

Conversation #10

Reflections on the Hiring Process: What Happened to Curiosity and Passion?

Conrad Akunga of Innova Limited



Conrad Akunga is an enthusiastic, optimistic cynic, thinker, developer, son of Kenya, and all-round good guy with a keen interest in governance, economics, technology, and human nature. He has worked with technology for more than 15 years and does not see that changing in the immediate future. He is a co-founder of several initiatives, the main ones being Innova Limited, a pan-African software company that develops analytics and tools for the investment and capital markets, and www.mzalendo.com, a digital governance platform that provides nonpartisan insights into Kenya's government and administration.

Why did you start Innova, and what is the story behind it?

Before I started Innova, I worked for a software company that developed supply chain software solutions for almost ten years. We developed client-server applications running on mobile devices before there was Android. Before there was iOS. Before there was even 3G. Or Edge. It got to the point where I felt I knew the space and the issues like the back of my hand. In that capacity, I led a team that won the 2011 Growth Economy Venture Challenge, a million-dollar award from Nokia. But over time, I grew bored working in a space I knew so well and wanted a new challenge. So I partnered with my longtime friend Vincent Ntalami and went into a space I knew nothing about—finance and capital markets. We started officially in 2011, developing a range of financial software and tools for the capital markets. Today, we have 20 full-time staff, and we develop solutions for custodians, fund managers, private equity firms, and insurance and pension managers. We have clients in five countries—Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Malawi.

Entrepreneurship in Africa is quite hyped at the moment. How do you see this development?

I feel it is unfortunate. Entrepreneurship is considerably romanticized and glorified. Nothing is hotter and sexier than entrepreneurship. The current ethos is that entrepreneurship is the solution to all our problems. I could not disagree more. I agree that entrepreneurship is important, but entrepreneurship is not the Holy Grail or the solution to all our problems. We cannot all be employers. We also need employees. As a matter of fact, employers and employees exist for the exact same reasons. Take the parallel of the armed forces. You cannot have an army of all generals. You also cannot have an army of all noncommissioned officers. Each element brings something to the table, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Perhaps this new narrative is a knee-jerk response to the atmosphere we have been brought up in. For generations, kids have been told the following: go to primary school, work hard so you can go to a good secondary school, work hard so you can go to a good university, and finally work hard so you can get a good job. Generations and generations conditioned in this fashion have led to an education system optimized around producing employees, which, in turn, produces graduates who seek jobs. That is the demand side—employment. However, not much used to happen on the supply side—entrepreneurship. Perhaps that is

why the entrepreneurship narrative is getting such a reaction. It is the complete antithesis of the status quo.

The other issue I feel we have with the education system is its outright bias toward science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Do not get me wrong—I think STEM is very important. But I also feel that the humanities, arts, and physical education are just as important. Again our kids have been conditioned to grow up to become doctors and engineers. In Kenya, the exit point from primary school is a nationwide examination called the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education. Millions of students appear for this exam around November, and by January, the results are out. There is generally much fanfare, and the highest-scoring students are identified, celebrated, and interviewed. And every year, without fail, these kids are asked what they want to be when they are done with education. They invariably respond with some variation on doctor, surgeon, engineer. I cannot recall ever hearing any of these kids say they want to be poets or dancers or artists. In our schools, a smart kid is one who is good at math or science; a kid who is good at drawing, curiously, is referred to as “talented.” But not smart. For society as a whole to flourish, each of these disciplines brings something to the table. We need STEM. But we also need arts. And physical sciences. And humanities. A holistic approach to our development capacity.

How will more “curious” students graduate from the education system?

I have always felt that the really good teachers can only be truly recognized after they have left their students to themselves. Allow me to explain what I mean by that. Given that our education system is optimized around passing exams, anyone with a good memory can cram facts and dates and regurgitate them at exam time. But knowing facts and understanding and internalizing them is a different kettle of fish. Good teachers plant a seed in your head, and usually you are blissfully unaware of it. They instill curiosity. Curiosity is what will make you go to the library and look for books on how electricity works. Not because there is an exam or because you have been asked to. You have gone on your own because you simply want to know. Things you learn out of curiosity, or genuine passion, stick in your head a lot longer than those bullet points you crammed to pass an exam and almost immediately forgot. This model of a teacher standing in front, rapping out notes, and then students regurgitating the same notes back at them during exams needs to be reviewed. I have interviewed software

developers and architects for almost 15 years now, and I am simultaneously saddened and amused by the number of graduates, masters, and even postgraduate prospects who have no clue about even the most basic fundamentals of computer science. What then does your degree prove other than that you know how to pass exams? What is it worth if you cannot access what you claim you know? It is a tragedy on so many levels.

How do you filter out job candidates that can apply and not only repeat what they have learned?

For starters, I no longer care whether anyone has a degree. As a matter of fact, for some positions, a degree paradoxically seems to get in the way. A degree seems to install some kind of thoughts barriers (justified or not), and I want a mindset that either does not realize there are any barriers or ignores them completely. There is a lot to be said for dreamers and the doggedly determined who are not held back by reality.

Just like our education system, the interview process is also broken. Take the usual hiring situation...

INTERVIEWER: Tell us about yourself.

INTERVIEWEE: My name is Mary. I am a hard-working, God-fearing citizen.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us about your past jobs.

INTERVIEWEE: Currently I work at....

INTERVIEWER: What are your strengths?

INTERVIEWEE: I am a team player. I work well under pressure. I require minimal supervision.

INTERVIEWER: What are your weaknesses?

INTERVIEWEE: I am a perfectionist.

It is as if there were a universal template—literally dozens of interviews where I have heard the same things. At Innova, we used this model for many years until we had some particularly disastrous hires who interviewed well but not only performed poorly, they but actually retrogressed us. We realized that it is impossible to know if someone will be good at their job during the interview. Some people interview well and flounder. What if there were

people who interviewed poorly but would have turned out to be exceptional? So we changed it. We use the interview to get to know you, and vice versa. We sell you our vision and expectations. You do the same. Meet our team and your potential colleagues. What are your interests? What are you passionate about? Convince us to give you a chance, not a job. After this, you work for three months. How good are you at the job? Are you a team player? Are you pleasant to work with? Do you enjoy the work? Can you manage yourself and your time? Are you willing to pull together and pitch in during emergencies? We do not enforce official working hours, so these things matter. After these three months, your colleagues and your head of department vote whether to keep you or not. Any negative votes—no hire. After all, if your colleagues do not want to work with you, how useful can you be in a collective effort? It has worked extremely well for us.

How many people do you find that fit the profile of a creative problem solver?

It is very difficult to find those, because almost all software developers come with the mindset that their primary work is to write code. This is not true. Their primary work is to understand and solve problems. Writing code just happens to be one of the tools at their disposal. The other problem is that they come in as Java guys. Or C++ guys. Or C# guys. They do not come in as programmers. The programming language is neither here nor there. What is important is the knowledge and understanding of algorithms and data structures. Syntax and organization of source code is a book or a google away. Mindset and attitude are the most important things. Are you curious? Determined? Passionate? Driven? If so, most of the war is won. The technical stuff we can teach you. However, we cannot teach you the former. My old boss Francis Kioko once told me that the first thing you should do when you take on a new job or opportunity is to train your replacement. At the time, that made no sense to me, because it sounded like career suicide. But with age came wisdom, and I understood that much as I could try to impart all of my technical knowledge, what I could not impart, even if I wanted to, was my experience—how to apply said knowledge: That is your edge! You cannot study this by cramming and repeating what you have read. You need to start trying and learning by applying knowledge. We are looking for those who know how to put their knowledge to work.

Hustling is very prominent in Kenya. What is your opinion on the “hustling” entrepreneur?

It depends. If hustling is a temporary and reactionary move, in exceptional circumstances, then it makes sense. If it is the end of the month and you do not have the cash flow for payroll, how can you temporarily address that situation? Aggressive negotiation? Overdraft? Short-term consultancy? If, however, hustling is your standard mode of operation, then you have a big problem. It is not sustainable or scalable. You will be spread too thin. You will not be focused. And that is bad for you, your employees, and your company. Here, hustling is a bad thing. Structure, planning, and process are essential for scaling and growth. The dubious badge of honour carried by those who are permanent hustlers needs to be retired. If you are constantly hustling, you have fundamental problems. Fix them.

Let us imagine you could start Innova all over again. What would you change?

I have been asked this several times, and I used to answer, “I should have started sooner.” But again, with age comes wisdom. If I had started sooner, would I have had the experiences and lessons that shaped my thinking and attitude today? Because learning includes both the things you should do and the things you should not. All of these played a part to make me who I am today. And so I can answer confidently that, with hindsight, I would not change a thing!

Thank you, Conrad!



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