

Symphony of tech voices singing the same tune at third U-Start Africa conference

 By Leigh Andrews

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Cutting through governmental red tape, improving Wi-Fi access and what it takes for start-ups to succeed were all hot topics at this year's U-Start Africa conference.

The third U-Start Africa conference, held at Cape Town's city hall on 28 November, a beautiful venue typically host to symphonies, kicked off with the conference introduction from 567 breakfast host radio personality Kieno Kammies. He spoke of listening to an interview just after 7am on his own show while driving in to town that morning, with someone commenting on how hard it is to sell South Africa overseas. Kammies said with that as a backdrop, it was amazing to be in a room with people who actually want to make a difference and create jobs in the country.

Then Stefano Guidotti CEO of U-Start, gave an introduction to U-Start, saying Cape Town has the potential to become the world's next tech hub, especially with the African opportunity on our doorstep. Kammies then introduced Western Cape Minister of Economic Opportunities Alan Winde for the official welcome address.

“ [@alanwinde](#) talking about open data and [#GovHack](#) initiatives at [#UStartConf](#) pic.twitter.com/wS9X9MniQd - SA Government Hack (@GovHackSA) [December 2, 2014](#) ”

Winde says his intention is to focus on red tape, broadband and improving skills in Africa. In looking for business enablers going forward, he simply doesn't accept that we will grow at just 1.4% in the next year as we "can't survive on a shrinking growth rate year-on-year." Most of the red tape is right where he sits, in government, so he encourages all citizens to make use of the redtape@westerncape.gov.za email address to send through specific blockages and hopefully get these resolved fast.

Look local, implement continental, think global

In terms of skills, Winde says in sub-Saharan Africa we need to look to each other as neighbour countries for solutions, not just to the Western world as what works there doesn't necessarily work here. South Africa's already experienced great growth into the rest of Africa and shows great potential, with seven of the world's top ten growing economies in the world located on the continent, so why bother looking further afield?

On the topic of broadband, Winde says primarily South Africa is connected, but government actually needs to roll out broadband to better connect where people actually are - in hospitals, schools and the like, with broadband bringing a host of other business opportunities to the continent. That's why he says we need to create opportunities in Africa, for Africa, by Africa, which essentially benefit the world. Winde's division is aiming to get government into the open-data space, which will benefit people as well as government. The province not there yet, but Winde explains that the city of Cape Town came in and leapfrogged them for open data, and he now looks forward to becoming the first digital city in Africa.



Western Cape Minister of Economic Opportunities Alan Winde giving the official welcome address at Cape Town's city hall

Family business is tricky, hence my 12-year sabbatical: Pick n Pay's Gareth Ackerman

Next, Gareth Ackerman, chairman and CEO of Pick n Pay, built on Winde's introduction, saying that governmental red tape is slowly but surely getting easier to cut through. Sometimes all it takes is one phone call to the right person- but it's about knowing who that person is.

Linking back to Kammies' introduction, Ackerman pointed out that everyone moans about what's wrong with South Africa, but so much is actually right with it - think of the property boom in Cape Town and Johannesburg, this is doing a huge amount of good in promoting the country to overseas investors as a country worth investing in.

On the topic of business, Ackerman said history shows that most new ideas come from people under the age of 30, so we need to listen to the youth, as it's all about entrepreneurship.

“ Advice from Gareth Ackerman "the worst thing you can do is not make a decision" [#ustartconf](#)- Nicole Chowles (@Nicole_Chowles) [November 28, 2014](#) ”

He who controls the minutes controls the meeting, says Ackerman. He adds that being involved in family business can be very tricky, which is why he took a 12-year sabbatical. Speaking of his time at Pick n Pay, Ackerman said the past few years' financial problems are from not letting the business reinvent itself. It's now starting to come right as it's starting to think global yet act local. In closing, he advised business owners to encourage independent decision-making as that's what encourages entrepreneurship.

Learn from others' mistakes to get your own fresh business venture off to the right start

Introducing Nic Haralambous, lead of an entrepreneurial-themed panel who now sells NicSocks, Kammies pointed out that like Haralambous, we all find out very quickly that being a journalist doesn't pay very well. Haralambous spoke to a handful

of entrepreneurs on what it took to start, succeed and fail at start-ups. Rapelang Rabana of Rekindle Learning says there's definitely lack of organisation in our fragmented market, which makes it hard to sustain consumer market growth. This is especially true as much of the focus is on B2C. Haralambous agreed that South Africa is obsessed with 'sexy' B2C, but B2B is actually where the money is.

Next, Sheraan Amod of Springlab said if people aren't interested in your product they won't buy it, no matter what price you sell it for, simply as it doesn't help them solve a problem. And until people start buying your products in a regular way, you're just running experiments, added Aaron Marshall of Over.

Sylvia Gruber of RubyBox interjected that e-commerce is a fast game, you need to pivot if you don't see an immediate consumer response. Daniel Guasco of Groupon agreed but said to also keep an eye on what consumers wants and aim to find solutions. So if you need to create a website but you can't write a word of code, outsource it.

Amod ended by saying it's a good idea to raise funding at the right time when your business is moving in the right direction, if possible. Raising money's not easy so you need to realise you're actually raising partners. Eventually that honeymoon period will end and you'll need to start talking to keep the relationship alive.

“ Closing comments at [#ustartconf @KienoKammies](#) - get out there and do it! pic.twitter.com/KZhaxHstA2- Chris Corbet (@ChrismCorbet) [November 28, 2014](#) ”

That's great advice for any business, not just a start-up.

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