



# Empowering Emerging Elite Talent: Solving South Africa's IT Experience Paradox Through Structured Graduate Mentorship

The South African Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector faces a critical challenge characterized by a persistent mismatch between the demand for high-tier technical skills and the underutilization of newly qualified university graduates.<sup>1</sup> This structural contradiction is intensified by rapid digital adoption, evolving corporate requirements, and systemic risk-aversion in hiring practices.<sup>3</sup>

While the domestic technology ecosystem requires advanced capabilities in artificial intelligence, software engineering, and cybersecurity to remain globally competitive, standard recruitment methodologies consistently exclude early-career professionals.<sup>5</sup> This report analyzes the systemic drivers of this market failure—often termed the experience paradox—and evaluates the targeted graduate mentorship model implemented by Coderise Solutions PTY Ltd.<sup>4</sup>

# The Macroeconomic Landscape of South Africa's Digital Skills Crisis

The South African digital economy is shaped by a profound divergence between macroeconomic necessity and localized human capital development.<sup>2</sup> Despite a severe youth unemployment crisis, the domestic software engineering and technology sectors remain severely understaffed.<sup>1</sup>

A comprehensive sector analysis conducted by Synesys highlights the scale of this issue, indicating that the artificial intelligence skills shortage alone could cost the South African economy up to R124-billion by 2027.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, approximately 45,000 positions in artificial intelligence and data science remain vacant across the country, even as broader youth unemployment rates persist at historically high levels.<sup>6</sup>

To understand this imbalance, it is useful to analyze the domestic developer community within a global context.<sup>1</sup> Out of approximately 26.8 million active software developers worldwide, only about 716,000 reside across the African continent, with a mere 121,000 located within South Africa.<sup>1</sup> This limited talent pool has intensified competition among domestic industries, driving up salary costs and accelerating the migration of local skills to international markets.<sup>1</sup>

Talent Demographic Metric	Global Context	African Continental Context	South African National Context	Source References
Total Active Software Developers	26,800,000	716,000	121,000	1
Estimated Digital Job Vacancies	Undefined	Undefined	66,000	10
Unfilled AI & Data Science Roles	Undefined	Undefined	45,000	6
Projected Economic Skills Gap Cost	Undefined	Undefined	R124-billion (by 2027)	6

<b>Youth Unemployment Rate</b>	Undefined	Undefined	45.5% to >60.0%	<sup>6</sup>
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This skills deficit is further documented in national regulatory frameworks.<sup>2</sup> In October 2023, the Department of Home Affairs published an updated Critical Skills List featuring 142 urgently needed occupations, heavily emphasizing disciplines within the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.<sup>2</sup>

Among the most critical vacancies are chief information officers, IT systems analysts, data scientists, software developers, and programmer analysts.<sup>2</sup> The persistent inclusion of these roles on national priority lists underscores a fundamental breakdown in the domestic talent pipeline, where traditional academic institutions are unable to produce candidates who meet immediate industry requirements.<sup>2</sup>

## Demographics of Labor Market Supply and Demand Mismatches

The structural challenges within the South African ICT sector are documented in the annual ICT Skills Surveys, conducted by Wits University's Joburg Centre for Software Engineering (JCSE) in partnership with the Institute of Information Technology Professionals South Africa (IITPSA).<sup>5</sup> Authored by Adrian Schofield and Emeritus Professor Barry Dwolatzky, these studies track the supply and demand of technology skills.<sup>5</sup>

Recent survey findings reveal a notable shift in how South African companies source technical talent, with more than 50% of surveyed employers recruiting ICT professionals from international markets, up from 38% in prior years.<sup>5</sup> This growing reliance on foreign recruitment is particularly concerning given high domestic youth unemployment, and is driven by an enterprise-wide reluctance to wait for local university graduates to become fully productive.<sup>5</sup>

This internationalization of the labor market works in both directions.<sup>5</sup> While local employers look abroad for experienced personnel, South African ICT practitioners are increasingly seeking opportunities with foreign companies.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 30% of surveyed local professionals are currently working remotely for overseas employers, and over 50% are actively considering doing so.<sup>5</sup> This external migration of skilled professionals limits the domestic talent pool and drives up local recruitment costs.<sup>5</sup>

<b>MICT Sector Hard-to-Fill Vacancies</b>	<b>Estimated Open Vacancies</b>	<b>Primary Contributing Factors</b>	<b>Source References</b>
<b>Software Developer</b>	1,435	High demand for cloud-native applications	<sup>5</sup>
<b>Computer Network &amp; Systems Engineer</b>	1,070	Shift toward distributed hybrid work environments	<sup>5</sup>
<b>ICT Systems Analyst</b>	1,036	Complex integrations of legacy and modern platforms	<sup>5</sup>
<b>ICT Security Specialist</b>	270	Increase in enterprise data breaches	<sup>5</sup>
<b>Developer Programmer</b>	252	High demand for custom agile software delivery	<sup>5</sup>

These unfilled positions exist alongside significant graduate underemployment.<sup>5</sup> The JCSE-IITPSA research indicates that only 50% of local ICT graduates secure employment immediately upon graduation, while approximately 25% require six to twelve months to find work.<sup>5</sup> This delay suggests that academic qualifications alone do not guarantee industry readiness.<sup>2</sup> To address this challenge, coordinating organizations like Collective X—led by CEO Evan Jones, Board Chairman Mteto Nyati, and industry partners including Cassava Technologies CEO Ziaad Suleman and Microsoft SA CEO Vukani Mngxati—are driving demand-led skills strategies.<sup>13</sup>

Supported by Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, which identifies up to 66,000 potential digital jobs in South Africa (two-thirds of which are suitable for entry-level professionals), Collective X has launched the Digital Skills Industry Fund.<sup>10</sup> Administered by Bonds4Jobs, this outcomes-based fund has secured R50 million in donor and partner capital to scale work-integrated learning programs.<sup>10</sup> These collaborative efforts aim to shift the local market toward structured, hands-on training to address the country's youth employment and technical skills challenges.<sup>2</sup>

# Deconstructing the Experience Paradox in Software Engineering

The primary barrier preventing qualified software engineering graduates from entering the professional workforce is the experience paradox.<sup>4</sup> This structural issue is defined by a hiring landscape where entry-level positions demand multiple years of prior professional experience.<sup>4</sup> Analysis of online job postings reveals that approximately 35% to 38% of designated entry-level positions require three to five years of prior practical experience, a figure that exceeds 50% in specialized software services and manufacturing sectors.<sup>15</sup>

## The Root Causes of Organizational Risk-Aversion

Modern recruitment risk-aversion is driven by several operational and structural factors within enterprise IT environments.<sup>4</sup> Over the past four decades, corporate hiring has shifted from internal training and structured upward promotion models to an outsourcing model that prioritizes pre-trained, external candidates.<sup>17</sup> Because organizations are under constant pressure to protect operating margins, they are often unwilling to invest the time and budget required to onboard unproven talent.<sup>5</sup>

This aversion is compounded by technical fragility within corporate systems.<sup>18</sup> Many enterprises operate with legacy architectures, insufficient automated test coverage, and poor system documentation.<sup>18</sup> Fearing that an inexperienced developer might make a critical mistake that disrupts production systems, hiring managers use years-of-experience metrics as a basic risk-mitigation tool.<sup>4</sup> However, this reliance on external experience filters often points to weaknesses in an organization's internal processes rather than a fundamental issue with junior developers.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, modern Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) have automated this exclusion.<sup>17</sup> By treating arbitrary experience thresholds as primary filters, automated recruitment pipelines discard qualified university graduates before their portfolios or academic achievements can be reviewed by a human recruiter.<sup>4</sup>

## The Pedagogical Disconnect Between Academy and Industry

This structural exclusion is further widened by a mismatch between university computer science curricula and the practical demands of modern software engineering teams.<sup>2</sup> Academic programs are designed to teach foundational computational theory, algorithmic proofs, and the formal structures of computer science.<sup>6</sup> While this provides an essential conceptual base, it is

often separated from the practical methodologies used in professional settings.<sup>2</sup>

This disconnect is summarized by academic leaders, including Professor Hussein Suleman, Dean of Science at the University of Cape Town (UCT), who notes that computer science departments are structured to produce theoretical tool builders rather than purely operational tool users.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, graduates often complete their degrees with a strong grasp of computational theory but little experience with the modern workflows used in corporate environments.<sup>2</sup>

<b>Academic Curriculum Focus (Theoretical "Grammar")</b>	<b>Commercial Engineering Requirements (Practical "Dialects")</b>	<b>Source References</b>
Algorithmic Complexity & Big-O Notation	Distributed Systems Architecture & Cloud Deployment	6
Programming Language Syntax & Compiler Theory	Advanced Version Control & Automated CI/CD Pipelines	6
Relational Database Theory & Normalization	Microservices Integration & Scalable API Development	6
Abstract Mathematical Proofs & Theory	Agile Scrum Frameworks & User Acceptance Testing	17
Isolated, Single-Author Academic Coding Assignments	Maintaining Legacy Systems & Collaborative Code Reviews	6

Without structured bridging programs, graduates struggle to transition from academic theory to professional software engineering roles.<sup>2</sup> This gap leaves many qualified candidates underemployed, while organizations continue to import high-cost foreign talent to address their technical skills shortages.<sup>2</sup>

## The Coderise Solutions Intervention Model

To address this systemic talent gap, Coderise Solutions PTY Ltd has structured its business model around a clear corporate mission<sup>8</sup>:

"To bridge the gap between academic learning and industry demands by providing a structured, year-long mentorship program for newly graduated university students, enabling them to

become proficient IT professionals capable of delivering cutting-edge solutions for our clients." This mission is driven by a focus on **Empowering Emerging Elite Talent** [User Query]. By operating as a structured talent incubator, the company addresses the experience paradox for both candidates and enterprise clients.<sup>4</sup>

The Coderise model is built on partnership, structured development, and client delivery.<sup>8</sup> First, the company partners with leading South African universities to identify and recruit promising technology graduates.<sup>8</sup> These selected candidates enter a rigorous, year-long program that combines technical upskilling with professional soft-skills development.<sup>8</sup> By working alongside senior industry experts, graduates develop their technical capabilities through hands-on experience on real-world projects.<sup>8</sup> This structured approach allows Coderise to deliver high-quality, cost-effective custom software and IT consulting solutions to its clients.<sup>8</sup>

### Engineering and Consulting Services

To support its graduate development model, Coderise Solutions provides structured, enterprise-grade engineering services.<sup>20</sup> These services are designed to deliver reliable technical outcomes for clients while providing graduates with hands-on experience under senior supervision.<sup>8</sup>

Commercial Software Service	Core Project Deliverables	Professional Fee Structure	Source References
<b>Business Process Automation (BPA)</b>	Workflow mapping, custom web portal construction, automated email/SMS alerts, staff training	R60,000 – R120,000+ (Project-based)	20
<b>Custom API Development</b>	Secure endpoint creation, comprehensive technical documentation, data encryption, integration testing	R25,000 – R60,000+ (Project-based)	20

These services are built on modern, modular architectures designed to ensure scalability and long-term system stability.<sup>20</sup>

## Architectural Standards and Quality Guarantees

To ensure delivery quality, Coderise Solutions implements strict engineering standards across all development projects <sup>20</sup>:

- **Modular Component Architecture:** Applications are designed using isolated, modular components.<sup>20</sup> This approach ensures that future updates to specific features can be implemented without compromising the stability of the broader system.<sup>20</sup>
- **Transparent Repository Management:** From project kickoff, code is hosted in version-controlled repositories (such as GitHub) with full administrative access granted to the client.<sup>20</sup> Codebases are fully commented and documented to prevent vendor lock-in.<sup>20</sup>
- **Automated and Manual Testing Pipelines:** Before deployment, software updates undergo automated security vulnerability scans and structured user acceptance testing to ensure security and performance.<sup>20</sup>
- **Post-Launch Architectural Support:** To ensure long-term stability, projects are backed by a post-launch support phase.<sup>20</sup> During this period, senior engineers guide the client's internal team through the application's underlying architecture to ensure a smooth transition.<sup>20</sup>

This structured approach allows Coderise to deliver reliable, enterprise-grade software solutions while building a sustainable pipeline of job-ready local software engineers.<sup>8</sup>

## Strategic and Financial Rationale of Mentored Early Talent

For enterprise organizations, integrating mentored junior developers offers clear operational and financial advantages over relying solely on mid-to-senior external hires.<sup>22</sup> When paired with structured senior mentorship, early-career engineers can deliver significant commercial value while helping to build a more sustainable talent pipeline.<sup>22</sup>

### Cost-Effectiveness and Resource Optimization

From a financial perspective, a balanced engineering team that pairs junior developers with senior mentors optimizes human resource costs.<sup>22</sup> Senior software engineers command high salaries, yet they are frequently bogged down by routine tasks, such as basic bug fixing, writing boilerplate integration code, or generating API documentation.<sup>21</sup>

By delegating these routine tasks to guided junior developers, organizations optimize resource allocation.<sup>22</sup> Senior engineers can focus on high-impact areas like system architecture, security hardening, and performance optimization, while junior developers handle simpler execution

tasks under senior oversight.<sup>22</sup>

The economic return of this mentored graduate development model can be represented by the net financial yield ( $Y_{\text{net}}$ ):

$$Y_{\text{net}} = (V_{\text{delivered}} - C_{\text{junior}}) - (C_{\text{mentorship}} + C_{\text{risk}})$$

Where  $V_{\text{delivered}}$  is the commercial value of the delivered software solution,  $C_{\text{junior}}$  is the direct cost of employing the junior graduate,  $C_{\text{mentorship}}$  is the senior developer's time overhead allocated to structured coaching, and  $C_{\text{risk}}$  represents the potential cost of system errors, which is mitigated to near-zero ( $C_{\text{risk}} \approx 0$ ) through automated testing and strict senior-led code review frameworks.<sup>18</sup>

## Building a Resilient, Custom Talent Pipeline

Hiring pre-trained senior developers from the open market often comes with friction, as they may bring ingrained habits or architectural preferences that clash with an organization's existing standards.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, junior developers are highly adaptable.<sup>16</sup> Under a structured mentorship program, they can be trained to adopt the company's specific coding standards, testing methodologies, and architectural patterns from day one.<sup>22</sup> This approach builds a continuous, highly aligned internal talent pipeline, reducing future recruitment costs and mitigating the risks of high staff turnover.<sup>22</sup>

## Boosting Senior Morale and Fostering a Culture of Learning

Integrating junior developers often has a positive impact on senior team members.<sup>22</sup> Mentorship opportunities allow senior engineers to develop their leadership and management skills, which boosts overall job satisfaction and team morale.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the enthusiasm and curiosity of junior developers often sparks innovation, encouraging the entire engineering team to adopt a mindset of continuous learning and improvement.<sup>22</sup>

## Design Principles of a High-Scale IT Mentorship Program

For a graduate mentorship program to succeed within a commercial software engineering environment, it must be highly structured.<sup>24</sup> Ad-hoc, informal mentoring often leads to inconsistent results, leaving junior developers feeling unsupported and senior engineers overwhelmed by administrative overhead.<sup>23</sup> Building a scalable, high-impact mentorship model

requires a framework based on five core pillars.<sup>25</sup>

## 1. Strategic Alignment with Business Objectives

The mentorship program must align with concrete business goals.<sup>24</sup> Organizations should define key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the program's return on investment (ROI), such as junior developer retention rates, code delivery velocity, promotion timelines, and graduate satisfaction scores.<sup>25</sup>

## 2. Competency-Based Matching

Effective pairing is critical to mentorship quality.<sup>25</sup> Rather than random assignment, mentors and mentees should be matched based on specific criteria, including technical and soft skill development goals, communication preferences, and long-term career aspirations.<sup>25</sup>

## 3. Structured Onboarding and Guidelines

To prevent confusion, both mentors and mentees must understand their responsibilities from the start.<sup>25</sup> Organizations should establish clear guidelines covering:

- **Meeting Cadence:** Defining the frequency and duration of mentorship sessions.<sup>27</sup>
- **Communication Channels:** Setting expectations for daily check-ins and code review turnaround times.<sup>27</sup>
- **Confidentiality and Boundaries:** Creating a safe space for honest career development discussions.<sup>27</sup>
- **Compatibility Outlets:** Establishing clear processes for reassignment if a mentor-mentee pairing is not working out.<sup>27</sup>

## 4. Milestone Goal Tracking

A structured mentorship program requires continuous, competency-based tracking.<sup>25</sup> Using structured competency frameworks, mentors and mentees can set clear goals, track progress, and log developmental milestones—such as mastering a new framework or leading a client demo—directly within their performance reviews.<sup>25</sup>

## 5. Psychological Safety and Peer-to-Peer Feedback

Effective learning relies on psychological safety.<sup>26</sup> Mentors should foster an environment where junior developers feel comfortable asking "dumb questions" and sharing their challenges without fear of negative consequences.<sup>23</sup> Feedback must be constructive, timely, and focused on growth, encouraging open communication and mutual trust.<sup>26</sup>

<b>Program Phase</b>	<b>Focus Area</b>	<b>Key Activities &amp; Technical Competencies</b>	<b>Primary Milestone</b>	<b>Source References</b>
<b>Months 1 – 3</b>	Professional Onboarding & Tooling	Version control, CI/CD setup, legacy codebase navigation, automated testing standards	Completion of first production bug-fixes and security patches	18
<b>Months 4 – 6</b>	Assisted Feature Delivery	Custom API endpoint creation, database management, peer-to-peer programming	Successful deployment of a minor system feature	20
<b>Months 7 – 9</b>	Independent Execution	Business process automation, performance optimization, agile scrum participation	Leading a technical sprint cycle under senior review	19
<b>Months 10 – 12</b>	Client-Facing Ownership	Requirements gathering, system architecture planning, post-launch hyper-care support	Direct delivery of a custom software solution to a client	8

By dividing the year-long residency into structured, milestone-driven phases, organizations can systematically transform newly graduated students into highly capable, productive software engineers.<sup>8</sup> This approach ensures that graduates develop the technical expertise, professional confidence, and soft skills needed to deliver high-quality work for clients.<sup>8</sup>

# Conclusions and National Policy Recommendations

The structural gap within the South African ICT sector requires a shift in how the nation develops, transitions, and retains technology talent.<sup>1</sup> Continuing to import high-cost international talent to address local skills shortages is an unsustainable approach that fails to solve the country's youth unemployment crisis.<sup>2</sup> To build a resilient digital economy, South Africa must focus on developing its own local talent.<sup>2</sup>

This requires collaborative, demand-led training initiatives.<sup>2</sup> Organizations must move away from viewing talent development as a discretionary cost and instead treat it as a core business priority.<sup>17</sup> By bridging the gap between university learning and commercial realities through structured mentorship, programs like the one run by Coderise Solutions PTY Ltd demonstrate that domestic graduates can be successfully integrated into high-performing engineering teams.<sup>8</sup>

When businesses invest in structured, year-long graduate mentorship, they get more than just access to cost-effective software engineering services.<sup>8</sup> They build a sustainable, highly skilled talent pool, increase long-term employee retention, and actively contribute to the growth of a robust, inclusive digital economy.<sup>2</sup> Solving the experience paradox through structured mentorship is a strategic imperative that secures South Africa's digital future and empowers its next generation of technology leaders.<sup>2</sup>

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