ICT Hubs study:
The impact of ActivSpaces model (in Cameroon) on its entrepreneurs
Final Report
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Abstract

This research is aimed at understanding the impact of the ActivSpaces model on its entrepreneurs. An ICT hub is a space where tech-entrepreneurs converge to network, learn from each other, design and program in order to conceptualize their mental creations. The first two Hub models of the 15 hubs in Africa to be profiled within this study were iHub, Nairobi’s innovation Hub for the Technology community and HiveColab, an innovation and collaboration space in Uganda. The third being Activspace, the model was different from the first 2 Hubs (iHub and Hive Colab), in that Activspaces has currently incorporated an open membership tier system. In addition, Activspaces can boast of having 2 location sites, one in Buea and the other in Douala. The other unique factor that differentiates Activspaces from the first 2 Hubs is on their sustainability model as was described in the model report.

The study on ActivSpaces found that most (n=11) of the individuals who frequent it are young people between the ages of 18-29. Additionally, two thirds (n=8) of the members hold a bachelors degree in various disciplines, most of which are in science-oriented fields. The study found that all of the entrepreneurs interviewed (n=12) appreciate the ActivSpaces as a conducive and innovative co-working space that drives continuous networking through the events, community meetups that leads to collaboration and partnerships, sharing skills and knowledge through teamwork activities, among others. Thus, having graduated with little to no forthcoming job opportunities, these talented entrepreneurs have had their talents and skills housed and nurtured under the Hub.

Overall, the entrepreneurs believe that the ActivSpaces can grow and strengthen its model by growing with institutional support, adopting tiered membership systems and premium courseware, and most importantly establishing an alumni network that share their experiences and skills with the community of members.

Keywords: ICT Hubs, Technology, Entrepreneurs, innovation, co-working space, Africa Cameroon
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Introduction

ICT trends:

Technology in Africa holds many promises as a driver of positive changes, as a tool to address problems. Economic development requires modern technology that has been used as a strategic tool in reducing transaction costs, crisis management, facilitating education and strengthening entrepreneurship.

It is this manifold interrelation of technology with its environment that makes exploring the future of technology so interesting and valuable. There is a need to explore how technology in Africa will or might evolve; to discuss the drivers and the obstacles, the issues technology might resolve and the problems it might cause; to identify how technology changes society and how African societies might change global technology [1].

It is widely recognized that Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) can play an important role in both social and economic development. This is attributed to its rapidly changing nature and ability to integrate world economies. The changing nature of ICT keeps an innovative pressure on both intra-ICT industries and on the rest of economy, and can facilitates rapid increases in total overall productivity. By increasing globalization of economies, technology raises the international competitive pressures and then necessitates continuous improvements in the competitiveness of countries.

As a trend that is replicated worldwide; but specific to this study in Cameroon, technology appears to be the proverbial key to unshackling the country from the bondage of illiteracy and social inequalities. The country hopes that ICT could be the game-changer that will mend the somewhat tarnished global appearance of this West African state.

The digitization of Cameroonian society is still in its infancy, and telecommunication infrastructure is significantly underdeveloped. The Scan-ICT 2006 report reveals that the cost of a computer is equivalent to the annual per capita income, which makes this tool inaccessible to the majority of Cameroonian and constitutes a major obstacle to Internet access for the population (less than 1% of households have an internet connection). Moreover, according to the Scan-ICT survey, 66.2% of institutions have no computers and only 6.2% have more than one computer. Yet the country is endowed with a fibre-optic backbone running along the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline [2].

Cameroon is among the sub-Saharan African countries that are making progress in the use of ICTs in the various development sectors particularly in education. However, little has been done to emphasize the importance and impact of ICT in the development process particularly among the youth. In recent years, the government has created ICT
centers in some institutions around the country where computers have been stocked for the training of young Cameroonians in Computer Education. ICT was officially introduced into education in 2001 by the president (ICT survey, 2007), but it took until 2010 for the Ministry of Basic Education to institute the teaching of ICT in all primary schools and teacher training institutions around the country. The Minister’s order specifies details as to the type of exams, the duration and the coefficients of the different exams. The ICT exam questions are optional and the marks earned by the candidates will serve as bonus marks. In 2011, ICT exams were done for the first time ever in Cameroon in the General Certificate of Education Exams (GCE) both at the Ordinary and Advanced Level of secondary education.

Promoting ICT amongst the youth:

The government is not alone in its effort to promote ICT among youths; the private sector and NGOs are also making efforts to engage the youth through ICT programs. For example I-Vission (Information Vehicle in Sub Sahara and International organizations and Networks) International, a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing ICTs to centers of social development that introduced Tachno-Holidays, an initiative collaborating with international Volunteers to prepare the youth to adapt themselves to the opportunities that the ICTs offer and as such participate in socio-economic development and nation building. Additionally, there is the ICT-U (the Information and Telecommunication University) a US-based institution that launched its campus in Yaoundé, with a liaison office in Buea South West Region of Cameroon that seeks to enable Cameroonians to use ICT as an enabler in all disciplines, especially in the social sciences (in banking, accounting and marketing) by providing them with the knowledge on the use of ICT in the social sciences.

“The difference between the developed world and the developing world is in the ability to harness information and use it to promote development of which the developed world has successfully achieved. Cameroon has moved from the industrial age to the information age and ICT-U hopes to transform the Cameroonian youth from the importers and consumers of ICT to producers of ICT,” says the marketing Manager of ICTU, Mr Layo Mbunkur.

While these are great ideas, certain issues need to be taken into consideration such as: Are the youth there? Are they interested? What will it take to make them interested? A lack of incentives such as lack of ICT related jobs, lack of co-working platforms and educational facilities set up by the government; curtails the participation of youths in ICT related activities.

According to statistics from the Ministry of Youth Affairs, about 11% of youths between the ages of 15 - 29 years old are unemployed and this situation is worse in urban areas. The unemployment rate for youths between the ages of 15 and 19 years and 20 and 24 years is 94% and 84% respectively. [3].
Most youths are interested in using ICT, but they are not interested in investing in ICT development. The Internet is mostly used to check their inboxes and chat with friends on social networks and as such under utilizing the ICT potential. Even with an incubation hub such as ActivSpaces in Buea, a lot has to be done to create awareness among the youth, initiate interest and desire, and provide them with necessary tools to take action in investing in ICT. While creating awareness, interest and desire are essential factors to attracting youths to the space; its location is another factor to be considered. The space is located a great distance from Molyko (the area where residents are mostly young in age) and most cannot afford the cost of transportation every day.

Impact of ICT:

While it is factual that ICT is a necessity and part and parcel of human existence, in Cameroon, they do not yet understand the power it carries and are importers and consumers of ICT but never producers of ICT. “Parents do not see a future in ICT and as such most deter their children from looking in the direction of ICT for a future” said one member of ActivSpaces. While most tend to look at the negative impacts of ICT, they fail to see the enormous positive impacts it is creating. Dorothy, a graduate from the history department of the University of Buea, agrees ICT has done more good than harm especially in education. She graduated from the university but says she cannot remember much of what she was taught in class; she remembers all she learnt online because she did the research work. Doing the research work has helped her acquire enough knowledge about her subject matter thus enabling her to effectively participate in class. She believed most studies should be geared towards e-learning as this creates room for interactive lessons between students and lecturers as a result of web based information. Students get to register for their courses online, that way they do not get to spend countless hours waiting on lecturers to sign for a course; fees into the university is paid via mobile money, a service offered by MTN Cameroon, saving many from long queues.

ICT opens a lot of opportunities regardless of professional expertise or academic background. Mr Benyella for example, a graduate from the University of Buea with a Bsc in Journalism and Mass Communication makes a living as a web designer. While some youths are exploiting ICT and using it to its maximum, a greater proportion of the youth are naïve about its potential. Most study it at school but lack places to go to explore it further. What they do not understand is the possibility of self-employment by solving pertinent issues within the society through the use of ICT.

Government involvement:

Unfortunately for most youths, ICT is poorly encouraged by the government, which extends to a dearth of digitization of their activities. When the ActivSpaces entrepreneurs were asked on involving government as a key stakeholder in the ICT Hubs, they had mixed views on the involvement of Government agencies in the collaboration with ActivSpaces.
Two thirds of our respondents (n=8) felt that the government ought to be involved in the affairs of the space since it can help in promoting and providing grants to ensure smooth running of the space. Government involvement will not only make financing easier but also ease the procedures involved in applying for loans and other financial aid to businesses. Additionally, one respondent said that the information and content generated by members in the space might help the government make informed decision to e.g. provide education that is up to standard and by using ICT as a tool to connect government and citizens, the government is able to promote transparency. Perhaps the government and Activspaces partnership might be summed up by a quote from one respondent who said, “The easiest way to grow is to fly with an eagle as the government is the eagle”.

On the contrary, one third (n=4) are of the opinion that the government should not be included in the running of ActivSpaces. “My experience with the government has been very bad. They cannot execute as already seen in the past projects. So, anywhere there is execution, e.g. in Activspaces, the government should not be involved as they will slow down things”, one responded said. Similar sentiments were echoed from all members who opposed the idea of government involvement in ActivSpaces.

![Figure 1: Government Involvement](image_url)
The Cameroonian government has taken significant strides in pushing and promoting the country’s ICT agenda by setting up a number of institutions to implement and regulate its ICT policy. The first of these institutions is the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications which elaborates, implements and evaluates government policy concerning postal and telecom activities. Other institutions set up to accomplish specific ICT missions include the Telecommunications Regulator Board and the National Agency for ICT. However, there is potential to do a lot more to ensure that the country reaps the full benefits of Technology both in the short and long term.

Conversely, the government has not had a perfect track record especially in matters relating to corruption and public finance. In Endemic Corruption in Cameroon, Charles M. Fombad acknowledges the fact that corruption happens to be biggest problem Cameroon struggles with. Corruption has become a part of everyday life and people in the community have accepted this as the status quo. Fombad, therefore, suggests that the only way to move forward is to get rid of corruption [4].

Internet access:

Less than 3% of Cameroonians have Internet access [5]. This has hindered not only the progress but also derivation of the value of web-based applications. There exist agile environments like Buea, which houses a University that had 617 and 758 students graduating from the Faculty of Sciences in 2010 and 2011 respectively (University of Buea, 2012). These students have come up with ideas that then get nurtured and shaped in co-working spaces such as ActivSpaces. These spaces provide services such as space, free Internet access among other resources that could go a long way to encourage ICT uptake among youths in Cameroon. These spaces further act as nurturing and collaboration spaces, which allow the students to exchange and develop their ideas to actualization. If these youths have such an environment where they could put their minds at work in stimulating innovative and creative ideas, it will keep them busy and off the streets therefore reducing crime and unemployment.

This report aims to find out how the Activspaces model impacts the entrepreneurial culture of its members and Cameroon, as a whole.

**METHODOLOGY**

An ethnographic approach was used for this study, with significant time spent observing and immersion in the ActivSpaces environment to better understand the experience of the users. Data was collected using mixed methods including semi-structured and virtual interviews, observation, and secondary literature research.

A total of 12 members formed the sample population. Each of the interviews took approximately 25 minutes. The sample size was statistically representative of the entire ActivSpaces population as the hub houses 7 startups and 5 other startups virtually that have minimal involvements with the space be it during events or activities. At least two members from each startup were interviewed. The interviews were conducted within the
Hub and around the vicinity of the hub.

Research Objectives

The main aim of the ICT Hubs study is to understand and assess how the factors that make up the ActivSpaces model have impacted on its entrepreneurs by answering the following research questions:

- What impact does the hub model have on the individual development of its members (skills and personal growth)?
- What impact does the hub model have on the individual start-ups and their innovations?
- What is the significance of the hub community to the individual member?
- What are the most important factors, which makes the members continue to use the space?
- What are the lessons and the recommendations to the hub and its members?

Criteria

- The following is the criteria that was used to select members to be interviewed:
  - Must have been a member in the hub for a minimum of 3 months
  - Must have a minimum number of 2 people in the team
  - Have at least 1 product/innovation developed or in development
  - Have at least 1 mentor
  - Must be working in the development of ICT-related sector e.g. through their innovations or work
  - Should have attended at least 2 events from the Hub
Findings

ActivSpaces as a conduit in stimulating youth employment

Private initiatives, such as ActivSpaces, are seen as a step in the right direction in tackling Cameroon’s unemployment. This is mainly by enabling techies and anyone interested in Information Technology to come together and share ideas that lead to new development and contribute to enhancing a sustainable growth in the ICT sector.

ActivSpaces, which stands for ‘African Center for Technology, Innovation & Ventures Spaces’ is an open collaboration physical space, innovation hub, and technology incubator aimed at providing coaching services and development resources for start-ups and young techies in Cameroon [6]. There arose a need to have this open space due to the technological crusade that was spreading across Africa, and Cameroon as a country wanted to be part of the revolution. ActivSpaces was, therefore, set up because of an existing opportunity for local developers to satisfy local needs, as the application software market was still largely unexplored. There are 13 million youths in the country and less than 1 million youths are employed. Of the jobless, youths below the age of 30 years constitute a greater percentage of the jobless; majority of who are University degree and diploma holders, according to Africa Review 2011 [7]. Subsequently, ICT hubs like ActivSpaces can be used as an innovation stimulant to create employment.

ActivSpaces Attracting Young People (Space Demographics):

It was interesting to note that a majority of the members who frequent the Space are the youth between the ages of 18-29 years (n=11). Only one respondent was between 30-39 years of age.
This appears to be a trend that is replicated in most innovation centers in Africa that iHub research has profiles; iHub-Kenya, HiveColab-Uganda and now, ActivSpaces-Cameroon, where the young people form the bulk of the population that frequents and seeks membership in innovation hubs. Innovation centers appeal most the youth because they are viewed as a break-away from the ‘suit-and-tie’ formal employment of the 21st century. The young people believe that their ideas and creations can fully be developed under the hospice of an innovation hub where they exchange ideas among other members and finally come up with possible solutions to recurring problems.
On the national scale, the young people in Cameroon form the bulk of the population. In a country of 20,129,878 inhabitants, 63% of the population is under 25 of years with 47% being between 5 and 24 years old [8]. Conscious of the potential labour force this represents, innovative centers such as ActivSpaces strive to improve training to its members and create an atmosphere where a culture of open innovation is encouraged. Such innovative young people are empowered to create employment opportunities for themselves and their peers by forming startup companies and other small and medium sized entities.

**ICT Hubs and Education:**

ActivSpaces seems to not only attract thinkers and innovators, but also creators who are educated. Approximately two-thirds (n=8) of the members interviewed have Bachelor degrees in various science-oriented fields such as computer science/engineering, mathematics and IT management. Moreover, a quarter of the members (n=3) have Masters degrees, still in the sciences field and only one of these members was a holder of a certification in CCNA.

![Figure 3: Members Highest level of Education](image-url)
Additionally, of all the respondents interviewed (n=12), (n=11) were male and only one female (n=1).

In fact, this female member is the holder of a CCNA (Cisco Certified Network Associate) certification. It can be deduced that the desire to hold science-oriented diplomas, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees appears to be the preserve of almost all of the male respondents. Of all the (n=11) male respondents interviewed, (n=10) have a science-oriented degree. The exception opted to study accountancy, which can also be counted as a social science course and is able to offer accounting services to members of the space since there is a big gap in the startups when it comes to ensuring accurate and proper financial management. This appears to be a cultural norm that is woven in the social fabric of the Cameroonian community where boys are encouraged to pursue science oriented courses and the women folks relegated to pursue community based certifications or STEM unrelated courses.

The noticeably large gap in the ratio of male to female members of the ActivSpaces cuts across ICT hubs in Kenya and Uganda as well, where Technology is dubbed as a male-dominated area. Perhaps the gaps exists because women view computer science as a subject for men, or have not developed skills in the field because they have not been exposed to the subject matter at school or have been discouraged by family and friends.

Despite the many possible reasons why there are fewer women in the field and in the ICT Hubs, there is enormous potential for maximizing the growth of technology through increasing the number and quality of women in technology with initiatives such as Computer Club’s for Girls (CC4G) scheme in Cameroon and Akirachix in Kenya. In a recent article by Jamuna Ravi titled “Plugging the IT skill gap: Encouraging women into a career in Technology”, the author writes that the only way to fix the gender disparity in technology is to have more women coming in at the entry level IT jobs. “It’s a numbers game;
you need more at the bottom to fill the jobs at the top. The reality is we do lose a lot of women along the way”. [13].

Impact of the Hub to the individual member

Period of time members have been working from the ActivSpaces

Three quarters (n=9) of the interviewed members have been coming to the ActivSpaces since it began in 2010 and the remainder (n=3) has been frequenting the space for 3-6 months. The respondents mentioned that they have witnessed the growth and dynamism of the space and view ActivSpaces as a second home to them- where they have developed in areas such as revenue, skills and clientele. This could be seen to indicate that the longer a member stays at the ActivSpaces, the more they network and grow as an individual.

How often do you come to the ActivSpaces?

From the research findings an equal number (n=3 each) of the members come to the ActivSpaces on a daily basis, 2-4 times in a week or only come to ActivSpaces during events and activities that are held monthly. The rest of the respondents (n=2) frequent...
the space once a week or once a month (n=1). The respondents who frequent the space on a daily basis are those who are currently working on start-ups that are at their infancy stage and have not yet fully matured.

ON AVERAGE, HOW OFTEN DO MEMBERS COME TO THE SPACE

![Bar chart showing frequency of space visits](chart)

Figure 6: on average, how often do members come to the space
Additionally, coming to the space on a daily and weekly basis can be attributed to access to resources that ActivSpaces provides such as free Internet, space to work and an opportunity to learn from other community members.

Why Do You Like Being A Member Of Activspaces?

One of the aims of the study was to ascertain why members like being an ActivSpaces member and what keeps them coming back to the space as a model factor.

Sharing ideas:

Almost half (n=5) of those interviewed stated that the concept of idea sharing is what they find fascinating about being part of the space. To the members, idea sharing involves meeting like-minded individuals and learning from them about the new happenings in a particular field. To others the idea of sharing entails sharing talents and acquiring new information pertaining to their startups.

New opportunities:

(N=2) of the members like the fact that the space offers new opportunities. One member was quoted as saying, “Thanks to ActivSpaces now I have avenues to circulate my business plan by meeting members and getting assistance”. To others, the idea of finding new opportunities manifests in the ability to be self-employed due to the many projects one can be involved in in the ActivSpaces.

Collaborations:

A further (n=2) like collaborating with like-minded individuals in the space. Collaboration is made possible by the large diversity of people who are willing to help them acquire skill sets they do not have.
Free Internet:

Only (n=2) of the respondents like the free Internet provided by ActivSpaces. This can be explained by Cameroon’s high Internet access costs. According to the World Bank, the price basket for access to Internet in 2011 was US$17.6 per month, while only less than 3% of Cameroon residents have access to internet [9]. The average for all lower-middle
income countries was much lower at just US$10 per month (Telecommunications Sector Performance Review, 2011).

Access to reliable Internet is an integral part to the growth and sustenance of a Tech-Hub. Members use the Internet as a medium of communication, research and most importantly, as a medium for commerce-related activities. As an avenue for communication, the Internet lets members get exposure and feedback from subscribers and clientele that are continents away. The positive or negative feedback enables the respective startups or freelancers realign their goals according to the local or global trends.

The Internet also enables the 21st century startups to do business via e-Commerce. The Internet serves as the universal tool of the virtual world and acts as a guide for the different strategies involved in the money market. Hence the success of the tech startups is also dependent on the Internet. Right from the increase in sales, the Internet can predetermine customer acquisition strategies, to the decrease in the costs and expansion of the size of the market. This is the reason for the growing popularity of the online businesses today.

**Clustering members into membership tier systems**

Unlike other Innovation hubs that have been part of this study so far, ActivSpaces in Cameroon appears to have an open membership system - No membership tier systems exist. Membership is available at no cost and is available to college students, graduates, women, aspiring techies, technology professionals and community leaders. As it was documented in their model report, the only requirement for access to the Hub is that applicants have an active project in the works. New members are selected by pitching their ideas to other community members. The community then decides to grant access based on the strength and potential of an individual’s idea. Thereafter, members must be able to demonstrate progress on their work. The goal here is to keep the drive and participation at high levels.

(N=6) of the respondents said they would like to have a tier system in the space. The reasons behind this appeared to be varied. A cross section of the members said they would welcome the clustering system if the management team provided good incentives and assisted members understand better these tiers and what is expected from them as members. Others said they would welcome the tier system if the member base increases and the whole operation is not too costly. One respondent said that they would advocate for a tier system since it would be ideal for security reasons and inject elements of seriousness among the members thus encouraging them to be more proactive and deliver.

The remaining (n=6) were a bit skeptical about adopting a clustering system for its members. The most predominant reason for rejecting a tier system is the fact that clustering might appear difficult due the newness of the concept of entrepreneurship in Cameroon, and especially in the hub itself. A few respondents argued that clustering would create constraints and inequality of resources. This implies that a few members may be favored over the others and subsequently have unlimited access to mentors, seed funding and resourceful people. Other members said that the tier system would discourage diversity.
and infringe on the freedom of members to open up and ask questions freely.

Tiered systems have worked successfully in innovation spaces such as HiveColab-Uganda and iHub-Kenya. From this study, it was evident that implementing a membership tier system would assist management of ActivSpaces to cater for the individual needs of the members by providing tailor made packages for each member tier, this is due to the growing member base in the space that comes with expectations. Grouping can be done based on prior achievements or growth of a startup. Entities that have grown to a certain degree may be accorded longer membership and facilitation fees charged for the extra privileges that they are accorded.

However, having a tier system may be seen as a way of alienating a certain group members by providing limited or extensive resources. Additionally, clustering of members may limit the power of interaction since different tiered members are allocated different sitting arrangements.

Figure 8: Idea of clustering members into tiers
What members do while at ActivSpaces

ActivSpaces emphasizes innovation at the core of its dual focus of social and commercial initiatives. It is, simultaneously, a place to work, a place to meet, a place to call one’s own and interact with innovative and inspiring people. (N=7) of the respondents normally work on projects while at the space. (N=5) attend seminars/events or either help in arranging the events. (N=2) (Who double up as members and co-founders of the space) perform quality management roles such as monitoring the space, monitoring member projects, receiving new members and taking up the responsibility of ensuring that the space is opened on time.

(N=1) of the respondent said that their main aim for coming to the hub is to network socially and build a rapport with other members. (N=1) member said that his reason for coming to the space is to come and solve challenges that he might not be able to solve on his own. Additionally, one respondent (n=1) told the research team that he analyzes social media trends on Facebook and twitter while at the ActivSpaces.
(N=10) of the respondents have contributed in one way or another to the responsibilities of ActivSpaces. Majority of the respondents said they assist to organize events while others help in the quality assurance of the space by managing the operations of ActivSpaces (as they are co-founders). Other members volunteer by organizing training workshops or taking pictures and videos of an event and offering training and talks to the members on various topics.

However, (n=2) of the respondents said they have not been actively involved in the affairs of ActivSpaces but look forward to volunteering in the near feature.

Volunteering is important for numerous reasons that benefit both the community and the volunteer. When someone gives their time, a difference is made in shaping a community for the better while the experience improves the person who gives their time. Volunteering can shape a community because it brings people together to work on a goal. Aiding others and lending a hand to get a job done more effectively, improves the community skills. More so, members willing to volunteer can be explained by the fact that there is limited capacity in the management of the space hence there is need for crowd efforts.

Area of expertise of Activspaces members

Skills are the abilities and capacities acquired through deliberate, systematic and sustained efforts to smoothly and adaptively carry out complex activities or job functions involving ideas (cognitive skills), things (technical skills), and/or people (interpersonal skills) [10].

Possessing relevant skill allows an entrepreneur to leverage technology and other resources. Skills enable businesses to remain relevant and subsequently save money, save time and prevent problems by intelligently preempting and preventing them. No skill equals fewer job opportunities for the members in the ActivSpaces and subsequently, they remains uncompetitive in the job market. One obvious way to obtain skills in an environment of rapid technological change and increased global competition is to continuously learn new things, tools and keep up with the trends.

Majority of the respondents interviewed are holders of bachelor degrees in various disciplines as mentioned above. Furthermore, (n=9) of the respondents are skilled in software development and can comfortably use PHP, Python, Drupal, java, .NET, Ruby on Rail, C, HTML, Java-script, CSS and android; (n=4) are skilled in Design work and unanimously use Photoshop as a design tool. (N=2) decided to go the business route and have acquired business development skills. Additionally, one (n=1) respondent is skilled in project management while another, (n=1) is an expert in strategic management. (N=1) respondent said that he is skilled in business management, another single respondent said that he is skilled in network trouble shooting while another cited social media development as a skill they had developed.

Based on the interviews with the respondents, there is definitely a need for more skilled expertise in project management and business management. It is therefore the role of
the Hub to ensure as they nurture their members’ ideas and teams, these skills form part of their human resource. Most projects tend to fail at their early stages, because of poor project management skills or lack of engagement of a project manager who can properly create frameworks to make sure the project succeeds. In addition skills like accounting, business and marketing are highly needed as part of the expertise of the entrepreneurs in the hubs to be able to germinate more successful startups past validation stage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Expertise of Activespaces Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Software Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHP, Python, Drupal, Java, .NET, Ruby, HTML, Javascript, CSS, Android</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NETWORK TROUBLESHOOTING</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 members</td>
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<tr>
<td>PHOTOSHOP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FACEBOOK, TWITTER, G+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROJECT AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10: Area of expertise of activespaces members

Level of members Skills improvement

(N=11) of the respondents said that their skill sets have improved while being at the ActivSpaces. They described the hub as an enabler of change and self-actualization. This can be attributed to the ability of ActivSpaces to attract well-educated and rounded members who are willing to learn from others. Special programs and seminars that are held at the space further cement the skillsets that these members have. Improvement in skill sets translated to the existence of viable startups.

Additionally, only one member (n=1) said that his skill sets have relatively remained the same since joining the ActivSpaces. Stagnation in skill sets can be attributed to his lack
of commitment to ActivSpaces activities and the inability to believe in the capability of the space. The single respondent who said his skill have remained the same frequents ActivSpaces on a monthly basis hence missing out on almost all the activities that would otherwise build his skills.

How ActivSpaces members’ skills can be further improved

Innovation centers can be described as the nexus through which ideas are disseminated and molded into functional solutions. Thus, innovation centers like ActivSpaces can help improve the skills of its members by ensuring that the space is adequately stocked with relevant and experienced networks and educative online resources. This ensures that members have all relevant information, both on a local and global scale, to keep them thoroughly informed and competitive. ActivSpaces can hold relevant seminars and workshops that are in line with the demands of the market and aim to fill in the missing gaps on skills members’ lack.

(N=6) members emphasized the importance of open learning as a way to further improve members’ skills. A teaching method that can allow members in the space learn collaboratively from each other through interest-guided learning. These respondents said that
setting goals, having deliverables and interacting with other members of the space, has helped them get more work done.

The teams in these tech hubs should work on building collective visions among themselves, as it will help them stay focused. Only \( n=2 \) believe that their skills can be honed in the space if they receive new challenging contracts or are individually challenged on various projects. How best a startup handles these new problems will be the determining factor in whether a startup will survive and remain relevant. Survival of a startup entails consolidating new skills that aid them in tackling the new challenges and subsequently, gaining relevant experience.

\[ \text{Figure 12: How activspaces members skills can be further improved} \]

\section*{STARTUPS & FREELANCERS}

\( N=6 \) of the respondents are currently in a startup while only \( n=1 \) is working on his individual projects and he also doubles up as a freelancer. \( N=4 \) of the respondents are in the process of developing a startup while another \( n=1 \) is partly in a startup and working on their own.
Activspaces startups

The table below shows the startups that have emerged out of Activspaces model giving a brief of the genesis of their ideas, product description of the startups, roles and number of the team members, customers they have acquired so far and their business model.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Products/Core Business Description</th>
<th>How their idea came about</th>
<th>Number of team members &amp; their roles</th>
<th>Business model</th>
<th>Customers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| WASAMUNDI         | A web platform that helps businesses and students find information about places they are looking e.g. hostels, restaurants etc. It also give reviews and recommendations | “When still a student, it was hard to find information about where the best hostels are and also good tenants. That was where the need was identified and the team started with Washhostel application then expanded to a larger platform for businesses and places to be searched” said the founder | 4 members with 2 co-founders  
- CEO  
- Secretary/data operations  
- CTO  
- Engineer | -Software development of websites and apps  
- Customization of existing software  
- SMS platform  
- Signing up/listing businesses online | 500 active and 500 inactive users |
| MAKONJOH          | An online shopping mall that focuses on selling products online                                     | The founder had a passion for shopping. Also from experience as shop owners who were relatives and friends approached the founder to help them identify verified places to buy products easily without too many middle men in the chain who were so expensive and corrupt. | 3 team members  
- Business Developer  
- Designer  
- Programmer | Commission for each transaction | Signed up 20+ shops |
| PADE.ME (means meet me) | An online site that focuses on event management and personalization                                    | Realized need for bringing some organization in events held by events companies            | 4 members  
- Lead developer,  
- Designer,  
- Business developer who is also the CEO | Sponsored content by creating targeted ads  
Future models will include: charging for premium services | Not yet as at the time of the interview |
| Haven’t figured out a name yet | Automates medical records for patients by connecting                                                   | Worked in a hospital as an intern and saw the need of automation of the manual records     | One team member | Still an idea | Not yet as at the time of the interview |
| Kingmaker         | An ad network for cyber café                                                                        | While the founder was working on ideas to get local content onto facebook, he decided to go to cybercafés where there was an untapped opportunity for advertisement and the idea developed with the help of the hub community. | 3 members  
- Founder & product manager and developer  
- Operations  
- Sales | - Selling ad space  
- Getting local content onto social media | In talks with potential clients such as Ad agencies. |
| Koutchoumi.com    | A website that matches real estate with people                                                        | “A friend suggested to get an apartment after school but found it necessary to have a list of apartments and their recommendations before purchasing” | 2 members  
- Projects leader & Developer  
- Web designer | - Currently it’s free  
- In the future, selling ad space. | 6 active users |
| Top-updesk.com    | Sell airtime online and give down credits                                                            | “It resulted as a stepping stone for a previous projects (online payment system) and realized there were no online e-commerce shops for buying airtime” | 2 members  
- Programmer  
- Business developer | - Selling airtime online by getting a commission | 80+ users |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Products/Core Business Description</th>
<th>How their idea came about</th>
<th>Number of team members &amp; their roles</th>
<th>Business model</th>
<th>Customers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agro-hub</td>
<td>Connect farmers to buyers (market)</td>
<td>Self-experience through assisting parents who have a passion in farming</td>
<td>6 members</td>
<td>- Selling food stuffs on behalf of the farmers</td>
<td>88+ active users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djoss TV</td>
<td>Social TV platform to provide an interactive way for media to interact with their audience</td>
<td>&quot;I love TV but I don't have the time to watch it. It would be a good idea to provide Djoss.TV&quot;</td>
<td>4 members</td>
<td>- Currently it's free but in the future they hope to sell it to corporate and through targeted adds - Develop websites</td>
<td>150,000+ users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zinger systems</td>
<td>- Software development on client applications - Website development</td>
<td>&quot;I have always had a passion of being a software developer. I left formal development to start my own venture&quot;</td>
<td>6 members</td>
<td>- Sale of applications - Consultancy - Charging for software development and maintenance.</td>
<td>2 fixed clients, 50+ clients who they have sold products or customized solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't have a product name yet</td>
<td>Developing hotspots through cyber café</td>
<td>&quot;There was need to help customers get their money's worth while at a cyber café&quot;</td>
<td>2 members</td>
<td>- At pilot stage - They want implementation into their cyber café but now we no long term focus on the idea past pilot stage</td>
<td>3 active users</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Active startups that have emerged out of activspaces
How and where team members met

(N=5) of the respondents said that they begun their respective business ventures and startups while at school by teaming up with fellow classmates and acquaintances while (n=7) of the respondents started and met their respective team partners at the ActivSpaces or during an event held in the same venue or through referrals from other members in the community.

These findings clearly show that ideas do not only originate from innovation hubs, but also from student innovators who begin thinking about the ideas or working on them as projects in school. In schools, the innovators can be limited by the ability to nurture ideas, access to a pool of resources and the inability to retain Intellectual Property for their ideas. Hence most of them opt to move to innovation hubs like ActivSpaces hoping their ideas will then be nurtured and grown with fewer limitations.

The fact that most members met at ActivSpaces shows that innovation spaces are perceived as a conduit of stimulating and nurturing young graduates ideas compared to schools. Additionally, a hub is considered as a place to meet like-minded individuals who are passionate about innovation and can qualify to be part of a team. This can be facilitated through the events and collaborative platforms provided by the Hub.

Figure 14: Where team members met

- **5 members** (while working with other members before coming to the space)
- **7 members** (through other referrals from members in the space)

*Figure 14: Where team members met*
Time startups devote to their ventures

Some business analysts often mention that the earliest phases of a business/startup are the most exciting and frustrating. Business owners are keen to sacrifice their time to get everything in order. Initial phase is heavily characterized by working long hours; sacrificing social presence and attending every business function they are eligible for in order to learn new things. This act of passion and commitment is also replicated across innovative centers like ActivSpaces where startup owners strive to spend as much time as possible at their early stages in their businesses.

(N=8) of the respondents interviewed said that they dedicate full time and energy to their startups. One respondent was quick to add, “If I want to build a solid product, then I have to dedicate full time in developing my startup”. To others, getting their startups off the ground and becoming fully operational is a life ambition. One of the respondents said, “In a startup, you either commit yourself or die; hence my decision to do it full time”.

(N=4) of the respondents however dedicated spare moments or work part time in their respective startups. It was also noted that members who work part-time on their startups do not always necessarily hold pivotal roles in the startup entity e.g. CEO and CTO roles. Additionally, their business ventures take more time to blossom and a sizable portion of them may end up failing due to lack of focus. Some cited that they are engaged in multiple startups or freelancing to make ends meet while a bigger majority said that they spend a lot of their spare time at their ventures. The reason why a few respondents are part time can also be attributed to the fact that most of them are bootstrapping with no investments to scale their team and ideas to another level. Bootstrapping simply means limiting your costs to the bare minimum in order to help increase initial profits while reducing startup expenses (Sam Knowlton, 2011).

Lack of focus and full concentration at the initial stages of a startup venture can jeopardize the foundation of the enterprise’s success. If members of a startup believe in their ideas, they should consider dedicating their full time and resources to make it work off the ground.
Investments

What kind/type of investors?

In an article published on Bankrate.com, titled Bootstrapping: Cutting corners and pinch- ing pennies to finance your business, Jenny C McCune, the author, wrote that when everybody says “no” - from the banker to the private investor - the tough small business owners turn to themselves. They raise money from within by bootstrapping [11].

Bootstrapping involves the entrepreneurs being as frugal as possible so that their business can be started with as little cash as possible. Bootstrapping requires discipline and determination as key ingredients. Not everybody has the discipline to do it. But it can turn a business concept into reality. All the interviewed respondents (n=12) have no investors and have to dig deep into their pockets to make ends meet in their startups.

However, the startup owners remain optimistic that investors will soon notice them and will eventually reciprocate in kind by financing their entities. Some startups, such as pad.me, have been in talks with potential angel investors from America, while others like Wasamundi and Agro Hub are locked in discussions with multiple capital ventures and donors.

Tom S. Gail, executive professor at the University of Houston’s Center for Entrepreneur- ship and Innovation, estimates that between 75 percent and 85 percent of startups use some form of bootstrapping to help finance their operations. According to Gail, bootstrapping is the ultimate litmus test for any budding business. Startups that are able to weather the financial drought stand at a higher chance of transitioning into medium sized entities of the future and their survival rate triples every year [12].

However the implications for not having continuous cash flow can be huge. The scaling of the entrepreneurs products can lag behind, inability to hire the right talented human resource, low productivity and the inability to execute faster than competitors are some of the negative impacts. There is therefore need for ICT Hubs to act also as a network point by identifying the startups that have scalable ideas and connecting them to the right investment opportunities.

Currently ActivSpaces does not provide any form of seed funding to its startups. How- ever, the management has plans underway to provide some sort of financial backing to startups that look promising. A cross section of the respondents feels that the process ought to be expedited to prevent startup owners from juggling multiple jobs in order to raise capital to fund their initiatives. This forces the members to engage in their startups on a part-time basis, hence denying their products the much needed ‘quality time’.

In addition, ActivSpaces is working with startups to make sure they have the right structures before approaching the investors- business plan, company registration, proper book keeping and financial management among others. Part of their future plan includes link-
ing up the members with investors and even negotiating on their behalf.

Activspaces brand affiliation

Being associated with a well-connected entity comes with certain perks and therefore a hub with a well-established brand, impacts the startups that are housed in them. A hub working with a small community of members has its own advantages as well. Its startups stand a greater chance of being noticed and not get lost in the crowd - and if a hub is a performer and has good reputation then the startup can benefit as well. It applies, if the startup in a hub is successful, then there brand is also considered successful too. The ActivSpaces brand is an integral part of the impact of the ActivSpaces startups community in general.

Members of the ActivSpaces have mixed reactions on the impact of the brand to their startups. (N=7) of the respondent said that the ActivSpaces brand and being affiliated with the space indeed has a positive impact to their startup. One respondent said that the ActivSpaces has provided 70% openings for his consultancy jobs since clients value any connection a startup has with the ActivSpaces. Another member said, “I feel that the ActivSpaces brand is good because it exposes my start-up to many opportunities and connections”. However, this particular member shies away from riding on the ActivSpaces brand too much because she would like to portray an image of independence. She is striving to build her own company brand rather than adopt the brand of the ActivSpaces, where she is, for the time being, working from.

Other members said that ActivSpaces brand acts as a point of authenticity and builds trust while working with big clients, thus exposing them to many networks. “I think the business would not have the good clients and opportunities it has now without the support of the brand” echoed one respondent.

For the (n=4) who avoided using the ActivSpaces brand, they have opted not to use it for several reasons including not knowing what value it would add. One member says that he does not use that ActivSpaces brand because he does not know the perception that outsiders (local and global) have of the ActivSpaces.
One individual stated that he avoids using the ActivSpaces brand because he has some clients who have worked with other members from the ActivSpaces who did not deliver. Therefore, he would not want to be assumed to be in that bracket since he is different and has always delivered well on his clients’ projects. This point raises an important issue. The ActivSpaces brand is only as strong as those associated with it. If the start-ups and freelancers associated are of poor quality, the entire reputation suffers and the others also lose out because of a poor reputation. But if all of the members ensure that they deliver high quality work, the brand grows and its members also benefit from enhanced reputation with clients. Another one respondent did not know if using ActivSpaces brand would have an impact, as his project was still just an idea.
Mentors & their roles

Mentorship is an essential resource in a startup. It helps the fledgling startup to make as much progress as possible in a short period of time. The mentors generally have diverse knowledge and experiences that they use to advise the startups and help them improve business planning, strategy and to overcome their challenges. The challenge is with their availability: some of the potential mentors are too busy handling their own work to be able to dedicate part of their time to guide and coach the startups. It is also a challenge when there is a mismatch between the needs of the startups and that of the mentors. Sometimes, even finding the right mentor for a start-up can prove difficult. Hence, if the hub can take this role then it will be relieving for the startups, which can then tap into the right mentors.

All (n=12) of the start-ups interviewed have mentors. One startup indicated that they have business mentors who advise them on business models. The same start-up however says that it does not have technical advisers and would really appreciate if ActivSpaces management could connect them to some. Another startup said that the role of the mentors in their startup is to advise them when they are making decisions in their company. For others, the role of their mentors is to advice and to providing best practices that help push the ideas to growth by making sure they align to the vision of the startup. Some of the mentors have also assisted in marketing the startups. It is worth noting that the advisory board of the Hub also forms part of the mentors of the startups.

Scale of Business growth success

The growth and success of the startups can be measured in different ways using various metrics applicable to each startup. The respondents were asked to rate their business success and growth since they started working from ActivSpaces on a scale of 1-10, based on their own metrics with 1 meaning least growth and 10 meaning most growth); (n=3) of the members rated their business growth on a scale of 4, based on aspects such as ActivSpaces community members contribution to their projects, scalable ideas and partners acquired through the ActivSpaces networks.

On the other hand, (n=2) members rated their business growth to a scale of 7; measured by the fact that the space has helped in cutting down operational costs, the availability of free Internet, good management of the hub and improvement of members’ skills. For the member who measured their business growth to a scale of 5.5, they measured it based on free Internet access and advice/mentorship given. One rated their growth at 6.5 due to learning new skills, professionalism acquired in dealing with projects, confidence, and time management. Another (n=2) gave their scale of 6, attributed to advise received on their business model, connection to potential investors and exposure to networks. Another (n=2) gave a rate of 5, measured terms of knowledge sharing while (n=1) respondent gave a rate of 2 due to the networking component in the space.
On an average, the business growth of the 12 respondents can be said to be a 5 on the scale. This average scale of 5 and not 10 can be due to the fact that despite the members mentioning free Internet, it is still very slow. Investment opportunities from local investors have also been lacking. Members felt there was need for more business and practical events that would teach them on building structures for their startups. The distance to the space is still considered to be far causing members delays and high transportation costs. Insufficient resources such as human resource, furniture and stable electricity, also limits the chances of business growth in the startups.

**SCALE OF BUSINESS GROWTH**

- Connection to potential investors
- Exposure to networks
- Growth of an idea to a startup
- Time management confidence
- The space has helped cut down startup operational costs
- Management growth
- Skill improvement among members

**KEY:**

- Number of Members
Significance of the Hub community to its members

Friendship & connection from the community

All respondent (n=12) have made new friends and connections since joining ActivSpaces through networking with and these friendships go beyond the scope of the ActivSpaces and transcend into lifelong business partnerships. Friendship offers constant contact with other people, thus greatly enhancing communication skills and nurturing presentation skills indirectly by boosting confidence. Partnerships acquired in such a setting go a long way in cementing trust and building business acumen. One respondent was quoted as saying, “Friendships in the ActivSpaces have been a learning platform and there is more to learn and work on”.

Another respondent said, “Friendship means having connections with many different people who teach you skills that you might never have thought of acquiring”. Perhaps the greatest benefit of having friends in ActivSpaces is the notion of trading ideas, getting feedback and useful insights and ultimately peer-to-peer learning, which is powerful in creating an accelerated learning culture amongst the members. However, a few respondents were quick to mention that although friendships are important and could potentially lead to business partnerships, sometimes it is just good for social aspects.

Description of working environment at ActivSpaces

ActivSpaces members enjoy the working environment; the word cloud below shows the different adjectives used to describe it. The ones that stood out were cool and open. Openness is a key principle for ICT hubs to succeed as it promotes external and internal interaction between the people in the hub eco-system, hence a higher degree of knowledge sharing. Transparency and decentralization on tasks and responsibilities is also enhanced in an open system.
**Description of ActivSpaces community**

When the respondents were asked to describe the community, the two key adjectives that stood out as shown in the word cloud below were vibrant and open. The respondents said that members were willing to share ideas and knowledge and that when it comes to crowd-sourcing tasks, members actively participate. The high energetic levels of the community members add color and fun to the space.

**Figure 18: Wordcloud describing the Activspaces Community**

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**Community collaboration on client projects**

All respondents (n=12) agreed that they would be willing to collaborate and form synergies with other community members in the space on client projects. Collaboration in startups gives members opportunities to connect and join with others thereby harnessing the power of collective thinking and action. (N=2) respondents said that collaboration on community projects would help in building skills in a specific domain as they learn new things from each other. Knowledge sharing and skill building appear to be the driving force behind the notion of collaboration as members are interested in gathering new knowledge and ideas from other members.

Despite the positive feedback of all members wanting to collaborate on client projects, they pointed out aspects that needed to be in place for the collaboration to be effective and lasting. These factors include: availability of other members, experience and competence levels of other members, scope and nature of the project and project incentives, among others.
Impact of ActivSpaces activities and programs to its members

ActivSpaces members appreciate the events held in the space as they provide an opportunity to socialize, network and create partnerships. More importantly, the events are an opportunity to learn and stimulate entrepreneurship culture. Members feel that the ActivSpaces activities act as an avenue to meet established people in the industry and get enlightened on trends in the ICT industry. It is also a great way to find out what other members are doing and understand the market needs and how one can take advantage of the current opportunities.

From this study, all the respondents agreed that the activities and the programs at ActivSpaces have enabled individual and startup development. Events and programs are the quickest and easiest way to obtain vital information that can affect the functionality of a startup or applications that members are developing. They provide quick fixes to problems faced by the entrepreneurs due to the wealth of knowledge therein. Such events and seminars provide a continuous inflow of education that helps in increasing knowledge and skill of the attendees.

Examples of events held at ActivSpaces:

Some of the events held at the ActivSpaces which most of the members interviewed stated they have attended included: events by 1% club, VC kitendo, startup graduation, Drupal training events, Peer events with entrepreneurs, nine ideas, data zone activities, investor workshops, canvass models events, SubCRM and open learning sessions (highly mentioned and really appreciated by members as they act as boosters to faster learning and feedback), among other events. The above events are not only wired to nurture the technological strength of the members but also their business and economical dimensions too. Business workshops that provide directions on how to come up with a viable business plan and idea execution are also facilitated at ActivSpaces.

Furthermore, the events provide an opportunity to interact with other people who share similar problems and are seeking similar solutions. Conversely, they are an ideal way to network with others in a field one is not working in as these could create avenues for future collaborations and/or business ideas. “Before, I did not know how to go about deriving a proper business model for my product but ActivSpaces events/programs provided advice on how we can go about it”, said one member, elatedly.

Additional future events members would like to see:

In addition to the current events stated above, which the members see their impact and value, they also suggested the space should invest in other events. These include: Hackathons for learning purposes; events that invite business men and women globally to advice entrepreneurs in the space; events where entrepreneurs share their experiences especially when it comes to startups; tech camps for coders; community outreach activities; fun events, design workshops, business and investor events.
There is need for the hub management to continuously get feedback from their members on the current events happening in the space. This will help them to understand the impact of current events, if the events are of value and how this value can be measured. On the other hand, there is need to get feedback on future events that relate to the problems of the startups/freelancers in their current undertakings. This will help them get guidance and knowledge that they can apply in order to be viable and relevant in the long term.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CURRENT EVENTS OF ACTIVSPACES</th>
<th>SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL EVENTS BY THE MEMBERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1% club</td>
<td>Hackathons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VC Kitendo</td>
<td>Business Events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Startup Graduation</td>
<td>Marketing Events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Learning Sessions</td>
<td>Tech Camps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drupal Training Events</td>
<td>Show And Tell Events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Events With Entrepreneurs</td>
<td>Demo Events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine Ideas</td>
<td>Design Workshops</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data Zone Activities</td>
<td>Investor Events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investor Workshops</td>
<td>Outreach &amp; Fun Events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canvass Models Of Accountants</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>subCRM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Current events & future events suggested
Challenges

Challenges faced by the entrepreneurs while working in ActivSpaces

There remains some work to be done to ensure that the ActivSpaces continues to address community members’ needs effectively. Only \( n=2 \) of the respondents stated that they have not faced any challenges while working from the ActivSpaces while \( n=10 \) of the interviewed members have faced challenges while working from the ActivSpaces as expounded below:

Distance

\( (N=2) \) respondents would have preferred if ActivSpaces was closer to their respective universities. It is interesting to note that the two respondents are undergraduate stu-
dent citizens who find it difficult to commute to and fro the ActivSpaces. They suggested that the ActivSpaces relocate closer to universities or close to the capital and prime region such as Yaoundé to attract more members.

**Slow Internet**

(N=4) of the respondents cites slow and unreliable Internet as a major problem, in not only the space but also across Cameroon. Internet speed at ActivSpaces range from 256kb per second for downloads and 128kb per second for uploads, and is provided by Camtel. The slow Internet has reduced productivity among the members. However, ActivSpaces is not to blame, but the Internet service providers as they have been slow in increasing their bandwidth. To mitigate this problem, the members and the hub management have opted to go to cyber cafés if they require faster Internet, an unsustainable approach in the long run.

**Limited space capacity**

A few respondents complained that ActivSpaces has limited infrastructure such as desks and chairs. This forces them to squeeze and compete for the limited spaces, which results in conflicts from time to time. As the community of members grows, there is need for the management to increase infrastructure so as to attract and retain more members. It is worth noting that ActivSpaces has tried to solve this challenge by opening a second hub located in Douala, the capital of Cameroon’s Littoral Region.

**Accessibility to more resources**

Being in a tech environment, members would like to have access to secondary devices that complement their projects but these devices are lacking, as is the lack of adequate human resource.

**Power failure**

Continuous power interruption can be disastrous especially if a hub is located in such a location and there is no power back up e.g. generators. In a hub like ActivSpaces where techies operate, power failure means that operations grind to a halt because most of their work relies heavily on the Internet as a tool of trade and any interruption translates to loss of productivity and consequently a loss of revenue.

**Events**

Members appreciated all events, as they bear much benefit, be it in the knowledge, solutions, networks and friendships that emerge out of them. However, some respondents cited poor organization of some events as one of the reasons that made those events not to stand out. Others said that some of the seminars they attended were more theoretical than practical.
Challenges faced by entrepreneurs while working in their ventures

The entrepreneurs have also faced challenges either as startups or freelancers as they run their businesses, which seem to cut across the hubs and are similar irrespective of the geographical location of the entrepreneur. Some of the key challenges identified include but are not limited to:

Identifying the right business model

One of the common problems faced by many startups is having a poor business model. Many startups are usually optimistic about acquiring clients. They assume because they have built a great product, clients will come knocking at their doors. This might work in the beginning but in the long run, the cost of acquiring new customers and the value of the customer becomes expensive. Many of the startups do not take time to realize the cost of customer acquisition terming it as a non-priority while working out their business models.
Financial access challenges

Many of the entrepreneurs have no access to adequate capital to grow their business in terms of scaling up their products and team capacity. Hence many of them do not wholly focus on their core business, but end up having free-lance side projects in order to generate revenue to sustain the business. Without appropriate financing, the inevitable result is a significant slowing down in the business development process, which may ultimately jeopardize chances of success, occurs.

Identifying a proper sales strategy

Some of the entrepreneurs interviewed lacked proper sales strategies for their products. Other than lacking in tactics on how to get customers, some of them also did not seem to have a plan that will position their product to have a competitive edge. Even more unfortunate was the inability of some of the entrepreneurs to identify their target customers. One member was quoted saying “I do not know who are my customers and how I should approach them. Its been challenging to reach my target market”

Fear of competition

The entrepreneurs competing against larger organizations in the market often find that their ideas end up being ‘stolen’ and implemented by large corporate companies. This leads to the entrepreneurs having a negative mindset and lack of confidence in implementing their ideas. Hence through excuses, fear ultimately paralyzes them from achieving their dream.

Getting skilled programmers

Respondents said that they found it difficult to attract and retain skilled programmers. Talented programmers are often ‘poached’ into large corporations leaving the startups struggling to stay afloat.

Lack of knowledge and skills

Most of the entrepreneurs are techies; they therefore lack business management skills. Most of them do not understand how to market their products past development or it ends up taking them too long to get the product in the market. As previously stated in this report, most of them do not have adequate capital to afford business experts.

Lack of commitment & greed from members

For any entity to succeed, commitment, passion and drive are necessary. As earlier stated in this report, (n=8) commit fully to their startups while (n=4) of the respondents commit part time. Two of the entrepreneurs said that there was lack of commitment from their
team members. One entrepreneur said that sometimes members run away from projects especially when they are needed the most or they feel the risks are high. Subsequently, a member might opt to bypass team protocols and speak to a client separately in order to change the terms of agreement for his/her own selfish gain. Such incidents expose the startup to ridicule and the possibility of being branded as a startup that is inconsistent and unprofessional.

Inexperience

The population of Cameroon consists mostly of the youth and ActivSpaces also attracts the young people. One respondents said that the bulk of the young people lack experience to run the affairs of a startup. Moreover, the member added that being youthful sometimes takes away due respect from older and big clients.
Recommendations

Recommendations to the Hub

Distance

Members suggested that there is need for ActivSpaces to move closer to the capital city, Yaoundé and also closer to the universities. This challenge can also be solved by ActivSpaces increasing their online interactions for the virtual members/startups so that they feel closer to the space and the activities even when they cannot make it for certain key events.

Internet

Internet can be termed as the core of the hub. The community suggested that there is need for ActivSpaces to partner with stronger Internet service providers who can sustain the current capacity of the space and accommodate the growing community base. There is also need of investing in alternatives sources so that when one Internet option is down the hub can switch to a backup plan.

Infrastructure

Members suggested the need for more chairs and desks and an additional incubator plan in order to accommodate new members; something that ActivSpaces is considering in their sustainability plan as was indicated previously in this report and in the model report.

Accessibility to more resources

There is need for more testing devices due to the fact that members are developing applications from a wide range of platforms. When it comes to human resources, members expressed the desire for them to get continuous feedback on what their projects but with one community manager, this is not possible. Hence ActivSpaces needs to hire more personnel to manage both the space and members. Although not a challenge, other members requested to have a coffee place in the space. A place they can relax from and treat their guests.

Power failure

In order to mitigate this challenge, members wish to be provided with UPS (Uninter-
ruptible Power Supply) systems to help protect their hardware. The members also have lobbied ActivSpaces to install backup generators as an alternative source of power or relocate to places with generators.

Follow-up and feedback system

There is need for the hub to introduce feedback and monitoring systems where they follow up on their startups projects and give them feedback. Right now it is upon the startup to gauge their own progress not knowing if they are doing the right thing or not.

Events

Members requested to have more practical to theoretical events in the near future. More so, planning of the events should be done in advance and not during the day of the event.

Recommendations to the startups

Identifying the right business model

Startups need to outline their business model in scalable manner. This can be done by clearly identifying and documenting who their customers and suppliers are; how to attract these customers and suppliers; and revise their pricing strategy based on customer feedback, so as to monetize them at a profit.

Financial access

Startups need to identify other sources of funding besides bootstrapping. They can borrow loans with low risks of borrowing. However, this should not be the primary source of finances as over dependency on external borrowing might lead the business to bankruptcy if it fails. There are also high demands for the hub management to provide investment networks for the scalable ideas to get seed funding opportunities and need for proper accounting tools for managing finances to be shared to the members.

Proper sales strategy

Startups should work towards a competitive sales strategy. This can be achieved by improving customer loyalty - by understanding their needs - and continuously improving their products to give them an edge over their competitors.

Competition
Many startups have a mentality that their ideas will be stolen and yet ideas are just ideas until executed. They should be bold enough to execute so as to make their ideas a reality. ActivSpaces can bolster this boldness by introducing practical legal and Intellectual Property events to educate the startups on how they can protect their products from idea phase to actualization.

**Incentivizing team members**

At a startup level, members should think of ways of how to incentivize and retain their employees. Giving them stock options is one way, especially if the startup has no investments or enough revenue in the business. Startups should motivate their programmers and acknowledge their work by giving them some sense of ownership in the development and the products. This can be achieved by listening to their ideas, giving them feedback and granting them to experiment and explore.

**Lack of knowledge and skills**

Startups need to get out of their comfort zones and be curious to learn business development and management skills. The hub should trigger this by hosting business development and management events in the hub to educate the startups in these skills to manage their startups and market their products effectively.

**Inexperience**

The youth are currently actively taking the lead in entrepreneurship. They should consider working with experienced persons in the field or with specialized skills. The hub can assist by linking the startups to possible mentors who will nurture them. “The community members should maximize on using the space’s mentors (advisory board) and community manager to advice on effective strategies and executing proper models,” added one respondent.

**Lessons learnt**

**By entrepreneurs from their team members**

Members at the ActivSpaces unanimously agreed that they have learnt a great deal from interactions with each other and participation in the space’s activities. One member said he appreciated the encouragement he received from the team members when he was extremely financially unable. They have therefore grown into a family that supports each other.

(N=3) of the respondents have learnt how to program using different languages and sub-
sequently, their skill sets have increased a notch higher. Another notable lesson learnt by the members (n=3) is the essence of team spirit. Working in a group entails listening to each member’s opinion and complementing each other’s strengths. One respondent said that, “I was shy but now I know how to talk to people because of team effort and practicing our pitch together”. Working in a team also entails having fluid communication and knowledge sharing for the good of the company. One member further added, “Entrepreneurship is not a one-man affair it’s a team effort”.

By entrepreneurs from ActivSpaces community

One of the respondents has understood the importance of starting lean in a startup and scaling up slowly. Starting small e.g. with a team of 3-4 employees (as most of them have) enables members to understand their business and appreciate the stages of growth as they learn from their challenges.

A further (n=2) of the respondents have learnt that execution of an idea into reality is the first step in business progression. One of them stated that: “People have a dream but don’t know how to execute them”. They have learnt the need to have the mindset of a businessperson so as to further grow a startup beyond product development.

By interacting with other community members, they have learnt how to work with each other irrespective of their background, level of education and gender. That way they have been able to learn new skills from each other e.g. basic accounting skills.

Changes members would like to see

To ensure that ActivSpaces continues to address community member’s needs and preferences, some of the recommendations given by members are:

Re-location:

(N=3) of the respondent stated that the greatest change they hoped to see in ActivSpaces is its relocation. The respondents suggested that ActivSpaces ought to be moved to a location nearer to universities like Beau or Douala. Relocation would help the space attract more members and subsequently, increase ActivSpaces appeal in Cameroon. However, Activspaces has taken the first step and opened a second branch in the city of Yaoundé to tap into the student population.

Increase of member base:

One (n=1) of the respondents wanted to see the hub to increase its member base as this would ensure that it has a diversity of experts and individuals to interact with. The incoming ActivSpaces members can build their community by adding value to the existing
members through widening their networks. The space can further collaborate with other innovation spaces so as to help members of ActivSpaces learn from other entrepreneurs across boarders.

Increase in Internet bandwidth:

(N=2) of the respondents would like to see the Internet bandwidth in the space increase. This would assist them cut on the costs they spend looking for alternative sources that are faster and subsequently increase productivity of their startups.

More educative & practical events:

(N=3) of the respondents would appreciate if ActivSpaces held more events and subsequently provided a platform where members talk about their projects and exhibit their startups. They suggested that such events be held weekly. Such events can assist members get more collaboration opportunities, build their overall confidence in their work and more importantly, get feedback on the progress of their startups.

Figure 21: Changes members would like to see
Activspaces is viewed as an oasis in the middle of a political and corrupt quagmire in Cameroon. The relief is echoed by the sentiments of the respondents. One respondent said, “Since I started working from the space, ActivSpaces has opened new horizons and I can now see my business in new light.” Another member said, “I believe the coming of tech hubs in Africa can drive technology. The tech hubs act as a shepherd to most of us since schools do not provide this drive and nurture but tech hubs such as Activspaces do just that”.

The community has a mix of skills and through collaborations, partnerships have emerged, potential clients referred, and friendships formed. It is evident that the skills of the entrepreneurs have grown as a result of the hub model. This can also be attributed to the educative variety of events, open learning programs, collaborative projects, training programs and the advisory board doubling up as mentors and coaches of the community members.

Innovations that have been developed out of the hub model such as Makonjoh, WASA-MUNDI, Pade.me (means meet me), Djoss.TV, Kingmaker, Koutchoumi.com, Top-updesk.com, Agro-hub and Zinger systems, are another indicator that the current model is functional. Additionally, ActivSpaces can boast of 2 location sites; one in Buea and another one in Yaoundé where they incubate some of the innovations.

Members appreciate the ActivSpaces sustainability model as they have benefitted from it through the collaborative projects and they have access to potential funding from partners such as Google and Indigo Trust. Members also appreciate the space’s atmosphere of openness and vibrant community.

Conclusion
Despite the positive trends in the hub’s model, there are challenges that need to be curbed in order for the hub to reach its long-term sustainability goals without shortcomings. Dealing with Internet access which has been consistently slow should be the hub’s priority, followed by mitigating the constant power failure, the hub moving closer to its members and increasing their management capacity to meet the members’ expectations. Plans are underway to hire a business developer in the hub and to provide more resources such as testing facilities to its members among others.

The entrepreneurs at the hub still need a lot of guidance and support from the management, as well as from the entire ‘techpreneur’ eco-system. This guidance can be in the form of connections to the right mentors who can advise them on how to scale up their products and how to run a sustainable business. Most of these entrepreneurs lack skills in project and business management; hence their products often fail in the market. The managers of the hub can assist startups to avoid these failures by organizing project management events and workshops that will help educate the entrepreneurs on how to go about achieving sustainable growth. There is also a need for the hub management to ensure that their model is also surrounded by the right investors (both locally and globally), who can inject resources to both the hub and the startups.

It is worth noting that the government offers no noticeable support to the space in any
way. This is because cases of corruption in the executive arm of government are high and the hub wishes to remain neutral in all political matters. However, ActivSpaces is open to future indirect interactions with the government as an independent entity that can play roles such as providing resources and grants. These resources will then help in capacity building and sustenance of the hub. In turn, the ICT hubs existing in the country can help tackle some of the problems plaguing the country e.g. by ensuring good governance through building tools that ensure transparency and better service delivery from the government.

ActivSpaces has been at the forefront in introducing new business services to the Cameroonian economy that are necessary for the ICT industry to compete successfully with other countries and attract investors. This has been achieved actively through their events, initiatives and innovations arising from the space that can be used to improve livelihoods. The onus is therefore on the members to come up with sustainability models for their innovations so they can keep reaping benefits and the innovations remain competitive.

The members are full of praise for all the effort and energy involved in running the space. “It is great being in the ActivSpaces community irrespective of the challenges. The diversity is rich and experience is worthwhile”, said one member.

Finally, one respondent said “I appreciate what ActivSpaces is doing as they are taking risks in a country like Cameroon where corruption has taking control. It is therefore an inspiration to the youth of the country”.

This study is just the beginning of better understanding the ICT Hubs in Africa. Out of 15 hubs that are part of this study of understanding the hubs’ model and their impact to their entrepreneurs, ActivSpaces was the third to be studied. The researchers will also continue to be in conversation with the hub management to update the model report and additionally be part of helping them solve their challenges and work towards implementing a long-term sustainable model with the knowledge accrued through this study series.
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