

The only thing standing between a budding Durban-based IT entrepreneur and success is a strong belief in themselves and a willingness to work hard and smart, says Ancie Hassim.

He should know, having built pioneering tech firm immedia from a start-up into a leading internet service provider (ISP) and one of the country's go-to sources of websites and mobile apps.

"All the services and infrastructure you need are here in Durban. And today, thanks to the cloud, access to virtually unlimited computing power and storage capacity is just a mouse click or tap of a touch screen away."

It's the kind of backend Hassim would have killed for 22 years ago when he got started in the IT game. Instead, he was instrumental in helping put that web infrastructure in place with the creation of East Coast Access, now KwaZulu-Natal's oldest ISP.

But for Hassim, more important than any gadgets or technology is self-belief and it's a quality he feels is still in short supply in Durban. "You still get people who look at one of our apps and ask, 'Was that really built in Durban?' More often than not, sadly, the person asking the question is from Durban."

This despite there being no shortage of Durban tech success stories, from R1-billion JSE-listed Adapt IT and online gaming juggernaut Derivco, to a host of more modest, but thriving enterprises serving a local, national and, increasingly,



THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

WE MAY HAVE A LAID BACK, RELAXED LIFESTYLE IN DURBAN, BUT WHEN IT COMES TO IT, WE ARE NOT CHILLING OUT. ALAN COOPER GIVES AN OVERVIEW OF HOW DURBAN IS PROGRESSING IN THE FIELD OF TECHNOLOGY



LEADING THE WAY

Left: Durban entrepreneur Ancie Hassim built the tech firm immedia from a start-up into a leading internet service provider. *Picture: Alan Cooper.* Below: Fibre optics company Link Africa has patented its "trenchless" installation technology that allows it to lay fibre in existing sewer networks.

up its IT support division Geek Patrol.

But it's a new cloud-based offering that Hassim believes may be a game changer, not just for immedia, but for the businesses it persuades to take advantage of it.

The seeds of the enterprise were sown back in 2015 when immedia was selected as one of three companies to be added to Microsoft's R500-million Equity Equivalent Programme. "Since then," said Hassim, "our growing relationship with Microsoft has seen us evolving our existing offering from a traditional services business to the point where we are ready to launch a world-first technology product called Fabrik that will significantly collapse the cost of digitising the traditional media space."

Until now, said Hassim, when a business has wanted to interact at scale with customers or prospective customers, it has had to use a third-party platform, or several of them, like Facebook, WhatsApp or YouTube.

"This was far from ideal. The business had to surrender much of its control of the message to the platform, and the security and confidentiality of messages was a major concern." Fabrik will allow a business to

achieve all of those communication goals through its own tightly-curated, highly secure platform.

"It's the kind of service that until now you needed to be a multi-national to afford. But thanks to our relationship with Microsoft and our access to their world-leading cloud technology, we can offer Fabrik at prices that put it within reach of small- to medium-sized businesses."

So bullish is Hassim about the new venture that he's reshaped his entire business around it, growing its staff complement to 55 over the past year and, more recently, appointing board member Kevin Leo-Smith as CEO.

Hassim will now focus on the strategy side of the business. "We realised we needed to increase the depth in our leadership team which will ensure that we scale and grow at a global level, while still dealing with the demands of our day-to-day business operations," he said.

Leo-Smith has a long association with the company, having signed up as a client in 1997 soon after immedia's inception, and serving as a non-executive director »

global customer base.

Hassim's company falls somewhere in the middle, although its latest venture may well elevate it into the big league. Apart from creating Android, iOS and Windows native apps and websites for a diverse range of clients through its immedia Studio team – including apps for SuperSport, Samsung, Computicket and Spar – immedia also continues to forge ahead with its educational and training platform "School" as well as consolidating its ISP offering, while ramping



since 2010. He also has experience within South Africa's eco-tourism sector, having co-founded Phinda Game Reserve and Conservation Corporation, and Kwando Safaris in Botswana.

He said, "I'm very excited to grow my role within immedia at this crucial juncture, as I take over the operational, day-to-day management of the immedia eco-system and assist with scaling the company into a global entity through Fabrik."

While immedia seeks growth through a partnership with a global tech giant, another Durban-based IT company is helping to roll out the infrastructure that is increasingly carrying connecting businesses and homes to the web.

The long-awaited mass switch-over from old-fashioned copper cables to much faster and more reliable optical fibre cables to carry data is in full swing and from its



WORKING SMART

Hard at work installing fibre optics so that businesses and residential areas have faster, smarter internet.

headquarters in Riverhorse Valley, Link Africa is at the heart of the action, with big plans to spread the benefits of fibre.

"There's a perception that fibre is only for well-off businesses or residents of wealthy suburbs and gated communities. We want to change that," said CEO Terence Moodley.

That's not to say that Link Africa plans to turn away from these markets. Quite the contrary, in fact.

"We've been involved in numerous fibre-to-the-business projects around the country for major corporate and business clients as well as fibre-to-the-home installations for a number of residential neighbourhoods and estates.

"We're proud of the work we've done in this respect and plan to significantly expand this side of the business. But we also believe that the current climate provides an opportunity to spread the benefits of fibre-

*information technology

based broadband connectivity much more widely – to schools, clinics, community centres, businesses and homes in previously disadvantaged areas," Moodley said.

Link Africa already has a track record of laying fibre to connect municipal buildings thanks to its work for the eThekweni Municipality and numerous base station connections for the major telcos across the country.

Another big tick in the company's favour is its patented "trenchless" installation technology that allows it to lay fibre in existing sewer networks. "Municipalities like this because it minimises the digging up of roads and sidewalks as well as helping keep the sewers in good working order. End use customers love it because no one likes the disruption of trenching," said Moodley.

A third factor in Link Africa's favour is

its impressive national fibre network of more than 3 500km of cables already in the ground, not only in metros like Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, eThekweni, Pietermaritzburg and Cape

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Town, but in areas as diverse as Soweto, Katlehong, Diepsloet, Umlazi, Chatsworth and KwaMashu, to mention a few.

Moodley says the company aims to engage hundreds of local small-, medium-

and micro-enterprises to help it roll-out fibre-optic networks connecting businesses, homes, clinics, schools and community centres across the country to ensure speedy delivery of universal access to telecoms infrastructure.

For immedia's Hassim, the roll-out of fibre across Durban is yet another incentive for local tech start-ups. "For too long the people marketing Durban have had their attention on the wrong kind of silicon, the sand on our beaches, when they should have been focusing on the silicon chips that are powering the fourth industrial revolution.

"But that's changing, and thanks to the democratising effect of increasingly widespread internet access, combined with the fantastic work-life balance we enjoy here, I believe there's no better place to be a tech start-up than in Durban." *