David Phume, an African technologist on a mission

By Evan-Lee Courie   29 May 2020

David Phume was born with an entrepreneurial spirit. The charismatic creative and tech entrepreneur, who hails from Bryanston, Johannesburg, has never been afraid to dream big.

Phume studied 3D animation at Boston Media House in Johannesburg, before graduating from a San Francisco-based animation school. In 2005, he founded award-winning Penthouse Motion Pictures, a broadcast design and animation studio. However, his dreams were much bigger and that is why he went on to study robotics and AI online with Udacity.

With his newfound interest in robotics and AI, he is determined to become a leader in this field on the African continent and has since launched a technology movement.

David Phume and business partner, Shelile "Gino" Shelile

Phume chats to us about Blackchain, a technology company that identifies problems in Africa and finds solutions through technology. It is founded on four pillars - to inspire, identify talent, nurture skills and innovate.

▦ What is the core function of Blackchain?

The function of Blackchain it to solve problems in Africa with the use of technology.

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

Having spent a lot of time in the Silicon Valley circles it's easy to try and copy what works there. However, as an African technologist on a mission, the biggest challenge was finding the right approach in founding a tech organisation in Africa. I first needed to shut myself from all the noise and clutter and come to terms with who I am and where I'm from. This helped me find a sense of purpose and mission.

▦ What advice would you give to other aspiring entrepreneurs?

I would advise aspiring entrepreneurs to do something with a strong sense of purpose and to not just follow the craze of being an 'entrepreneur'.

⊞ *What has been your proudest achievement thus far?*

What I am most proud of is establishing the more movement that is Blackchain.ai, which is a platform to develop young African technologists and computer scientists

⊞ *What does the future of entrepreneurship look like to you?*
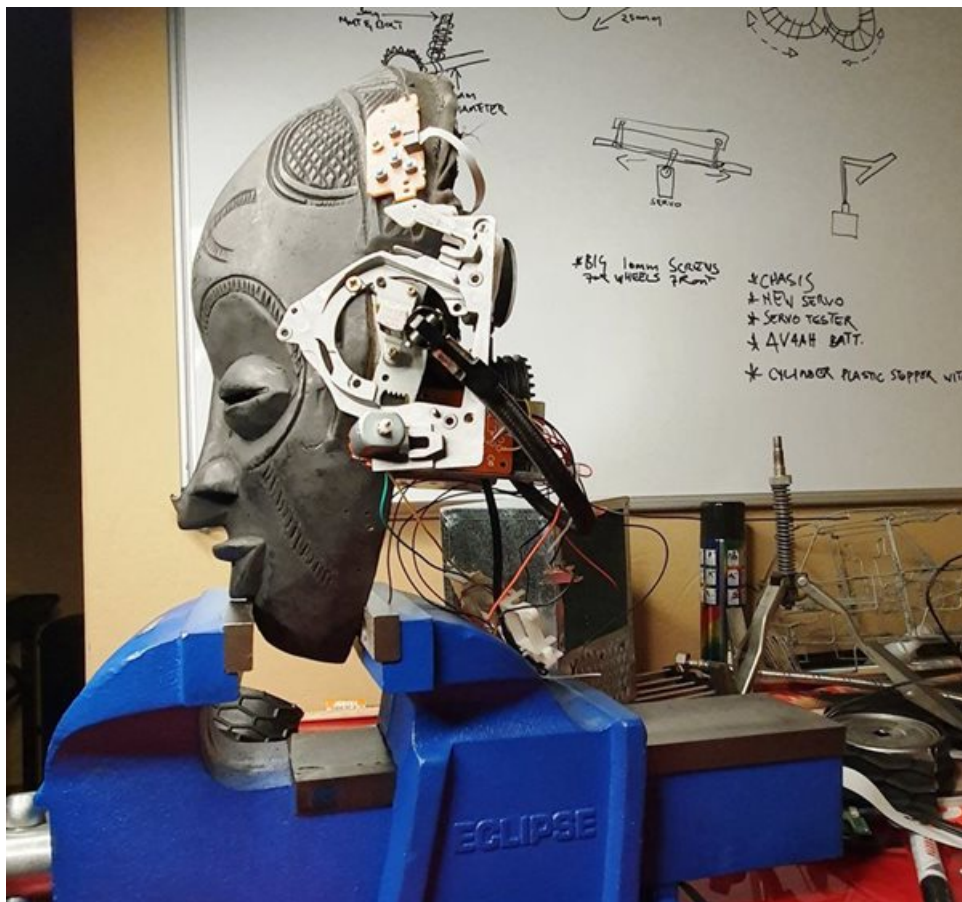
I am seeing that employing tech talent is becoming a must for all types of businesses.

⊞ *What do you think is the importance of startup accelerator/incubator programmes?*

In my opinion, startup accelerators are a definite must. YC combinator in Silicon Valley is single-handedly responsible for a number unicorns like Stripe and Dropbox. It's also exciting to see their impact in Africa through their work with a Nigerian fintech startup, PayStack.

⊞ *What would you like to see changed in the African startup landscape?*

The term startup could mean any startup business. My response is will be geared more towards tech startups. I believe that the tech startup landscape is still developing in Africa, so I would like to see more young talent being groomed for the future.

⊞ *Tell us about your biggest struggles as an entrepreneur, as well as some major highlights.*

I am a big dreamer, so my biggest struggle is my desire to take on problems that are too large at an early stage. Yes, it's a good thing to be ambitious, but without the right steering, it can also be dangerous.

Larry Page and Sergey Brin started off by tackling one problem and that was search. They didn't start off wanting to take over the world. Elon Musk didn't start off by building a rocket. They all started tackling problems their own size then developed a bigger appetite for bigger problems once they conquered the smaller ones.

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

The world is beset with many problems and challenges. The need for novel solutions calls on thinkers and hackers to come forward. It's one of the most eternally fulfilling things in life to apply yourself and live with a purpose.

⁜ *Where would you like to see Blackchain in the next 5 years?*

Our goal for the next five years is to have over 5,000 young African technologists enrolled in our Robotics and AI education program and being a barracks for an army of technologists in Africa.

ABOUT EVAN-LEE COURIE

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