

When hope, resilience and technology meet: DigiLink - Multiplying Digital Skills and Unlocking Opportunity for South Africa's Youth



The Evolution of DigiLink: From Innovative Experiment to National Impact

DigiLink was a pioneering initiative aimed at equipping young people in South Africa with essential digital skills to bridge the skills gap, fill latent demand and reduce youth unemployment. Established with the vision of creating a sustainable impact on the digital landscape, DigiLink has been instrumental in transforming the lives of thousands of young individuals.

South Africa's digital economy shows strong potential, yet a significant mismatch persists between workforce supply and industry demand. The country still lags behind global digital markets in converting talent into employment and unlocking economic value. Aligning demand with a scalable and consistent talent pipeline has been challenging for several reasons. Traditional skilling pathways for digital talent are often costly, lengthy and not responsive to business needs. Furthermore, entry-level candidates typically lack the real-world experience required to thrive in fast-paced, high-risk digital environments, while businesses often do not have the capacity to mentor and coach these young entrants into high-end, complex roles. In light of this, inexperienced youth need a structured and well-supported entry into the workforce - that provides a soft landing and equips them with the practical skills and exposure necessary to succeed in the digital environment.

The concept of DigiLink initially arose from the exploration of whether young people could be upskilled in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) space. The idea was radical yet simple, create a real world BPO working environment inside Harambee to give young people a chance to earn, learn and grow.

Vodacom was the first organisation to partner in piloting the initiative. The Simulation Academy was the first of its kind in South Africa and set out to test if it was possible to provide a quality service to Vodacom's prepaid customers whilst developing the skillsets of young people with no work experience at the same time. To enable this model, Harambee launched a 100-seat call centre in 2019, which quickly became Vodacom's top-performing site nationwide, outpacing even professional service providers. At the end of the pilot, 100% of the candidates were placed into employment.



“Coming from Khayelitsha, I didn’t see many opportunities. DigiLink changed that. It opened doors, showed our potential, and helped me get to where I am today.”

—Inga, DigiLink Graduate



The success proved that a socially impactful, financially sustainable model was not only possible but effective. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the physical call centre closed but learnings provided the foundation for the design of a similar model in the digital sector.



The Story of Inga

Born and raised in the vibrant township of Khayelitsha in Cape Town, Inga's tech journey began at the Centre of Science and Technology where she attended high school. It was here that an unexpected opportunity set her on a path toward a thriving digital career. A dedicated IT teacher introduced Inga to an after-school Oracle Java programme that, although not part of the standard curriculum, was open to students who wanted to explore the world of coding. Inga grabbed the opportunity with both hands and has yet to look back.

What started as an extracurricular activity quickly turned into a passion. Inga went on to get a Systems Development Certificate, but like so many young people trying to enter the workforce, found it difficult to find work.

While looking for a job, Inga expanded her knowledge and experience by completing several internships, each one exposing her to new technologies and programming languages. Despite her qualifications and exposure, she still could not secure employment. Why?



DigiLink: From Humble Beginnings

During the latter part of the 2010s, demand for digital jobs accelerated due to business digitalisation, consumer adoption of online services and global opportunities.

Recognising the uptick, Harambee launched the Shift initiative, partnering with training providers to skill young people in software development and testing. However, the low rate of

absorption into jobs after training revealed that training alone was not enough. A recurring message from employers explaining their reluctance to hire graduates was clear: they lacked real work experience.

Clickatell was the first to partner with Harambee, committing to redirect global digital software testing work to young South Africans through the DigiLink program in Cape Town. The DigiLink cohort delivered high-quality results, matching, and in many cases exceeding, the performance benchmarks of established international teams, while gaining valuable real-world experience. Similar to the Simulation Academy, 100% of the youth were absorbed into employment.

DigiLink soon expanded beyond software testing to include software development and data analytics roles. The curriculum behind these roles was thoughtfully designed based on research conducted by Harambee, which identified the most in-demand digital jobs and informed the development of targeted training to meet these needs. Combining both technical and work readiness components, the curriculum ensured candidates were holistically prepared for employment.

The technical training was customised to meet the specific requirements of employer partners, developed through in-depth technical meetings that helped align the syllabus with the tools, platforms and methodologies used by the employers. Equally important were the work readiness elements, which included training in social behaviours, conflict and time management, negotiation, and team dynamics—skills critical for success in the modern workplace. The curriculum was regularly updated in response to the evolving digital landscape and increasing complexity of roles, ensuring that candidates remained competitive and well-prepared for the demands of their careers. This model proved that even youth with an NQF 5 certificate could excel in high-complexity roles, if given the right support.

Since inception, DigiLink has partnered with early adopter partners to onboard 170 candidates, maintaining a low 4.5% attrition rate and achieving a 90% total absorption rate into long-term employment.



Scaling the DigiLink Model through Partnerships

Partnerships have always formed the bedrock of Harambee's strategy to get young people working. This is why partnerships with forward-thinking companies have been instrumental to the development and success of DigiLink.

Among the initial supporters were Clickatell, Capitec, Digital Solutions Foundry, BMW and one of the top 5 SA banks. As the initiative evolved another of the top 5 banks joined, further strengthening the programme. The project enabled employers to tap into supervised, entry-level digital talent to augment and support their digital delivery teams. These partnerships highlight the capabilities of South Africa's untapped tech talent as well as the business value that emerges when mentorship, structured onboarding and agile collaboration align.

Capitec is a great example. Capitec's Digital Solutions Team collaborated with DigiLink to create an entry-level talent pipeline for their software testing centre. Candidates, qualified in tech disciplines but unable to secure employment, underwent a two-month bootcamp covering globally recognised formal training in software testing basics, test automation and agile methodologies. They were then embedded into Capitec's delivery teams, supported by mentors. The result was immediate value delivery, where candidates helped meet tight deadlines and contributed to high-quality outputs. After 12 months, all participants transitioned from stipends to permanent employment with Capitec where they are still today. This showcased the programme's effectiveness in bridging the gap between training and employment.

The Clickatell and Capitec case studies highlight the essential role that all employer partners played in validating and scaling DigiLink's model for preparing young talent for the digital economy.



Lessons Learned

The road to achieving the success and adoption of the DigiLink model in the market has not been without challenges.

Lesson One: Shifting Employer Mindsets

Convincing employers to take a chance on entry-level talent without degrees or prior experience was initially difficult. This was seen in BMW, who traditionally sourced graduates from top universities for digital entry-level roles, similar to most employer hiring practices in the market. This therefore required a significant organisational mindset shift for the adoption of the DigiLink model.

BMW became a strong supporter of the DigiLink model, embedding it into their strategic and operational planning. Through this we learned that the presence of a strong internal champion with deep organisational knowledge and commitment to the programme is critical to overcoming resistance and establishing credibility. The impact of this mindset shift was felt by young people like Inga. After several learnerships, she joined the DigiLink programme where she had the opportunity to work for BMW, gaining incredible global experience and eventually transitioning into a full-time role in the company where she now works as a Business and Test Analyst.

Lesson Two: Identifying High Learning Potential

The expectations of employer partners required candidates capable of meeting real-world performance demands. For Harambee, this meant ensuring that candidates selected for DigiLink possessed the necessary technical skills and the grit to endure an intensive 12-month programme.

Through experience, we learned valuable lessons in screening for these qualities and quickly realised that candidates with higher learning potential and the right attitude were significantly more likely to successfully complete the programme, than youth with just technical proficiency. These qualities were identified using inclusive alternate assessments on the SA Youth platform. SA Youth is a free, easy to use online hiring platform operated by Harambee, that is designed for employers of all sizes and sectors seeking entry-level talent.

Including these non-traditional signals in the selection process contributed to better performance and an attrition rate of less than 5% across all DigiLink cohort participants.

Lesson Three: The Power of Holistic Support

Many of the candidates entered DigiLink as first-time hires from disadvantaged backgrounds. Without prior exposure to professional environments many candidates struggled to navigate workplace norms, expectations and communication styles. DigiLink recognised the importance of providing holistic support and integrated psychological services in the programme to ensure that young people could succeed, despite their of personal and environmental challenges. We learned that by offering timely and accessible wraparound support, candidates were not only technically prepared but also emotionally equipped



to thrive. Speaking about the DigiLink opportunity and the support provided, Inga says *“Coming from Khayelitsha, a township in Cape Town, this programme played a huge part in my life. If DigiLink didn’t give me a chance, I don’t know how I would have gotten to where I am today. It opened new doors for us to prove that we have potential and we can make it.”*

Lesson Four: Transportation Barriers

One of the major challenges faced by DigiLink, was the difficulty of accessing opportunities for young people living outside major metros such as Cape Town and Johannesburg due to the high cost of transport. Many talented candidates from other regions were unable to relocate due to financial constraints, which significantly limited their ability to participate in the programme. Looking ahead, this highlights the need to creatively explore new approaches in future models to better include and support youth from underserved and remote areas.



Incubating Collective X - Proven Impact and Systems Shifts:

Parallel to the operation of DigiLink, several other digital skills initiatives have been mobilised due to the exponential growth of the digital sector in South Africa. In 2021, the SiMODiSA Association, which works to address the barriers facing SMEs and startups, launched TechXit. TechXit was a private sector initiative, with the mission to address the widening digital skills gap and devised a ten-year action plan to reconstruct South Africa's digital skills pipeline. TechXit engaged with over 100 local stakeholders to chart the path forward. Simultaneously, Harambee partnered with the Presidency, the Public Private Growth Initiative (PPGI), Digital Council Africa (DCA), and Business Process Enabling South Africa (BPESA) to launch the Digital Work Accelerator. This public-private initiative aimed to create inclusive job opportunities within the digital economy, aligning with the national Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI), a national coordinated response to the challenge of youth unemployment in South Africa.

TechXit and the Digital Work Accelerator recognised that addressing South Africa's digital skills gap required concerted efforts, resources and a unified approach and in 2023 these two initiatives merged to form Collective X (CX). CX has set a bold target of placing 10,000 young people into digital work by 2027. It has already placed over 1,000 youth across 25 different employers, with a goal to reach 150,000 by 2030. The immediate goal is to build a robust entry-level digital skills pipeline to fill our latent domestic jobs demand and ultimately position South Africa as a global competitor.

The lessons from DigiLink's work integrated learning approach continue to be at the center of the work of CX. Inspired by DigiLink's proven approach, CX has created a work integrated learning 'Playbook' - a comprehensive blueprint designed to



guide the implementation of this particular work integrated learning model. By codifying the DigiLink model into a Playbook, CX is redefining how skills are developed, how value is measured, and who can access the digital economy. In addition, CX drives advocacy for the adoption of the DigiLink model and has established its own Digital Skills Impact Fund. Organisations can access this fund, but only if they adopt work integrated learning models as part of a young person's route to competence.

Finally, the CX is actively collaborating with government stakeholders, including the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) and the National Skills Fund, to influence and align policy and funding mechanisms in support of work integrated learning models. The goal is to ensure that public resources are directed toward scalable, impact-driven approaches like DigiLink, with the vision to shift policy and catalyse the widespread adoption of the model across businesses in South Africa.



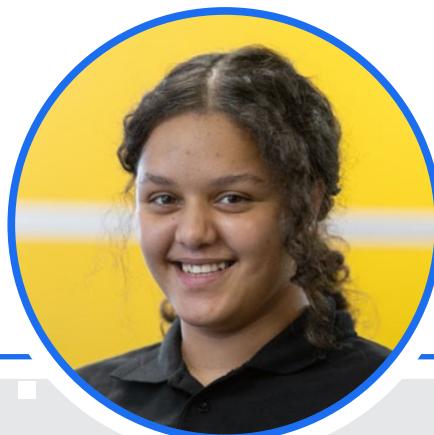
Inga's Story Multiplied

Inga's story is one of many. Hundreds of graduates of the programme have been able to secure high value jobs with significantly higher earnings, setting them on a path to greater economic stability and upward mobility.

DigiLink Graduates

The DigiLink journey is one of courageous testing, learning, and scaling. What began as a work integrated learning model is now a national movement - Collective X is more than a rebrand - it is a call to employers, training providers, and government to invest in models that work, that empower and that close the digital divide.

“DigiLink bridged the gap and laid a strong foundation. Collective X is building the highway.”



Runita's love for IT started at a young age when she played computer games with her grandmother in Mitchells Plain. She chose IT as a high school subject and was exposed to the endless possibilities of coding. After joining the Oracle programme she went into an internship opportunity with CapaCITI. Her passion and work ethic landed her an opportunity as a contractor for Capitec with DigiLink and after a year was offered a full-time opportunity with Capitec.

DigiLink opened doors for many young people to launch meaningful careers in the digital sector. Through hands-on experience and continuous learning, participants grew in confidence and capability—some overcoming significant personal challenges to thrive in professional environments.

If you are an employer looking to find out more about how you can be part of the digital skills revolution go to www.thecollectivex.org

To learn more about SA Youth and Harambee go to
www.sayouth.co.za or www.harambee.co.za