Meet Riaz Moola, the 'Steve Jobs of SA'

By Evan-Lee Courie   25 Sep 2019

Dubbed the 'Steve Jobs of South Africa' by the *Sunday Times* in 2017, as well as being listed in Mail & Guardian Top 200 Young South Africans in 2016, Riaz Moola has a spectrum of accomplishments that speaks for itself. He is the founder and CEO of CoGrammar, an edtech startup that is dedicated to closing the global tech skills gap.

Riaz Moola

We chat with Riaz Moola, who has also been listed in the Forbes Africa 30 Under 30 in the Technology sector in 2018, to find out more about HyperionDev, and the journey of starting up one of the largest tech education company's in Southern Africa...

⠿ *Can you tell us a bit about HyperionDev?*

HyperionDev, a division of CoGrammar, is the largest tech education company in Southern Africa. It was founded in 2014 and offers mentored coding boot camps, both online and on-site at its Sandton and Woodstock premises. From its two bases in London and Cape Town, HyperionDev provides boot camps in Data Science, Full Stack Web Development and

Software Engineering.

HyperionDev is backed by both Facebook and Google, and has supported and successfully placed learners from over 40 countries into developer roles.

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

The motivation for setting up HyperionDev stemmed directly from witnessing the depressing drop-out rates in South African universities in computer science degrees. I couldn't see South Africa, with its average failure rate of 88%, meeting its tech demands, and I wanted to change that. My initial idea was a simple one: an online course where people struggling with limited internet access - a reality in South Africa - could still become programmers.

To deal with these uniquely African conditions, I developed a simple online course in Python to teach students the basics of Artificial Intelligence with small files – rather than the large data-hungry videos offered by many massive open online courses (MOOCs).

The course then spread organically to many other universities all across South Africa, and it kept getting a phenomenal response from people who wanted affordable, accessible courses in programming. HyperionDev is now the largest online coding boot camp in Africa and has been successfully scaled internationally to over 40 countries.

⊞ *What is the core function of HyperionDev?*

As a people-first company, HyperionDev's ambition is to close the global tech skills gap by accelerating people into programming careers. Right now, there is a dire tech shortage both in South Africa and globally.

According to MyBroadband's 2019 IT Salary Survey, 46% of IT professionals in South Africa are planning to work overseas or leave SA permanently in the near future. This will create a dire skills shortage. Our goal at HyperionDev is to bring industry critical tech skills to able and keen students at a fraction of the cost and time of a traditional university degree.

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

Every startup experiences challenges - HyperionDev was no exception. It's always very difficult to find the very best talent to build your dream team, and as with all startups securing funding is never a simple task. Surprisingly, one of our biggest challenges has been keeping up with the massive growth we've been experiencing over the past few years.

⊞ *What advice would you give to other aspiring entrepreneurs?Never give up. Embrace your vision and keep going.*

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

We're exceptionally proud to have received funding from both Facebook and Google. We're the first South African startup

to have received financial backing and support from internationally-recognised big tech companies.

We're also very proud and pleased about our graduate outcomes. We publish an annual Graduate Outcomes Report and the 2018 report showed that 95% of our graduates reached their career outcomes upon graduating. These outcomes included students moving to a new career in tech, starting their own business, upskilling in their current tech role or using their new skills in another job.

In addition, once graduates completed their courses with us, their salaries, on average, increased by R12,000 per month, equating to an extra R144,000 per annum.

What does the future of entrepreneurship look like to you?

Obviously, I'm predominantly interested in the edtech space. With this in mind, the education market has been growing since 2013 at an annual rate of 90%. We feel that HyperionDev is uniquely positioned to become a global engine for coding education, supporting millions of aspiring developers in bridging the tech skills gap.

When it comes to technology education, I believe African startups have the edge in understanding the technological constraints and thinking of innovative methods of working around them. High demand for easy-access education provides the stimulus for African entrepreneurs who need to make sure their solutions are cost-effective and can be used in a variety of settings, including low bandwidth areas.

What is the importance of startup accelerator/incubator programs?

There are a number of important factors here. Firstly, incubator programs are integral in providing support in those early critical days of a startup. Thereafter, accelerator or incubator programs play a role in guiding entrepreneurs. They should also encourage new business owners to take risks and they should provide an opportunity for experienced business owners to mentor and assist new entrepreneurs.

These programs also attract a lot of talent and are an incredible space for startups to build lasting and expansive networks across the world.

What would you like to see changed in the South African/African startup landscape?Many South African entrepreneurs simply think too small. We live in a connected world, so we can operate and compete on the global stage. People often can't believe that we got funding from Facebook.

The fact of the matter is, there's no reason why a South African company can't get funding from a massive international operation. It can be done. It's not necessarily easy. We had to work very hard to get it, but it's not impossible. You just need to start thinking big.
We need to cultivate more of a risk appetite in the startup landscape. South Africa has, sadly, never had a real unicorn startup - i.e. a startup valued at over one billion dollars.

Investors need to take on more of a private equity mindset rather than a venture capital mindset with the understanding of high risk, high reward. So investors should be funding companies to scale to billions rather than buying 50% of a company in the early days to mitigate risk.

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

Resilience, creativity, ambition, financial acumen, a well-adjusted risk-taking attitude

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

Some major struggles included the following: securing financial backing from multinational tech companies like Google and Facebook (which was a major catalyst for our growth), finding the best product fit for our various markets and scaling a team, which required so many different skill sets from copywriting to financial controls.

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

There are big rewards out there - and they're not just financial, but you need to be comfortable taking big risks. Being an entrepreneur builds your skills as well as those of others.

⊞ *What is the importance of entrepreneurship?*

Research shows consistently that startups and SMEs, driven by entrepreneurs, disproportionately contribute to innovation in an economy, and this is especially applicable in a South African context - i.e. these types of businesses generate more economic activity and jobs for their size than larger organisations. Here's the bottom line: when entrepreneurs win, a country wins.

⊞ *Where would you like to see HyperionDev in the next 5 years?*

HyperionDev will be a major international player in the tech assessment and skilling space - not just a major player in Southern Africa.

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