

# The 'State' of our education system in the technology age and how that translates into employment

by Jill Young



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She previously worked as an employee communications developer for Nokia (2012); as the head of Internal Communications Middle East and Africa for Nokia (2010); and the Marketing Manager: Brand Sponsorship and Events (Activation Manager) for Nokia (2007)

She was the Project manager at Makwetla and Associates; formerly the CEO of the National Delphic Council.

## Abstract

In this opinion piece Jill Young argues that one of the most effective ways to break the poverty and unemployment cycle is through education, however, the education system in South Africa is not working as a stepping stone to preparing South Africa's matriculants and graduates for the working world.

Jill points this out to SA's digital industry arguing that digital solutions opens up opportunities for a multitude of services including ones, like the EvenME portal she founded, that act as a bridge between the current schooling system and our unemployed youth. Jill contends that with the right policies, digital learning is a potential game changer in terms of equalising access to education, since access to the internet in South Africa has been exponential over the last few years, especially in terms of people accessing the internet via mobile phones.

She believes that not only can digital learning make a real difference to the lives of the millions of South African youth so desperately in need, but it can also position our country as a beacon of hope for the billions of under-educated but highly motivated learners across the globe that are being let down by their education systems.

## Introduction

At the International AIDS conference in Durban in June 2016, the formidable Bill Gates said: “A good education is the best lever we have to give young people what they need to make the best of their lives.” He also said that our duty is to invest in the young people and that we have a duty to do it now!

South Africa’s future lies on the shoulders of a generation that has been subjected to inefficiencies and shortfalls in both educational support and career guidance. There are simply not enough jobs available to create economic growth and in order to fuel the country’s economy, it has become imperative that our youth are equipped with the tools and know-how to become entrepreneurial power-houses, creating the streams of income that the previous generations have failed to provide.

40-years ago, in 1976, a group of brave youngsters in Soweto rose up against the tyranny of the Apartheid government to take back their future, and the future of the next generations. To honour their struggle, and bravery, I believe that it is important to take stock of where we are now.

Note how I did not say ‘how far we’ve come’, because, quite frankly, I don’t believe we’ve progressed much since then. In fact I would go so far as to say our current education system is South Africa’s new Apartheid. It is failing our children and it will also certainly fail our children’s children.

This status quo has seen thousands (hundreds of thousands) of students and other youth take to the streets over the last year or so in various forms of protest action. Their voices, in many ways, are calling for the same things the youngsters in 1976 were. They want to be seen, heard and provided for. They want an equal chance for a proper education. They too want a bright future. And isn’t it worth asking ourselves why, 40 years later, our youth are having to fight the same fight as their predecessors?

[21.7%](#) of South Africans live in extreme poverty and two out of three South Africans aged between 18 to 28 are unemployed. Let that sink in for a moment.

One of the most effective ways to break the poverty and unemployment cycle is through education. But, at its most fundamental, the education system is just not working as a stepping stone to employment. It is not preparing our matriculants and graduates for the working world.

The job market has become highly competitive and employers are looking for holistically skilled candidates that offer much more than just a tertiary qualification. In essence, a good education is no longer seen as a guarantee of employment. Which means that vulnerable young South Africans who come from poor households with limited (broken) schooling stand little to no chance of finding worthwhile employment.

Poorer South Africans from poorer households more often than not find themselves approaching the labour market with lower levels in literacy, numeracy and communication skills. And because these youngsters sit outside of middle-class privilege they do not benefit from the ‘step-up’ that strong networks or social capital affords many of their peers. They also tend not to have the finances to enable them to get to where the jobs

are. If South Africa's schooling was solid, young South Africans would not need privilege or parental funds to help them find jobs or build a career but sadly, as it sits at the moment, this is not the case.

So what does a working education system look like?

A working system should be made up of trained, motivated and properly paid teachers; structures and classrooms that are conducive to learning which include safety from violence, desks and teaching aids and basics like safe sanitation and clean water; proper, good quality teaching materials like textbooks; and very importantly strong leadership with a clear vision. And finally access. Children need to be able to access an education.

This is a far cry from where we are currently – especially for the schools in the rural areas, townships and informal settlements.

Our economy is shrinking, our government is not delivering, parents and children are becoming despondent and angry. So is it time to completely rethink the solution to this problem? Does the solution perhaps lie in an online space?

Digital learning has been identified as key in parts of South Africa (Western Cape is a great example). If implemented properly with relevant stakeholders, online learning can make the educational system a lot more efficient, it can be used as a powerful administrative tool for educators (in essence enabling them to do greater work) and can promote equality through the empowerment of all learners from different economic status groups. It also gives access to learners with limited physical ability and those with difficulty accessing relevant information or teaching (perhaps because of distance to schools).

As SA's digital industry continues to grow it opens up doors for a multitude of services including ones that act as a bridge between the current schooling system and our unemployed youth.

Very recently EvenMe! partnered with Coal of Africa to bring online learning to the community of Makhado. Coal of Africa provided a community centre and we donated the computers powered by EvenMe!. We adapted the platform to be specifically geared towards the needs of the community and to be aligned to the training manuals they developed for the teachers. In essence we created an online learning space that is 100% focused on the solutions for the people of Makhado. This is a great example of the power of the digital learning space.

Digital learning is a game changer and the growth in digital in South Africa has been exponential over the last few years, especially when you look at people accessing the internet via mobile phones. I believe that not only can digital learning make a real difference to the lives of the millions of South African youngsters so desperately in need, but it can also position our country as a beacon of hope for the billions of under-educated but highly motivated learners across the globe that are being let down by their education systems.

It is into this space of opportunity that our innovative concept, EvenMe! entered. EvenMe! is an online portal that bridges the gap between sustainable employment and school leavers, graduates, unemployed youth and entrepreneurs. It provides a platform for the youth to interact, connect and learn and offers tangible resources like:

- Free online learning in everything from History to Computer Sciences
- Links to every major online jobs portal that SA has to offer
- Motivational talks on entrepreneurship
- Essential tips and advice to help you make the best career choices
- FREE downloads of Microsoft products to compile CV's, portfolios and business plans

We approached several powerful partners and were thrilled when giant industry players like Microsoft, Edcon, My Star and Star Schools agreed to come on board. There is no doubt that the backing of these partners provided us with both the reputability and functional capacity that we needed in order to get the project off the ground.

We soft launched in December 2015 and the first 6-months of being live gave us immensely valuable insight into what the critical gaps were and what kind of real support our youth need in order to step-up and live their best lives. So this month, September 2016 we launched Phase 2.

EvenMe! now gives users a much more efficient and personalised route to the information they need, which means it lessens the burdens of data usage. As part of phase 2, EvenMe! users are required to register (or re-register if they had already registered during phase 1) to enable the portal to better understand who they are. After registration they complete a questionnaire which allows the system to get to know what they are looking for – first-time job seeking, entrepreneurial tips, career boosting advice or more. Once the registration has taken place, the user has a personalised dashboard geared just for them.

As an outcomes based system, EvenMe! is designed to deliver exactly what a user needs. It works through interactive user journeys that guide users through the steps of their processes with valuable advice and tips, digital learning courses and downloadable resources along the way – all carefully curated to ensure they achieve their goals.

In June 2016, Statistics South Africa released employment stats which showed that although there was a 0.1% decline in unemployment in Q2 of 2016, there was an increase of 379 000 inactive people (which implies that many South Africans who lost their jobs remained inactive instead of moving into new employment). The report also showed that 3.2million youth (15 – 34 years) remain unemployed (the rate is a terrifying 37.5%).

These stats most definitely represent a crisis in South Africa. As we know high levels of unemployment, particularly youth, has dire consequences not only on their lives but on the overall growth of the country's economy. And when the economy stagnates it raises unemployment even further, sending the country into a dangerous cycle.

Even though South Africa moved into a democracy in 1994, I believe we are still falling very short of educating and empowering our vulnerable youngsters. Our current education system is South Africa's new Apartheid and it is failing our children and it will also certainly fail our children's children.

So what are the solutions? Do they live in a digital space? And if so (because I certainly believe they do), how do we get to a place where the resources are accessible to the South Africans that need them the most? To answer this I want to look at what digital learning can achieve:

- The ability to open up classrooms so that they become a collaborative teaching arena. Online communication tools and networks will make it possible to collaborate with teachers and schools all over the country. Less experienced teachers or those from less equipped schools (usually located in poorer areas) will be able to tap into the tools, lesson plans and resources prepared by more experienced teachers – helping to bridge a massive equality divide.
- Teaching spaces will become more specific. As more options open up online, pupils and scholars will be able to engage with online spaces that teach them exactly what they need to know. No longer will it be about generic teaching materials and styles. The youth will be empowered to find schooling and learning that suits THEM.
- Learning experiences will be a lot more interactive. Online adaptive tools, apps, and other resources mean there is again more power in the hands of the learners and it means that instructors are 'talking' less and spending more time on the lessons and the tools.
- Once the infrastructure is in place – and provinces like the Western Cape are proving that this is possible – access to top quality resources and teachers is no longer an issue. Services can be provided from wherever, to wherever they are needed most.
- It becomes easier for youngsters to move from a high school, into tertiary education and then into a place of employment because the access to the education, resources and support all sit in the same place. The transition becomes A LOT easier to manage.

It's still early days in South Africa but as our digital industry continues to grow it opens up doors for a multitude of services including ones that act as a bridge between the current schooling system and our unemployed youth, like [EvenMe!](#), that provides resources, support and mentoring to assist young South Africans in successfully navigating the job market.

Our duty to invest in our youth extends far beyond a secondary or tertiary education. A young person trying to carve out a positive future faces an uphill battle even without the added challenges of poverty, under-privilege and (often) low self-esteem.

South African Millennials, in particular, are struggling. They are often fighting to get into the job market or make the best of an early career without resources or guidance to help them achieve success. And because South Africa faces so many education challenges, there are more often than not zero resources beyond basic schooling and it is expected that youngsters will take care of themselves. Essentially it's sink or swim time and sadly, this often means they sink.

And that is why a detached approach is destructive. We owe it to this generation to do more. We need to assist and support young South Africans to build solid, sustainable careers that will give them bright futures and which will make them happy. After all, happy people are productive people and a productive workforce is vital for a thriving economy.

So how do we bridge that gap? How do we assist our youth, eager and hungry for a future?

One of the tangible resources EvenMe! tries to provide is access to highly effective tools, resources and programmes that can be used to assist them in transitioning successfully into a workplace and help them adapt and grow in their roles, tools like internships, learnerships, apprenticeships and mentorships.

We have to recognise that as working adults we have a duty to pass our skills and experience on to young, educated South Africans, to equip them with the life skills they need to grasp opportunity with both hands. And to help them believe they can do better and be better.

In summary, South Africa is facing many challenges not the least of which is unemployment. But there is hope. Support for our youth, if implemented properly with relevant stakeholders, is key to bridging the equality divide, and to unlocking the potential of this generation and generations to come. The potential in our millennial generation is unlimited. These youngsters have, in their hands, the power to change the world. Because as Bill Gates said: "The youth must be given an opportunity to thrive. We must clear away the obstacles that keep young people from growing."