

Techpreneurs - the face of the future

By [Charleen Duncan](#)

10 Sep 2020

The University of the Western Cape's Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (CEI) hosted a webinar entitled Techpreneurship: Is this a viable option for your future?

If entrepreneurship, as defined by the Young African Leaders Initiative, is the “ability and willingness to develop, organise and manage a business venture to make a profit”, techpreneurship or technopreneurship is simply the application of entrepreneurship in the technology space. Techpreneurs produce and sell technology products, services and processes to those who use technology to operate or improve a business.

In a recent article published by the Malaysian online news platform *The Star*, Dr Aliza Sarlan wrote that 2020 would go down in history as the year when everything came to a halt. And while everyone was trying to keep their heads above water during the Covid-19 pandemic, “information technologies” became the “unsung heroes that kept things running when the world was at a standstill”.

“From the work we do with the industry, computer science, IT and information systems are remaking the world economy to thrive in the face of continuous turbulence,” she said.

The University of the Western Cape's (UWC's) Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (CEI) hosted a webinar – entitled Techpreneurship: Is this a viable option for your future? - to explore this field. Panellists included Professor Mmaki Jantjies, Eldred Jordaan, Lynette Hundermark, Renier Kriel and Lana Franks.

The participants were unanimous about the role of failure in the technopreneur's learning journey, especially as getting the technology right rarely happens the first time. Each failure is an opportunity to learn more about the market, the customer, the technology and the development of personal skills essential to successful entrepreneurship, such as leadership, resilience, cooperation and patience.

Jordaan, the CEO of GovChat, emphasised that in a startup, the first challenge is imagining the end objective, especially as the business is often the first to attempt a particular solution to a problem. To ensure that they maintain their focus, founders should confine themselves to only two activities in the business – listening to the user/customer and building the product.

Investment culture

Responding to an audience question, Jordaan said that, rather than it being a government problem, the problem of

attracting investment is more related to the absence of a culture of investment in South African startups.

He noted that getting started doesn't necessarily require money as there are free resources on the internet that can be used to develop ideas. Kriel, CEO of French South African Tech Labs (FSAT Labs), added that investors want high returns for the higher risk of investing in a startup. Bold plans and big ideas that have already been developed into working models are likely to attract investment, as are innovations that have the potential to upscale.

Women in tech

In her opening remarks, Professor Jantjies, a UWC researcher in education technology, focused on women in the industry. She said girls should be encouraged from early childhood development right through the education ecosystem to pursue careers in techpreneurship.

Professor Jantjies noted that, despite tremendous progress in introducing technology in the school curriculum and using technological aids such as computers, tablets and smartboards, there was still a considerable backlog. Opportunities were also not being taken to embed technology at ECD level for learners and educators.

In response to a question from the virtual audience, Professor Jantjies said there are opportunities at higher education institutions in skills development, research and entrepreneurship for women interested in technology. Universities are evolving from the traditional approaches to skills development and changing to multidisciplinary approaches.

She said, "We've started new academic programmes which cut across faculties. For example, a person from an arts background with no programming experience can enter an augmented reality/ virtual reality programme. There are also many programmes specifically focused on women in tech at higher learning institutions."

Hundermark is a part-time lecturer at UWC's Future Innovations Lab – a partnership with Samsung and the Department of Trade, Industry – that teaches digital skills. She is also the managing director of Useful and Beautiful, a mobile solutions consultancy focused on mobile technology and product development. Having worked in the mobile space since the launch of the first iPhone, she started her own company when her previous employer closed down six years ago.

Hundermark added that there are many free online resources that women can access for self-enrichment and skills development.

While agreeing that coding and tech skills are useful, ordaan feels strongly that investors are more interested in investing in well-rounded entrepreneurs who might understand the tech but, more importantly, who understand how to develop the business using technology.

In closing, the panel was asked how the University could enhance techpreneurship attributes in students. Professor Jantjies said schools and universities still train students to be employees rather than entrepreneurs, and academics are not trained to encourage entrepreneurship.

Thankfully, units like the CEI are bridging the gap between traditional academia and entrepreneurship training.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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