

A Case Study on Bridging the Employment Gap: A Human-Centred Innovation for South Africa's Informal Job Sector

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Abstract: Unemployment in the informal job sector is a persistent social challenge, particularly for individuals with limited or no work experience in a country with one of the highest unemployment rates worldwide. Many job seekers struggle to access updated CV formats, trusted references, and direct employer connections, limiting their chance for employment. Addressing this issue requires an innovative, human-centred business approach that not only connects job seekers with employment opportunities but also fosters long-term social and economic impact. This paper explores iLink, a web-based application designed to bridge the gap between informal job seekers and employers. Unlike mainstream job-finding platforms, iLink is specifically tailored to serve the workforce in the informal sector by leveraging community input to build credible online profiles for job seekers. In South Africa, many domestic workers, gardeners, and nannies work without formal contracts, making them vulnerable to low wages, job insecurity, and limited legal protections. Through low-cost vetting processes and employer feedback mechanisms, iLink enhances job matching by ensuring that employers can find workers with verifiable skills and references. This paper examines how human-centred innovation can drive employment accessibility, improve workforce readiness, and contribute to economic inclusion in the informal job market.

Keywords: Social human-centred Business, Higher Education

1. Introduction

Unemployment is a pressing issue worldwide with statistics showing the effect on millions of unemployed individuals as in South Africa – a country with the highest unemployment rate worldwide (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Huge shifts in economics due to the COVID pandemic, effect of Artificial Intelligence (AI), globalisation and changing labour markers has impacted this phenomenon. Vulnerable communities are affected even more – especially youth, women and those in vulnerable sectors (Tóth et al., 2023).

Social entrepreneurship is a fundamental element to attempt to further social goals to elevate poverty and to develop the community. One such entrepreneurship project is iLink, a web-based application designed to bridge the gap between informal job seekers and employers. iLink is tailored to specifically serve the underserved informal job market within South Africa by leveraging community input in building credible online profiles for job seekers. Domestic workers, gardeners and nannies complete informal and formal short courses, but never gets “linked” with potential employers. iLink has the purpose and pursuit to assist the informal sector in ensuring that potential candidates are matched with potential employers by providing reliable workers with verifiable skills and references.

iLink was born from an entrepreneurship competition hosted by idea-GYM, an Idea Generator unit, resorting under the Innovation and Technology Transfer Office at a Higher Education Institute in South Africa that promotes business start-ups. The iLink social impact business was funded by the unit providing start-up costs for this human-centred innovation driving employment accessibility, improvement of workforce readiness, and contribute to economic inclusion in the informal job market and providing business training through the training program.

Within South Africa the informal sector plays a pivotal part in absorbing a large share of the unemployed citizens in South Africa, yet it remains unsupported.

2. Literature Review

South Africa continues to grapple with high levels of unemployment, especially amongst youth and the informal job sector who is often seen as low-skilled individuals. According to Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2024), the unemployment rate exceeds 40%, of which the informal sector has a significant share in. Looking at unemployment within the social entrepreneurial sphere it is important to note that not all people who do not work can be seen as unemployed (International Monetary Fund, 2023).

In this context, social entrepreneurs have emerged as vital agents of change, developing community-driven solutions that offer training and employment pathways. Social entrepreneurship can in short be defined as the pursuit of sustainable solutions to neglected problems with positive externalities (Santos, 2012). Social Entrepreneurship is not a new theory, and early evidence can be found since the 1920's (Teasdale et al., 2022). With the growing need of entrepreneurial innovations that address issues that traditional business models or government interventions cannot effectively address, social entrepreneurship is gaining growing interest and popularity, one of these entrepreneurial innovations is to address the growing unemployment amongst the informal job sectors. However, the informal economy presents unique challenges in terms of accessibility and lack of technological advancements, which makes reaching this target market extremely time consuming. Often candidates who needs to be accessed is also illiterate with low levels of education.

iLink is a South African based social enterprise that was established in 2021. The start-up focuses on addressing unemployment in the informal sector, helping caretakers, domestic workers and gardeners to find employment. It connects employers seeking this type of informal labour market workers with vetted, trained, and reference-checked individuals, creating safer and more professional employment relationships. iLink also offers informal, low-cost training programs that culminate in certificates of completion.

Often social entrepreneurship programmes struggle to transition beyond pilot funding, due to limited outcome data and the difficulty of quantifying "soft" impacts such as confidence, community leadership, and informal learning (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013).

Higher Education Institutions are starting to leverage institutional capacity to develop solutions beyond traditional academic outputs, this trend is emerging even stronger at Universities of Technologies. Education in innovation and entrepreneurship is now a focus within Universities of Technology, aiming to transform more graduates from job seekers into job creators (Central University of Technology, 2025). By establishing innovation hubs, such as the idea-Gym at the Central University of Technology and the Solution Space at the University of Cape Town (University of Cape Town, 2025), support and guidance is given to staff and students with innovative ideas to solve social problems by providing funding, mentorship, access to resources and networks as well as supporting these entrepreneurs to launch socially impactful enterprises.

The policy on Community Engagement at the CUT is based on an integration of the university with the community via the quadruple helix approach and social communities. The university's Vision 2023 Statement emphasizes social and technological innovations, socio-economic development with the aim of creating jobs (innovative and entrepreneurial spirit) and to be engaged with its communities. This directly aligns with the 2030 CUT vision statement "By 2030, Central University of Technology, Free State will be a leading African university of technology, shaping the future through innovation" (Central University of Technology, 2025b). By fostering and developing socially responsive business models by academia, staff and students, HEIs are creating an imprint and ripple effect of sustainable entrepreneurship, especially in underserved communities. Addressing these challenges requires multi-stakeholder collaboration and systemic support, including enabling policies, accessible funding, and partnerships that acknowledge the informal sector's critical role in South Africa's economy.

2.1 Comparative Programmes to iLink

Looking at different social interventions formats is useful to assess the impact and scope of a social intervention. Broadly this study looked at the objectives, target groups, delivery methods, and outcomes of the following programmes:

The above comparative analysis of employment-focused programmes available in South Africa highlights various approaches to improve employability, initiatives included are mostly of focussed on the informal and youth sector workers. Examining programmes like the Shoprite Retail Readiness Programme (RRP) and YES Initiative who offer structured, large-scale work-integrated learning and successfully showed tangible employment outcomes by placing over 38,000 youth since 2016 and international models like the ILO Apprenticeship Reskilling Programme and Europe's EEPO initiatives that emphasize lifelong learning, targeted upskilling, and systematic labour market integration Youth Employment Service, 2024; Shoprite Group, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2023; University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business, 2025; European Employment Policy Observatory, 2024). In contrast, iLink presents a micro-level, community-driven model that is focused on informal job seekers who are often excluded from larger scale systems due to their limited literacy, lack of formal credentials and digital exclusion.

iLink's distinguishing factor is the element that it is hyper-local, human centred and leverages the trust of the community, adaptability and the low barrier entry. While there are various comparative programmes focusing on formal sector readiness or rely on large scale government or corporate infrastructure, iLink addresses gaps that the traditional, bigger employment frameworks tend to overlook, offering a promising alternative model for employment generation. The web-based application is specifically designed to bridge the gap between informal job seekers and employers by leveraging community input to build credible online profiles.

3. Methodologic Approach & Results

In this explanatory case study, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the entrepreneur to gain insight regarding the objectives & outcomes of the start-up and how challenges were addressed. What role did the entrepreneurship training program offered and which aspect of the training prove to be valuable, which aspects could be added or improved on was done with feedback surveys pre- & post-training. The aim was to provide and gain insights that are specific to the case for practical implementation in other similar initiatives and improving on structure of an entrepreneurial development program.

Entrepreneurship is a key driver of innovation, economies' diversification and inclusive growth, particularly in the emerging economies such as South Africa. In response to the growing necessity for systematic entrepreneurial training, the Entrepreneurial Development Programme (EDP) offered at the Idea Generator Unit was developed as an official educational intervention to offer prospective entrepreneurs basic business information as well as applied competencies. The EDP is designed as an outcomes-based, modular program that integrates key elements of the entrepreneurial processes, consisting of series of workshops. This annual program stated in 2020 is adapted yearly based on participants' feedback.

Milestones listing required for presentation in the challenge to obtain funding and adjustment made post-startup implementation is listed as results in Table 2.

Table 2: iLink – Milestones, Results, Decision Criteria, Deliverables, Key Activities

Milestones	Pre-Startup Planning	Post-Startup results	Decision Criteria	Deliverables & Key Activities
1	1.1 Identify reliable web developer 1.2 Register as a PTY LTD 1.3 Draft legal contract with developer	1.1 Website self-developed after research 1.2 Registration changed to NPO/Trust after consultation 1.3 Legal documentation completed	1.1 Developer identified within budget and capable 1.2 PTY LTD registration completed 1.3 Signed legal agreement in place	Signed legal contract Initial registration documents & Self-development of website Legal contracting
2	2.1 Register domain: www.ilink.org.za 2.2 Develop website prototype 2.3 Identify and secure strategic partnerships	2.1 Domain established: ilink.godaddysites.com 2.2 Prototype developed and tested 2.3 Partnership secured with Department of Labour and Employment	2.1 Domain registration completed 2.2 Prototype presented and functional 2.3 Signed agreements with partners holding work seeker databases	Registered domain Working website prototype Confirmed partnerships & Domain registration Prototype refinement Partner engagement
3	3.1 Test website with work seekers 3.2 Test website with employers 3.3 Begin marketing	3.1 Tested with sample group of work seekers 3.2 Tested with sample group of employers 3.3 Website promoted on social media and local platforms	3.1 Website functional for work seekers 3.2 Employers validate usability 3.3 Growing public engagement	Functioning platform User validation (employees/employers) Marketing reach Stakeholder testing Marketing development Public launch

3.1 Pre- and Post- Training Survey

Indicate level of knowledge for the following topics (Scale: Well Informed (5); Knowledgeable (4); Some Knowledge (3) Limited Knowledge (2); No Knowledge (1))

Table 3: Pre – Post- Training Survey

Workshop Topics	Pre-Training	Post-Training
Creativity & Innovation	5	5
Feasibility & Viability	3	5
Target Marketing	4	5
Relationship Marketing	4	4
SME Business Management	4	5
Operations, Logistics and Purchasing Management	3	4
Management	5	5
Legal Aspects of a Business	3	5
Project Management	3	5
Business Canvas Model	2	4

3.2 Interview Analysis

What began as an individual response to a personal need, soon snowballed into a business idea and broader intervention started in 2022 after receiving funding through winning prize money at a competition hosted by the Idea Generator unit at the end of 2021, to address unemployment and economic exclusion through direct community engagement and grassroots marketing. It draws strength from its emphasis on trust, personal service, and context-specific solutions for an underserved target market.

Traditional marketing approaches such as social media were found to be ineffective for the intended user group, lacking internet access or digital literacy. This insight informed a blended approach combining printed materials, SMS communication, and in-person recruitment—often supported by students gaining work-integrated learning experience. A strong sense of social responsibility underpins the operation, with a focus on enabling job seekers not only to find employment but also to improve their employability through practical training, CV building, and basic digital skills development.

Despite limited funding and resources, the initiative continues to grow by leveraging community networks, partnerships, and an adaptive mindset. Balancing full-time employment, academic studies, and business development presented ongoing challenges, yet careful planning and emotional self-regulation helped sustain momentum.

The venture reflects an iterative, non-linear approach to entrepreneurship where small adjustments in one area often create ripple effects across the system. Through commitment to follow-through, responsiveness to emerging needs, and the prioritisation of meaningful impact over rapid scaling, the enterprise offers a grounded model of socially conscious entrepreneurship within South Africa’s informal economy.

3.3 Observations at iLink Business: Factors Influencing the Outcome of the Implementation Process and Adaptation to Succeed and Value of the EDP Training Program

The business idea demonstrates originality, requiring minimal physical infrastructure but reliant on mobility and digital facilitation. Through the EDP, the participant reported gaining critical entrepreneurial skills, particularly in financial planning, business model development, and marketing strategy. This knowledge empowered greater confidence in transitioning from concept to implementation. The respondent highlighted the importance of practical guidance provided by the programme, particularly regarding business processes, milestone mapping, and awareness of common pitfalls—knowledge areas seen as instrumental for start-up survival in the informal economy.

The post-survey reinforced the programme's relevance, with self-reported knowledge across a broad range of topics. A notable shift observed in the depth of reflection regarding long-term business needs, with future expectations centred on funding access, mentorship, regulatory compliance, and sustainable business practices. This suggests that the EDP not only delivered foundational knowledge but also fostered forward-thinking and strategic awareness. Additionally, the preference for visionary thinking, creativity, and self-discipline as core entrepreneurial traits aligns with the business model's emphasis on innovation and problem-solving in low-resource environments.

The experience revealed a continued need for contextualised support, such as training on customer engagement, negotiation, and digital marketing optimisation - elements that align closely with the operational challenges identified in earlier interview data. The programme's perceived impact was strengthened by its emphasis on community-building and peer learning, with the participant valuing the opportunity to network with like-minded entrepreneurs. Overall, the EDP functioned as both a knowledge-building platform and a motivational catalyst, reinforcing entrepreneurial intent while equipping participants to pursue inclusive, socially impactful business models.

4. Discussion

The structured learning sessions of the entrepreneurial development program influenced the implementation of iLink which serves as a platform to minimize employment gaps in the South African informal job sector. The start-up used the Business Canvas Model framework as a foundation to create essential business concept elements. The platform's value proposition and distribution channels were defined through this process while also identifying customer segments and cost structure. The company also implemented early project milestones regarding legal structuring and technical development with full comprehension of the business model's foundational principles. The feasibility analysis module intensified the entrepreneur's understanding by requiring them to validate core assumptions through practical testing. The realistic evaluation of financial and technical restrictions led to the internal development of the website since it demonstrated the project's transition from visionary thinking to practical implementation.

The focus on competitor analysis and creativity showed the entrepreneur's efforts to differentiate iLink from competitors. Rather than to directly compete with bigger formal job seeking applications, iLink used a context specific tool, tailored to the specific market – namely informal jobseekers. Furthermore, the environmental analysis component provided the entrepreneur with tools for assessing and adapting to socio-economic and technological conditions of their target market, which increased the platform's success. These insights are in turn directly influenced by marketing strategies, looking at the focus on grassroots-level outreach and the use of community centres and churches for user acquisition.

Principles of the management model are reflected in the structured milestone framework in the way tasks are allocated and iterative reporting mechanisms. Financial Management training further reinforced the project's sustainability in the form of budget conscious decisions, such as developing the platform in-house and leveraging the community for marketing rather than expensive marketing strategies and tools. This enabled the project to hold momentum despite possible resource limitations.

The iLink platform clearly demonstrates how applied entrepreneurial education can significantly influence the trajectory of social innovation. There can be clear lines drawn between the integration of key entrepreneurial themes to the project milestones that are set out. The EDP programme did not only provide technical tools but also cultivated an adaptive, resilient mindset in the entrepreneur that proved essential for developing a practical and contextually grounded solution for unemployment in the informal sector in South Africa.

The human approach to employment in South Africa aligns strongly with this case study. Several key points emerged that reinforce both the value and the complexity of addressing unemployment in the context of social entrepreneurship. One of the core strengths is the responsiveness to local needs.

When applying iLink through the lens of post-project reflection, core strengths such as community trust, relevance and creativity stand out, while gaps such as 1. progression pathways, 2. system integration and 3. duplication on a larger scale can be seen as weaknesses. For instance, the lack of administrative personnel is a limitation for iLink to properly provide services to potential clients. This reflective practice gives a guideline to design more responsive programs and builds the capacity of practitioners to learn alongside their participants—a hallmark of effective social entrepreneurship. The importance of building meaningful relationships with local communities was done by these four elements 1. building trust through consistency, 2. presence, 3. adaptability

and 4. culturally sensitive facilitation. These insights reflect broader findings in adult education literature (Merriam, 2001; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009), which emphasise the emotional and social dimensions of learning.

Building meaningful relationships and development of the rural communities in the form of upskilling the informal labour force are the two of the core elements implemented by iLink and furthermore the social entrepreneur served not only as a facilitator of training but also as a connector, counsellor, and informal advocate.

This multidimensional responsibility underscores the complexity of work in marginalised spaces, where entrepreneurs must navigate between the needs of the community, financing of the enterprise and restricted resources. While the intervention achieved success in short-term skill development and confidence-building, sustaining impact remains a challenge and a limitation. These concerns echo the question around preventing dependency and designing interventions that enables the informal work seekers to become self-sustaining as sustainable development and employment is core functions of this social enterprise. The intervention was successful at a localised level however the absence of integrated support can hinder long-term employment gains.

5. Conclusion

This explanatory case study set out to explore how a human-centred, socially entrepreneurial innovation can address the persistent employment gap in South Africa's informal job sector. Rooted in empathy, responsiveness, and community trust, the project demonstrated that innovation designed with and for the people it serves can create immediate impact in contexts often overlooked by mainstream employment platforms.

The financial and support in from the idea-GYM unit dedicated to support entrepreneurship and innovation at the higher education institute was pivotal. It enabled the transformation of a seed idea into a functional, socially impactful business with measurable reach. Milestones such as the onboarding of the first 100 job seekers, development of digital profiles, employer-user engagement, and job matches served as practical indicators of early success. The business model proved viable in its pilot phase, but it remains sensitive to scale-related challenges, such as platform maintenance, community onboarding, and user support and funding for full time employees to upscale and increase output and linking of employers to job seekers.

From a sustainability perspective, iLink's most significant contribution lies in fostering self-reliance, skills recognition, and economic inclusion. It offers a promising example of how human-centred business models can respond to systemic employment challenges in marginalised contexts. It calls on higher education institutions, funders, and social entrepreneurs to jointly invest in scalable, context-sensitive employment solutions. By integrating technology with trust, and innovation with inclusion, it charts a path forward in creating sustainable livelihoods for those most in need.

6. Recommendations

Social Entrepreneurship programmes should be integrated in training programmes offered at Higher Education institutions and institutional support should be given for continued expansion of their role to foster social entrepreneurship by providing incubation, mentorship, and entrepreneurial development programs. Additional courses on Artificial Intelligence and Human Capital might become essential in the changing landscape of social entrepreneurship.

Despite the successes of this social entrepreneurship, long-term sustainability remains contingent on several factors since access to basic resources such as mobile data, transportation, and reliable communication tools for job seekers remains a big barrier. Continued support and funding to move beyond the pilot and integrate broader digital infrastructure will be needed.

Looking at the limited digital access and literacy amongst the target population, future social entrepreneurship ventures within this scope might look at a hybrid outreach approach by combining low and digital platforms. Investment in user friendly technology infrastructure might also be critical for scaling social interventions without compromising the core or accessibility.

By integrating social entrepreneurship into higher education, support is essential for a sustainable impact.

Ethical Declaration

Ethical clearance was not needed for this research.

AI Declaration

AI was not used in this study

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