

Tech entrepreneur develops solution to aid Gqeberha's water crisis

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'Tech is the gateway to solving a lot of the challenges and problems that the world is currently facing. Those who decide to act on their ideas are the entrepreneurs we will need more of for the future.' Those are the words from Rodney Louis, founder and CEO of Smart Vending, a company based in the Eastern Cape, providing innovative smart solutions within the water management space.



Born and raised in the small town Palm Ridge in Bethelsdorp, just 20 kilometres outside of Gqeberha, Rodney grew up in a community that favoured a simple life. "The area where I grew up was a low-income town with not many opportunities for education or business available to us. There were very few professions that we were exposed to as kids. It wasn't until I discovered gaming and then later computers, that I found my passion for technology," shares Rodney.

Careers in IT are some of the most sought after in modern day society with the telecommunications sector being the [largest employer in 2021](#), providing employment to over 22 thousand people according to the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA). "What I liked about the IT space most was the fact that you could play in the end user space and the designer space. I could see the potential in the implementation of the tech, gaming, and software packages. I started working at the municipality in a customer care role within the water management division. This is where I noticed a gap for a potential solution," adds Rodney.

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Nelson Mandela Bay's looming Day Zero

The city of Gqeberha falls within the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality (NMBM) region and is home to approximately 1.5 million South Africans. Known as the hub of the automotive industry in the country, beautiful beaches

and friendly people, the region currently faces a critical water issue which the Department of Water and Sanitation describes as dire.

In 2016, severe drought hit the area with many of the dams and reservoirs never recovering despite receiving rainfall. As of the end of August 2022, levels were reported at a mere [11%](#). Since the beginning of 2022, there have been various estimates to when exactly the dreaded Day Zero would fall, but interventions by government and the collective efforts of community groups and citizens across the NMBM have been successful in delaying complete depletion. One of those interventions with the capability to affect large scale impact is the smart meter innovation from Rodney's company, Smart Vending.

A Tech-driven Solution for Smart Water Management

"We assist clients with a smart tech solution that allows for better utility management. Our range of products consists of smart prepaid water meters and smart bulk water meters with data logging capabilities that allows clients to monitor their water usage online, in real time. The key value proposition of our offering is that with the technology we employ, we can save clients' money by reducing the bottom line on water usage and bring to light any unknown leaks on a property," explains Rodney.

First registered in 2017, JR Prodigy Venture, now trading as Smart Vending, is a business that has always had their sights set on creating a big impact. In just under five years of operation, the business has grown in size, revenue and opportunity.

The opportunity for the technology that Smart Vending employs to aid in Gqeberha's water crisis, continues to grow too. "Through our smart water management, our technology allows us to control water leaks by automating water flow in a building and in so doing, we mitigate unnecessary water wastage. So far, we've installed our smart meter devices in a few of municipal buildings in the Nelson Mandela Bay region, providing immediate value to our client in water bill savings," says Rodney.

Challenges as an entrepreneur

"The biggest challenge when you leave a formal job to become an entrepreneur is funding. Starting out as tech entrepreneur, it can be difficult. It helps to associate yourself with others who are already in that space to support your journey," comments Rodney.

In a country such as South Africa where the need for more entrepreneurs in the economy is crucial, the importance of entrepreneurship support to ensure sustainable growth in those businesses cannot be understated. "My journey into incubation as an entrepreneur started when I joined the Nelson Mandela Bay Innovation Hub (iHub). There, I came across the [Innovator Trust](#) Enterprise Development (ED) programme that was on offer to entrepreneurs. I applied, got in and it's been a brilliant opportunity that came my way," shares Rodney.

The Innovator Trust's ED programme is very specific in its targeting of businesses with primarily IT-based service offerings. Over a 24-month incubation period, SMMEs cover core business knowledge areas such as finance, marketing, technical support and development as well areas such as presenting, media, pitching, while having access to a mentor and bespoke business coaching workshops.

A look ahead

"My ultimate goal for Smart Vending is to be one of the leaders in the supply of smart technologies in the country and Africa. I can see that the water crisis and the issue of utility management is a growing problem, and I see myself as someone who can contribute to solving that problem using technology. Because we are sincere as a company when it comes to the problems our clients face, we believe that this will be our success factor as we grow in the future," says Rodney.

Visit the Smart Vending company website for more information on the products and services available:
<https://smartvending.co.za/>.

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