

Helping entrepreneurs to innovate and grow

 By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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Innocircle, a South African innovation consultancy, helps entrepreneurs innovate and grow. The Innocircle team guides entrepreneurs to develop and implement effective, tangible and measurable strategies for customer-driven innovation, business model innovation and the development of sustainable competitive advantage.



Innocircle co-founders, Karen Eksteen and Ellen Fischat

Innocircle together with the Meltwater Entrepreneurial School of Technology (MEST) Africa implemented the Airbus BizLab and the GIZ's (the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) Make-IT in Africa #Africa4Future aerospace accelerator initiative.

We chat to Karen Eksteen, co-founder of InnoCircle to find out more about how the innovation consultancy came in to fruition and their journey in helping entrepreneurs innovate and grow...

Can you tell us a bit about Innocircle?

Innocircle is a strategy and innovation consultancy based in Cape Town and one of the implementation partners of the Airbus Bizlab & GIZ Africa4Future Aerospace Accelerator program.

Innocircle enables innovation commercialisation, assist tech startups and unlock the potential of the entrepreneurs and innovators with a dynamic and diverse approach. We also assist corporates to find different strategic approaches to their markets and assist everyday entrepreneurs to scale up, globalise and increase the impact of their products and services.

■ **When, how and why did you get started?**

Innocircle was founded in February 2018 after years in innovation skills development in the public sector. It was time to venture out and not only give advice on entrepreneurship but live it too.

■ **What are some of the obstacles you've had to overcome since starting out?**

A small team with not enough hours in the day to have a successful business and a social life. This is still a challenge but we are working on it. For now, we align ourselves with world-class associates and service providers to assist us in delivering, but in the very near future, we'll have the expertise in-house.

■ **What advice would you give to other aspiring entrepreneurs?**

As Laurie Notaro said

“ If you really believe in what you are doing, work hard, take nothing personally and if something blocks one route, find another. Never give up. ”

This has been my philosophy in life and you need this bit of stubbornness to get through the tough times. Also, celebrate all successes even if it is very small... you have worked hard for it.

■ **What has been your proudest achievements thus far?**

Receiving the #Africa4Future Aerospace Accelerator contract which is sponsored by Airbus Bizlab and GIZ Make_IT Africa. Innocircle was just a few months old when we secured the contract. And working with startups from all over Africa and the amazing programme funders – definitely our biggest achievement thus far.

Every time an entrepreneur and startup that one had some involvement in during Innocircle's lifetime or even in some of the previous tech entrepreneurial programmes, succeed – even in a small way - feels like the proudest achievement because one has seen their growth and you know the effort that has been put into their businesses.

■ **What does the future of entrepreneurship look like to you?**

Entrepreneurship in Africa is alive and happening. Many African countries are recognising the bright future which entrepreneurs can offer and lighten the tax burden on startups.

South Africa is not there yet, but we can only hope that the powers that be, will take note of the changes happening in countries such as Mauritius, Tunisia, Rwanda and Ghana, and follow suit.

■ **What is the importance of startup accelerator/incubator programmes?**

Startup accelerators and incubators open networks for the entrepreneurs which they usually would not have had access to. Corporates and investors get access to entrepreneurial talent and the opportunity to handpick their next investment or feed into their supply chain. It is important though that startups select the 'right fit' accelerator and commit to the time and effort that it requires.

■ **What would you like to see changed in the South African/African startup landscape?**

I would like to see less “tick box” approaches by some of the players in the ecosystem and real commitment to open doors for the startups and uptake in the supply chain of corporates and government.

■ **What do you believe are the traits an entrepreneur needs in order to succeed?**

- Determination (stubbornness not to accept failure).

- Creativity (many a time you have to make a plan and make things work without the necessary resources).
- High energy levels
- Optimistic personality

▣ ***Why would you encourage someone to become an entrepreneur?***

Sometimes I think entrepreneurship chooses you, you don't choose entrepreneurship. It takes a very special person to be an entrepreneur. In the early days, it is a very lonely road with long days and you need to have the determination to see it through to the next success.

▣ ***What is the importance of entrepreneurship?***

Entrepreneurship and startups will change the socio-economic environment by creating more jobs, bringing in new technology and innovation to make the world a better place.

▣ ***Where would you like to see Innocircle in the next 5 years?***

Our vision for Innocircle is to have a presence in more African countries to show the world the innovations and technologies coming out of Africa for Africa and ultimately to have an angel fund to invest in these innovations.

ABOUT EVAN-LEE COURIE

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