PhD graduate's research lands job with Google

A University of Cape Town (UCT) PhD graduate is changing the lives of unemployed skilled workers through a ground-breaking technology solution that has also secured her a job with Google in Africa.

Shikoh Gitau has devised a simple, yet revolutionary approach to using mobile technology to connect skilled workers with prospective employers. Gitau, who hails from Nakuru, Kenya, graduated from UCT earlier this month.

The system, called Ummeli, now has 150,000 users, with the initial impact evaluation indicating that approximately 18% have found jobs and another 10% have secured interviews. The relatively inexpensive application, which matches unemployed workers with employers in urgent need of their skills, has enormous implications for the labour force in regions where unemployment is high. Ummeli has been rolled out in South Africa and will hopefully be made available in other African countries.

Making a difference

Gitau devised the technology solution in collaboration with staff at UCT's Information and Communication Technologies for Development Centre (ICT4D). "I had experienced and seen so much poverty, and I knew deep inside me that I wanted to something about it. I looked at various institutions for a graduate programme that would offer me both the social and the technology angles," she says.

Gitau has since been appointed to Google's User Experience Group in Africa. "Although I was initially hired for a position based in London, and then Zurich, I requested to be sent back home because I believe this is where I could have the most impact," she says. Based in Nairobi, Kenya, her role is to explore the ICT needs of different groups throughout Africa and emerging markets, and design appropriate systems so that Google can meet those needs. The Praekelt Foundation, established by South African IT millionaire Gustav Praekelt, has also learned about the new software and is in the process up-scaling the system to make it available countrywide, free of charge.

Gitau's innovative way of using mobile technology to benefit the continent is just one example of the work done by the ICT4 Centre, launched by the UCT Department of Computer Science in 2009. The centre's staff and students are dedicated to finding suitable mobile solutions that meet the societal needs of people living in Africa. They work closely with communities create and evaluate technology that is best suited to local conditions. The centre has already produced an impressive portfolio of mobile apps and other innovations that provide solutions to health, education and labour sector issues.

For more information on Ummeli, go to www.ummeli.com.