

# Our youth and the future of work

By [Daniel Robus](#)

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As many South Africans sit back and enjoy the annual Youth Day public holiday, I am reminded why this memorial is so important for us all.



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Many years ago, the youth stood up and demanded changes. They were fighting for the right to be educated, to be represented and to have a voice. And many died for this cause. These young people dreamed of a different world where there was an opportunity, where they could have a choice, that they could be heard and that they could contribute to the world in a meaningful way.

I feel that the youth of today are having the same fights, however, the battlefield is now in the digital space.

Fast forward to one Friday night during the nationwide lockdown. I was in a conference call with a young man asking me for some career advice. This young man, Jonathan, was hip-deep in an IT apprenticeship program learning how to assemble and fix hardware.

“Daniel,” he said, “I want to work in an area where I can build a life, make a difference and have a say in the structure of my day...”

So I did what any self-respecting, fast approaching middle age, semi-successful person would do. I proceeded to tell him what I should have done, not what I did.

### **Build a foundation**

“Jonathan,” I said, “you need to ensure that whatever you do, make sure you build your foundation on three parts – your digital relevance, your digital voice and your digital seat at the table.”

The world is so different from 1976, when youth frustration due to regulated oppression exploded and the Soweto Uprising made the news, especially for people entering the world of work. But the youth are still easily marginalised due to the woeful lack of access to the internet, the web and the boundless opportunities that exist in this new frontier.

For those who are privileged enough to be able to access the digital world, the future is bright. It means that the traditional path to success is not necessarily the same for everyone.

There are options. Heck, even the idea of success is now so varied and more encompassing. No longer does it have to be confined to a couple with 2,5 kids, 2 cars and a house with a white picket fence holding back a cute labrador.

“But, my career...?” was a question almost posed by my poor Jonathan.

What career? My opinion was quite vocal on the “career question”. For me, a career is a linear concept which is either going up or going down. You either succeed or you fail. It’s a hard line to follow and many burn out in the path to the ever-elusive top.

I prefer to consider work as a project. A project, by definition, has a start and end date. If you view your working life as a series of projects, you provide yourself with the option to change. It also allows for failure. If a project fails, you can move to the next one and take the lessons with you. If your career fails...ouch!

The career option is a stable, predictable series of steps. Many of us (older people) like predictable and something that’s easy to follow.

### **Continuous learning**

Being project-focused means a journey of continuous learning, change and self-examination because you have to remain relevant to move to the next project. Having foundational skills is a must and those in the digital economy include areas such as programming, system analysis, robotics, data analytics or workflow. These skills allow you to get work done.

At the time of writing this piece, there are over one million vacancies for programmers and the third-highest paying job in the world is a software developer. Unless you are a neurosurgeon or anaesthetist you simply don’t do as well as a software developer!

To live in the project world you need to be tech-savvy, but you also need to be money smart. True independence comes when your financial freedom is not solely dictated by your job. After all, J.O.B stands for “Just Over Broke.” Turns out those

investment people actually have it bang on.

You need to ensure that you can earn money when you are sleeping. It's a big ask, but through sensible investments, business interests or hard saving it's possible to build momentum and soon be free. A brilliant way to get a head start on how to do this is captured in the course offered by Worth SA –to make your money work for you, not the other way round.

### **You have a choice**

Why is this important in the digital world? Simply put, this gives you choice. It allows you to work with passion, to stand on principles and to take risks because you know you have a buffer against the dark days.

Lastly, young people need to take advantage of the digital stage. The barriers of entry are low, the information and training is available (mostly free) and there is massive demand. Perhaps not in your country, but the world is a small place when it comes to digital work.

As an example, my sister and brother in law have been travelling the world for two years - and earning whilst they are doing this as he is a programmer and she is a graphic designer. Both never have to be in the office and work completely remotely. They are currently in Bali....drat...

Being young is both beautiful and ugly, it's scary and exciting, carefree and consequence-filled. The choices we make bear fruit far into the future and I would encourage young people to know that they have a choice.

I finished up my call with Jonathan saying "Jonathan if I were in your shoes, I would strongly consider moving up the value chain to an area where you can solve problems for clients such as in Robotics or Artificial Intelligence as that's where organisations are moving at a rapid rate."

Let's see which path he follows...

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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