

## How Zaio founder built a coding school from scratch

Youth Month is observed in June in South Africa and it's a time when citizens celebrate their youth for a better future. One way to help our youth have a prosperous future is through education, and one way our youth can help South Africa is through entrepreneurship. One young man sought to fulfil both of these by starting up a coding school camp to help push youth into the fourth industrial revolution.

 By [Imran Salie](#) 19 Jun 2024



Mvelo Hlophe | image supplied

This young man is 26-year-old Mvelo Hlophe, founder of coding school Zaio. Hlophe says Zaio aims to democratise access to tech education, ensuring that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, have the opportunity to develop the skills needed for a successful career in the tech industry.

Unlike conventional programmes that often emphasise theoretical knowledge, Zaio prioritises project-based learning, allowing students to work on real projects that mimic the challenges they will face in the tech industry. This approach ensures that students not only understand the concepts but can also apply them in practical situations.

We caught up with Hlophe to find out more about his journey and what it takes to accomplish what he has..

### ***Share a bit about your personal journey and what inspired you to start Zaio?***

My journey began with a deep passion for technology and education. Growing up, I was always fascinated how education could transform lives and create new opportunities.

Through the use of technology, that impact could be scaled up quickly.

However, during my academic journey, I noticed a significant gap between what was being taught in classrooms and the skills needed in the real world. Many of my peers, despite having degrees, struggled to find jobs because they lacked practical, hands-on experience.

This gap highlighted the need for an educational platform that not only teaches theory but also provides practical skills and real-world experience.

Inspired by this realisation, I decided to start Zaio. The vision behind Zaio is to bridge the gap between education and employment by offering a platform where students can gain practical skills through project-based learning and real-world experience.

Our mission is to empower students with the skills they need to succeed in the tech industry and to help them build a strong portfolio that showcases their abilities to potential employers.

### ▄ ***What were the initial steps you took to get it off the ground?***

At the beginning of our journey, we were looking to get people studying towards an IT-related qualification more employable. Therefore, initially, we needed to find as many people as possible who were doing just that.

We created a landing page using a no-code tool to capture names and contact details. We shared this website in Facebook groups, through developer societies at universities and through WhatsApp groups.

Once we had a large database of people, we started engaging startups that needed applications and websites to be built. We then connected these startups to people in our database.

Over time we realised the mismatch between the skills required to build the projects that the startups had and the skills that our community had been taught at their respective higher education institutions.

We started with engaging industry professionals and educators to find out what skills young people need to equip themselves to be relevant and successful in their IT careers. We then began to curate learning programs based on this research.

Next, we focused on developing the Zaio platform, ensuring it was user-friendly, engaging, and capable of delivering interactive learning experiences, project-based modules, and real-world scenarios. Integrating features for mentorship and community support was also a key aspect of our development process.

To support these efforts, we sought funding by pitching to investors, applying for grants, and exploring partnerships, which allowed us to cover development costs, marketing expenses, and operational needs.

Before the full launch, we ran a pilot program with a smaller group of users to test the platform, gather valuable feedback, identify issues, and make necessary improvements.

The positive response from pilot participants validated our approach and gave us the confidence to proceed.

With a refined product, we launched targeted marketing campaigns to build awareness and attract our target audience, leveraging social media, content marketing, partnerships with educational institutions, and participation in industry events.

Post-launch, our focus shifted to continuous improvement based on user feedback and evolving industry needs, adding new features, expanding our course offerings, and enhancing the user experience.

▄ ***What were some of the biggest challenges you faced when starting Zaio, and how did you overcome them?***

- I went into working on Zaio full-time after studying so I had no formal employment before then.

I lacked practical experience in the working world. In fact, my whole team was in a similar position. We leveraged mentors and our networks to overcome most challenges that we were facing for the first time. We read books and attended webinars for all aspects of running a successful business.

The longer we stayed on our path the more experience we gained until now.

- We have had cash flow issues more than once in the business but particularly when Covid happened, we experienced it the most. Companies and our learners were spending less which meant less business for us.

We had to make some tough calls about what we spent our money on as a business. During that time, the team and I took pay cuts to reduce our monthly burn and keep the business running.

- Team disputes and letting people go have been something I could have never been fully prepared for.

In teams, you will not always see things the same way and at times team members can underperform.

As a leader, it has always been important to me to spot this and fix it as quickly as possible. Doing it quickly instead of letting the problem stick around very long has been the best solution.

▄ ***What does it take to build a successful coding school from scratch? Walk us through some key elements***

- You need to validate that the teaching approach that you are using is effective enough that learners are competent at the end of the learning process and stay engaged to finish the course
- You need to offer more than just skills training so offer accreditation, a job at the end of the program or some earning potential at some point after they have picked up the necessary skills
- Pick your target audience well as this will determine important things like your price point and distribution plan
- Secure funding to pay for expenses. Early on we entered competitions and applied for grants to cover our expenses before raising capital through angel investors and VC funds later on
- Speak to your users constantly. Get feedback at every stage of your product around what works and what needs to be improved.

▄ ***What advice would you give to someone who wants to start their own educational initiative or coding school?***

Figure out which group of people you would like to impact or teach then get an understanding about their needs.

Find out what their end goal is then create a learning experience that helps them to achieve that.

Implement a small goal with a pilot programme to test your ideas and gather feedback for iterative

improvement. Focus on practical, hands-on learning experiences that prepare students for real-world challenges.

Build a strong team with diverse skills and leverage technology to enhance accessibility and engagement.

▣ ***What are some common mistakes to avoid when starting an educational programme focused on IT and digital skills?***

- Teaching skills that are not required by employers is a mistake to avoid as students need to be employable at the end of your programmes
- Accreditation is important in South Africa and this affects how students view your course. Do not position a non-accredited course the same way that accredited courses are positioned, especially when it comes to pricing
- Creating programs that are more theory-based than practical won't help your students gain experience and competence. They need to see how they implement their skills in the real world
- Not adapting what you teach based on technological changes can make your coding program redundant in the market

## ABOUT IMRAN SALIE

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