GirlCode seeks to narrow tech industry gender gap with AWS

By Sindy Peters   14 Jun 2018

Founded by chairwoman Zandile Keebine in 2014, social enterprise GirlCode aims to empower young girls and women through technology. Initially launched as a hackathon specifically for women, it has flourished into a number of supportive programmes promoting skills advancement and business growth.

The organisation is currently collaborating with Amazon Web Services (AWS) in a nationwide competition which will award 30 small-, medium- and micro-sized enterprises (SMMEs) the opportunity to partake in the AWS CloudStart programme.

Celebrating Youth Month, Bizcommunity caught up with Keebine to find out more about some of GirlCode's programmes, how it ensures its impact is sustainable, what its partnership with AWS entails and how interested SMMEs can get involved.

Zandile Keebine, chairwoman, GirlCode

▦ *Statistically, what does the gender representation gap look like in the ICT sector in SA?*

According to the *PWC 16 nudges for more #WomenInTech report*, women currently hold 19% of tech-related jobs at the top 10 global tech companies, relative to men who hold 81%. This indicates the enormity of the tech industry gender gap that South Africa faces at present.

▦ *GirlCode started off as a woman-only hackathon, how has the initiative grown since then?*

Following the success of the first hackathon in 2014, the GirlCode hackathon became an annual event, attracting more and more women each year - some who have never coded before in their lives.

It was then that we realised that GirlCode can grow beyond just the hackathons into a platform that engages women in tech, facilitates their skills advancement in the industry, and encourages others to join the tech revolution.
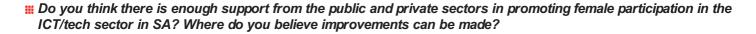
At the end of 2017, GirlCode launched several other initiatives designed to empower young women and girls in tech of all different ages, including:

- the GirlCoder Club for high school girls,
- Meet the Mentors, a networking initiative for anyone wanting to find a female role model in the industry,
- the GirlCode Workshop Series, a monthly workshop to develop technical skills,
- the Digital Literacy Programme which provides women with no IT experience a basic introduction into Microsoft Office,
- the GirlCode Learnership Programme, designed to bridge the gap between tertiary IT education and work-ready skills, and
- an SMME programme to provide female-owned, IT-related SMMEs with skills support.

Recently, we have collaborated with Amazon Web Services (AWS) to launch a nationwide competition which will award 30 SMMEs the opportunity to partake in the AWS CloudStart programme. The aim of this partnership is to help enable female-owned tech businesses with the tools they need to grow their businesses, and empower them further.

⊞ *How do you ensure GirlCode's impact is sustainable?*

Every time girls attend our workshops and hackathon, they learn something new and add a new skill to their abilities. Skills development by its very nature is sustainable. Once someone has a new skill, they are able to use and teach it for the benefit of others. However, from a sponsorship perspective, GirlCode is constantly being contacted by corporates who wish to support our programmes in various ways. The more we are able to teach, develop skills, and expand our reach, the downstream effect will continue to sustain the impact we are creating.

⊞ *Do you think there is enough support from the public and private sectors in promoting female participation in the ICT/tech sector in SA? Where do you believe improvements can be made?*

There is still so much to be done. For organisations like GirlCode, there are always more opportunities to run programmes and more women and young girls to reach. The support we have received from the public and private sector has been great, but we will continue to grow. Improvements need to be made along the entire chain.

There are several notable women in high profile positions in tech now, but we need to keep an eye on the future and ensure South Africa has a talent pipeline that can support the skills we need as a country. For example, the Girlcoder programme teaches basic computer programming skills to girls in high schools and is designed specifically to address this issue. Still too few women are choosing IT subjects at varsity-level, but to change this, we have to drive interest with girls at a much younger age. If our talent pipeline is strong, then our future is strong.

Image source: Facebook

⊞ *Tell us more about GirlCode's recent partnership with Amazon Web Services - what exactly does it entail, and how will it further the GirlCode cause?*

The partnership includes access to AWS CloudStart, which supports organisations in getting started on AWS by providing a set of resources that will allow them to quickly learn about cloud computing.

AWS CloudStart will provide the following benefits to our competition winners:

- AWS promotional credits,
- Customised training,
- Practice labs and quick-start guides for the cloud,
- Job board to post open positions.

To qualify for the programme, SMMEs must meet the following criteria:

- Be ICT sector-based and currently have a technical solution or service that they offer to the public or private market,

- Have an annual turnover of below R50m,
- Have black-female ownership of at least 51% as defined in the Amended Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment ICT Sector Code, and
- Need to be formally registered on the CSD (SA government's supplier database)

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Interested SMMEs will need to outline their business plan, why they need the credits and training, and commit to a monthly update with AWS to ensure they get optimum use from the platform. Download the application form.

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Submissions are open and selection will be an ongoing process until 30 SMMEs have been chosen. Winners will be announced on GirlCode's Twitter and Facebook pages. Queries can be directed to tapiwam@girlcodeza.co.za.

A partnership like this, not only helps us empower female-owned tech businesses, but also provides upcoming entrepreneurs and young tech talent with the exposure they will need to cutting-edge platforms and tools like AWS CloudStart so that they can become a formidable competitor in the market.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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