

house4hack: Stimulating Technical and Practical Innovation for Social Good [Discussion Case]

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Case Overview

How can we stimulate more active involvement and valuable partnerships in creating more relevant mobile apps, engineering or other technical artifacts for South Africa and Africa?

John Burger, the founding member of house4hack, despite his passion for social good using practical innovation, was fully aware of the cost of getting people and organizations actively involved in social enterprises. The successful electrical and electronics engineer with a number of academic (PhD and Masters – cum laude) and corporate accolades (executive in a top firm) had already been at the top of the corporate ladder. But despite the success, his stronger desire to see South Africa become a net producer of IT and technical artifacts rather than a net importer had led him to rethink his entire life strategy. After deep discussions on the merits of free and open source software development with two friends, they decided to start house4hack as a non-profit organization. The main purpose of house4hack was to provide an innovative environment, a *hacker space*, where members could conceptualise and create innovative technical artifacts which are well suited for the South African and African environment. The emphasis of house4hack was on making available technical equipment and working space so that members had an environment in which they can experiment and develop technical artifacts. An example of a technical artefact that emerged from house4hack is Robohand. Robohand is a mechanically driven artificial hand printed using 3D technology. Robohand has depended exclusively on donations to develop and distribute artificial hands to people who cannot afford them such as in the war torn areas of South Sudan.

It was now three years since house4hack started. The hacker space was exciting, new ideas and opportunities kept emerging at the Tuesday meet ups where members and visitors networked and collaborated on new techniques or technology they had come across. But despite the liveliness, there were some key questions and critical decisions on John's mind:

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1. How do we get more people involved in creating artifacts?
2. Where do we find seed funding to support house4hack?
3. Are we serving Africa well enough with relevant artifacts?
4. Am I falling right back into the corporate work lifestyle trap?