The Lewis Group and redAcademy partner to create a sustainable pipeline of tech talent

The Lewis Group and redAcademy have joined forces by providing practical experience and tailored skills to South Africa's tech talent pipeline, leading to a sustainable source of IT professionals for the Lewis Group. This case study showcases how this unique partnership is changing the game and making a meaningful difference in the lives of young IT professionals.

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"I have interviewed upward of 400 juniors in my career. When I interview a junior, it is all about attitude and aptitude rather than technical knowledge, which can be taught. The benefit of working with an organisation such as redAcademy to source young IT talent is that unlike a university degree, redPanda Software can influence the course curriculum. As redPanda Software is the software development partner for South African furniture retailer, the Lewis Group, this is invaluable, as we can refine what our requirements are for the end goal.

In addition, these highly-motivated candidates - called Sprinters - are more likely to take full advantage of what is their first formal job opportunity. Quality talent makes a difference to a business, and this is a great way for organisations like the Lewis Group to secure that talent from redAcademy and contribute to social responsibility in a sustainable way," says Niel Coetzee, head of engineering at redPanda Software.

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Challenge

redPanda Software is an enterprise retail software developer and technology partner, providing highly customised software solutions to retailers around the world. Through the development of long-term partnerships based on trust, transparency and specialist experience, the company delivers enduring, quality software and solutions that enables forward-thinking retailers to achieve their growth objectives.

The company's unique partnership approach begins internally, with bold investment into internal talent development that propels a sustainable growth cycle. This growth cycle enables the company to provide advanced technical expertise to future-focused retailers, and to partner with best-of-breed solutions providers in key areas such as Point of Sale solutions (PoS), last-mile delivery and digital transformation journeys.

As the demand for software development talent continues to rise, redPanda Software faced a significant challenge: the need to establish a sustainable pipeline of skilled software developers to build client solutions. This included skilled resources to work on the Lewis Group account, within redPanda Software.

In a unique approach to address the issue, Lewis Group entered into a partnership with redAcademy that would see talented young South Africans being trained in a manner that would also see them contributing to the development of IT solutions for Lewis.

Partnership with redAcademy

When adopting traditional recruitment methods, it is not uncommon to find candidates who possess two or three of the technical skills that an organisation needs, but there is still a gap and they need to be taught new skills that are particular to the business they are joining. Through redAcademy, redPanda Software is able to secure the exact blend of technical skills that it requires.

redAcademy is a skills and experiential learning hub that specialises in teaching coding and technology skills. Unlike the traditional academic approach, candidates (or Sprinters as they are called) in redAcademy can fast-track their IT careers in a live environment, taught by dedicated software lecturers and guided by senior real-world developers, to develop working solutions for real customers, such as the Lewis Group, using the most relevant coding languages.

This was an ideal partnership; being a proudly South African company, the Lewis Group is also committed to supporting and uplifting young people who may not have the opportunity to study in formal tertiary education. Beyond that, it sees the strategic value for the country in fast-tracking young people onto the career ladder.

Before a single candidate was trained, redPanda Software worked with redAcademy in order to develop the course outline, as well as provide guidance around course material and what the candidates would learn about. This included in-depth train-the-trainer sessions so that redAcademy lecturers could familiarise themselves with redPanda Software's technology stack and best practices, though the need for this is likely to diminish as the partnership matures.

The course material was further refined along the way, with redPanda Software architects working with redAcademy lecturers to modify the course as required so that successful Sprinters were fully aligned with the redPanda Software's requirements. Of course, self development is a journey and learning doesn't stop once someone finishes their studies, but redAcademy has set a solid foundation for this growth.

Work-ready Sprinters

Sprinters take part in a one-year long programme where the first six months is weighted towards theory, learning career dynamics, learning business structure, and more, while the second six months is a sprint that's weighted towards actual, real-world development of solutions for an array of the biggest retail customers in the country.

Because the course is custom-developed, and there is close cooperation between redPanda Software and redAcademy, the second six months of practical experience and development of real world solutions is completed inside redAcademy with oversight from redPanda Software, with clients directly funding the solution creation. In-depth interviews with team members are then conducted to assess their skills, to determine if there is a good cultural fit and if they already have exposure to the domain knowledge needed.

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Those meeting the criteria are recruited as permanent staff by redPanda Software, which saves time and resources as compared to a traditional hire, as the organisation doesn't have to wait for a few months to know what they are getting.

This innovative approach means that instead of just doing abstract exercises once the Sprinters arrive at redPanda Software, this six-month workplace exposure to live projects for Lewis Group adds significant value to the Sprinters. They get to see the practical use of their skills, and also adds value to redPanda Software as the company can actually use the software that has been developed. Those who successfully complete the year-long programme were then taken on by redPanda Software as company employees.

Adding value to clients

Similarly to any potential employee, Sprinters are also interviewed before they join as permanent employees in order to identify which fields they want to move toward; while they might technically all start out as junior developers - which is the high-level goal of the partnership with redAcademy - there are a variety of roles available within the software development environment.

Because of the close relationship between redPanda Software and the lecturers at redAcademy, the organisation gets a better understanding on where best to place the Sprinters once they are brought on-board permanently. For example, a candidate had been successfully placed directly into a database administrator role, while some candidates placed within the business analysis team have also received much positive feedback.

All the Sprinters taken on have been placed in the team servicing the Lewis Group, and have already added tremendous value to redPanda Software with their coding and automated testing roles allowing more experienced members to focus on priority issues.

Ultimately, the intention for the future is that the course, the material and the engagement with redAcademy and Sprinters will mature as the two organisations optimise their working relationship. This includes expanding the course offering to enable future candidates to work on different technology stacks that are used for other redPanda Software clients, thereby ensuring that the company has a healthy influx of motivated, talented and well-suited individuals.

"By investing in programs like redAcademy's Career Sprint, we have not only provided these young individuals with valuable knowledge, skills and real-world experience from working on our tech solutions, but we have made a meaningful difference in their lives," adds Arno Geldenhuys, head of information technology for Lewis Stores.

According to Waleed Achmat, HR director for Lewis, this initiative supports the Lewis vision of developing and upskilling youth to become future leaders for the country.