



Young, lost, down - but not out

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I started at Alfa Chicks in September of 2009, and one of the things I have noticed in my four and a half years in this business is that the presence of young people in the market which we supply (being the small and developing farmers) is noticeably lacking.

According to Statistics South Africa, in the third quarter of 2012, 71% of unemployed people were between the ages of 25 and 34 years. This is scary, because at this age one would expect a person to have matriculated and gained some form of further education. The unemployment rate among the youth was 36%. More than three million youth aged between 15 and 34 years were not employed or studying.

The problem

So what makes someone 'employable'?

I would see someone as employable if they had a skill or knowledge that they could trade for remuneration on a consistent basis. This skill or knowledge is historically gained by attending primary school, moving onto high school and then obtaining a tertiary education at a college, university or technicon.

Presently our education system is failing the youth because of the quality and relevance of the education. The education department has failed miserably in ensuring that all South Africans receive education of a reasonable quality by the time they leave school. This means that these youngsters are disadvantaged because they are not prepared for tertiary education, as they do not have a solid foundation on which to build and most that enter tertiary education drop out very soon thereafter.

The solution

The hard truth is that we are sitting with millions of school leavers who have wasted 12 years of their lives trying to obtain a reasonable education from a source not willing or able to provide it to them.

These youngsters cannot be written off or thrown away.

They need to be educated or trained from the beginning in something that does not need a 50% high school pass mark. They need to be empowered and made to realise that sitting around waiting for charity is going to destroy their self worth and lead them to a life of welfare and poverty. They need to be presented with a formula that is fairly easy to follow with access to the correct guidance and where a reasonable chance of success exists.

And most importantly, the solution must be something that can start small and grow as the individual obtains knowledge and develops his or her skills.

My example of a solution is small scale poultry farming, because this is what I know. However, there are many other agricultural endeavours to which this example can be applied.

My experience is that wherever I deliver day old chicks, the people responsible for the raising of these chicks are on average 50 years old – and this age increases dramatically in the more rural areas. So you can imagine my distress when I deliver chicks to a rural farm and the old people who farm with the chickens are the ones helping to unload and place the chicks, whilst many youngsters are just sitting within a stone's throw of the cage watching the scene unfold.

A defining factor of a rural village is the closeness that exists within the village. Everybody knows everybody, yet the youngsters watching the oldies farm do not appear to be invited (or forced for that matter) to join in the production process.

Poultry farming is something that someone with a limited reading ability and math skills can do well in, because the rules and processes themselves are not difficult to understand and implement. It is the 'why' that can be tricky at times. Let me expand: for example, a farmer should ensure that the cage litter is at least 10cm thick and kept dry at all times by ventilating and regularly removing wet spots. There are many important reasons for this and most farmers can't tell you what the technical reasons are, but they can tell you that by following this simple rule their mortalities are much lower and the health of their chickens is much better. It's like driving a car: you know you need to press the brake to stop at a traffic light, but you don't need to know how the braking force applied by your foot ends up in the vehicle coming to a stop. Just make sure you brake when you need to.

The logistics

If I had the courage (or the back-up) to confront the youth who are just sitting around, I would firstly ask them to assist my old client in carrying the day old chicks into the cage and unpacking them from the boxes. Secondly, I would suggest that they offer to assist the elderly farmers in the production process (albeit at a negligible salary) just to obtain the necessary skills and experience in raising chickens.

Remember, if these youths were suitably educated they would most likely still have to have paid university

fees. So working for free in your grandmother's chicken run is not exactly a waste of time if you are going to learn a new skill from your grandmother, now is it? Your grandmother will have access to information from her suppliers. If she does not already have it, she could request information from Alfa Chicks around the rules of raising day old chicks or she could request the feed supplier or Alfa Chicks to provide reading material around the subject of poultry feed (the assumption is that a school leaver would be able to read and understand 80% of the information and be able to ask us what the other 20% means).

Within a period of six weeks this youngster would have gained invaluable experience and knowledge related to the raising of broiler chicks, provided he or she really put in the effort and time to learn something out of the process. Within two or three cycles and after making the effort to obtain and understand as much of the information as possible, I would reasonably expect the youngster to be in a position to start farming for him- or herself on a small scale, even if only starting with 50 or 100 chicks in the beginning.

Starting small

You may be surprised to learn that companies such as Google, Apple, Amazon, Harley Davidson, Disney and Hewlett Packard, as well as Alfa Chicks, all started in a shed or garage.

So many of our customers started off like this and moved on to bigger and better cages. Some chose to stay in the shed or garage - and there is nothing wrong with that from a character point of view, but those of us in the chicken business know that it is very difficult to properly ventilate a garage! The point is that you should not be afraid to start small and dream big.

Stop waiting for handouts or broken promises to materialise and take that small step that may change your life forever.

So, if you are an unemployed youngster, go find a mentor in your community. If you are an experienced *magogo*, invite the youngsters into your business and teach them the ropes. The fact is that people need to eat and chicken still remains the cheapest form of protein in South Africa. All local producers, big and small, have the opportunity to contribute to food security in our country by producing the most and healthiest chickens possible from their operations - and in the process earn a living and provide for themselves, their families and communities.

The future can be bright. Let's make it so. ●