HIV via text messaging, they found 10 motivational-style SMSs got a statistically significant amount of people to test compared to the control informational messaging.

12   Macgregor, K. "South Africa: student drop-out rates alarming". University World News, 28 October 2007. Retrieved at http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20071025102245380

parents[13] or a PC to email or research answers to their individual questions, such as how to write a Matric without an ID book. The potential of mobile counselling – in terms of scale and engagement – has been demonstrated by such services as RedChatZone, an HIV counselling service that uses Instant Messaging chat via MXit to allow the client to text-chat from their mobile phones with a counsellor who is chatting from a computer connected to the Internet; and Angel, the live mobile drug counselling service made available by Rlabs via MXit (and mobi-site for those not on MXit) that has reached over 170,000 people affected by drugs throughout Southern Africa.

Our progress so far

Formative research
As was mentioned in the previous section, we conducted research with potential users – particularly those in more disadvantaged areas where 'mobile' users of internet predominate, to inform the development of a user-friendly platform for both opportunity seekers and providers. This participatory approach was implemented to ensure the development of a technology that speaks to the real-world concerns, mobile behaviours and current attitudes towards mobile applications among our two core target audiences. We conducted telephonic surveys with a range of opportunity providers in areas characterised by high youth unemployment using a pre-established set of questions. Questionnaires were completed by a total of 133 Opportunity Providers in Ugu (in KwaZulu-Natal), Knysna, Khayelitsha and Philippi (in the Western Cape).

As was illustrated in the previous section, the research has been very useful to inform both our technology development and strategies to generate content. While the research confirms the need for mobile platforms to be as user-friendly, cost-effective and accessible as possible, they will also have to be 'life-friendly' for sustainable buy-in on the part of youth users. All the value-adds, customisation and easy navigation will have to be

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13   As Altman notes in the case of self-employment and developing a culture of entrepreneurship, "the apartheid past dramatically reduced the culture of entrepreneurship, meaning that young Africans are unlikely to have grown up in a household with business people who would have shaped their understanding of market opportunities, and their access to networks and know how."

coupled with content, opportunities and tangible resources, as well as speak to their aspirations while keeping it 'real' to ensure adoption of the platform that is meaningful and caters to the concerns of users in their contexts.

Development of technology
Firstly, a technical specification document was developed to direct the development of the mobile technology supporting our service. Currently development is taking place and we will be launching the beta version of the USSD (an operating protocol) and mobi sites for testing in February 2012, to pinpoint the need for features or functionality not anticipated or recommended in the formative research.

Recruitment of Opportunity Providers
Recruitment of OPs will be an important and ongoing activity of Career Planet. OP's will be invited to post their job, graduate placement, internship, bursary, job shadow and learnership opportunities. So far more than 200 companies have been contacted to secure relevant contacts within these organisations; over 100 bursary providers have been contacted to verify their contact details, application process, bursary inclusion and exclusions, opening and closing dates, etc.; and databases of all public and private higher education institutions and municipalities – particularly their youth development units – is in the process of completion. All potential OP's will receive an introductory pack outlining the benefits of using Career Planet's mobile platform, inviting and assisting them to use the platform.

To further bolster opportunities to ensure supply meets demand, a call to action will be launched to all recruitment agents to motivate their clients to share opportunities/openings on the platform for extended reach and added value. To generate awareness of the brand each month, we will feature a double-page spread in loveLife's youth lifestyle magazine.

Our initial advice to others who would like to reach youth using mobile technology

Plan ahead but build for the present
While mobile penetration is pervasive in South Africa, this does not mean all users experience

mobile equally. The phenomenal growth of smartphones may make it tempting to develop mobile applications solely for these phones, but the mass market feature phone still occupies 73% of the global market share.[14] In South Africa, AMPs' conservative figures place the number of "ordinary mobiles at 35 million, although others place them as high as 44 million cell phones in the country." We need to "remind ourselves that we should also be developing services for the vast majority of Africans who are still using feature phones".[15] We therefore need to ensure our mobile platforms/ interventions are forward-looking without sacrificing their functionality in the present on lower-end phones. This has important implications for the user interface design of a mobile platform for youth still using these devices – and who are accustomed to using applications on a daily basis that have become user-friendly or even intuitive for them (e.g. MXit).[16]

Usability testing is key, especially in the absence of concrete feature and functionality input at the initial stages of research and development for the intended end user. In investigating mobile literacy among South African teens, Walton and Marion[17] found that only those who mastered the "tricky registration" of their test mobi-site went on to use other features of the site, highlighting the need to get the registration process right for all parties. Issues that interfered with the usability of their mobi-site included agreeing to terms of service, needing to click a URL to send a confirmation SMS to return to the site – and that users were more accustomed to completing registration processes online (at schools or libraries and on such social networking sites as Facebook) rather than on mobile phones. They also found many users did not realise registration was a prerequisite for logging in, and after several attempts abandoned the process completely, which again highlights the importance of testing. Interaction with a

working prototype therefore helps to yield areas for fine-tuning by the developers not previously identified or anticipated, including possible choice of language/words that may present problems among diverse users and among those with lower levels of digital literacy e.g. sign-up versus register or log-in versus enter.

Consider mobile attitude and behaviours, not just mobile technologies

Users appropriate features and functionality to fit in with their lifestyles, already formed mobile habits and daily needs, thus implementers must take heed of these in the development of their platforms. In the case of Career Planet we need to deliver complete and accurate details about available opportunities, balanced with the very real space constraints of mobile and time constraints of the user. Studies in Central Asia have found that in developing contexts citizens rely heavily on their social networks of inter-personal communication for information."[18] Career Planet and similar implementers can therefore take advantage of the networking functionality which their users are accustomed to, to share information and to make their platforms more user-friendly.

Given that none of the smaller scale OP's in our formative research sample had used mobile before to promote opportunities– and a large number saw cellphones to be a youth artefact – it illustrates the need to provide supporting mechanisms that do not assume shared levels of digital literacy and use.

Mobile as an enabling technology – not a panacea

While mobile is ideally placed to foster interventions that are targeted and scalable; it does not preclude the need for interventions on the ground and development of supporting platforms/ interventions. In fact, the reach and culture of mobile communication has established a sense of immediacy and need for instant feedback, placing greater pressure on implementers to provide quick, reliable content. With an effective delivery mechanism via mobile, we still need to develop real and relatable content to engage youth within

14   Vision Mobile. November 2011. Retrieved at http://mybroadband.co.za/news/gadgets/38101-smartphone-usage-stats-sa-versus-the-world.html

15   "How young South Africans are really using their mobile phones". Vomo.co.za, 17 March 2011. Retrieved at http://www.vomo.co.za/how-young-south-africans-are-really-using-their-mobile-phones/

16   Shuttleworth Foundation by Marion Walton, December 2009, Full report available for download at http://m4lit.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/m4lit_mobile_literacies_mwalton_20101.pdf

17   Walton, Marion (2009). "Mobile Literacies & South African Teens: Leisure reading, writing, and MXit chatting for teens in Langa and Guguletu".

18   Walton, Marion (2009). "Mobile Literacies & South African Teens: Leisure reading, writing, and MXit chatting for teens in Langa and Guguletu".

the constraints of limited character counts and screen sizes on their phones, demanding flexibility and creativity on the part of the implementer.

We also need to ensure that we understand the context in which new technologies are introduced. For example, when we presented the Career Planet concept to resource-constrained, rural-based or small scale opportunity providers (such as NGOs and churches), we were surprised at their lack of understanding of the term 'mobi site' and reminded that while penetration is high, there is not a universal or 'shared vocabulary', which requires innovative ways of getting audiences to make the technologies their own.

This learning brief tells of the hands-on experience of:

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