

Silicon Valley reaches out to SA

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Launched officially on 6 August, The Sable Accelerator has secured high-powered backers, including angel investor and entrepreneur Laurence Seeff and a range of CEOs, directors and consultants from firms such as McCann Erickson, Grant Thornton, McKinsey and Hasso Plattner Ventures Africa.

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Yola founder Vinny Lingham is also an investor.

Donovan Neale-May, one of the three managing partners of Sable, has lived in the Valley, the technology hub south of San Francisco, since 1982, where he runs a global marketing consultancy. He says he's been toying with the idea of creating a network of well-placed South Africans — particularly those in the US — for almost eight years.

"I'm back and forth between the US and SA frequently," he says. "There is plenty of talent and tech innovation in SA. The challenge is the commercialisation of that innovation. Some of it is coming from within companies, some from entrepreneurs and some from universities."

The idea behind Sable is to provide a platform that can offer South Africans advice on everything from licensing products or services to attracting investors and moving into other markets. "Moving to the US can be especially challenging and daunting," says Neale-May.

"You have this global knowledge trust of expats, many of whom want to help other South Africans," he says. Various attempts have been made to get these people together and "aggregate their knowledge" and Sable intends doing just this by "creating an expert network, and an environment in which SA innovators can profile themselves and present their value propositions".

Its website, www.sablenetwork.com, went live on 6 August and will provide a platform for SA companies and entrepreneurs to help them connect them to potential investors, mentors and future board members.

"Sable is geared towards companies or individuals that have developed technology and need help taking it to market worldwide. This could be an academic, inventor or entrepreneur, or an existing small or medium

company."

Neale-May has met with nine local companies so far across a range of industries, including some making physical products, others offering business solutions, and even social networking players.

"There's a lot of good stuff that people can't get off the ground here because of the lack of venture capital infrastructure in SA," he says.

Some SA companies already linked to Sable include Cape Town-based messaging specialist Clickatell, animation studio Triggerfish, wireless base station company Inala Technologies, Zantsi Capital, and nonprofit organisations such as the Leap Maths and Science Schools programme and the Ubuntu Education Fund.

"We want to partner with alumni groups here as they keep track of the best and brightest," says Neale-May. "We also want to work with economic trade and development agencies, venture capital funds and firms to create a vibrant ecosystem. The big opportunity here is that we have the footprint in New York and Silicon Valley."

The website will allow "experts" to import their LinkedIn profiles and select their interests, expertise, what level of mentorship they're willing to undertake, and explain how else they are willing to invest in or contribute to the community.

"There have always been SA clubs and groups but this is very focused on furthering the country's competitiveness," says Neale-May. "It's not about taking tech from SA, but about helping to harvest the potential of SA innovations while also making the country more appealing as a destination to outsource to, partner with, and generally invest in."

The founders currently wholly fund Sable, but Neale-May says the organisation is looking for sponsorship from corporate SA. "A company like Investec might be interested because [the network] offers a global, aggregated audience of high-net-worth individuals. Whether we'll get government support remains to be seen, but we're trying that, too."

Neale-May says the service is exclusively focused on SA and not other African countries. "We haven't reached out to other nations. Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, they're all looking to set up Silicon Valley-like places. They all want to be the in-road for the global market looking at Africa's one billion potential customers. We want SA to be that vehicle."