

**CASE STUDY REPORT:  
DIGIFY AFRICA AND SAB  
FOUNDATION HIRE A  
GRAD**

**DECEMBER 2024**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Digify Africa x SAB Foundation Hire-A-Grad program is a transformative initiative to tackle youth unemployment and enhance the digital capacity of Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) in South Africa. The program pairs skilled graduates trained in digital marketing with SMMEs, creating a mutually beneficial relationship: SMMEs receive affordable digital marketing services, while graduates gain invaluable hands-on experience, build their portfolios, and advance their professional development.

### 1.1. Program Overview

- **Objective 1:** Facilitate employment for graduates by connecting them with SMMEs.
- **Objective 2:** Enhance SMMEs' digital presence and capabilities through targeted strategies.
- **Objective 3:** Promote sustainable partnerships by encouraging SMMEs to extend contracts with graduates post-pilot.
- **Objective 4:** Support graduates' professional development by providing real-world challenges and mentorship.

## 2. CASE STUDY OBJECTIVES

This case study aims to understand and gain insights into participants' experiences in the Digify Africa x SAB Foundation Hire-A-Grad program. By focusing on the perspectives of graduates, mentors, and SMME representatives, the study seeks to uncover how these stakeholders navigated the program, highlighting their successes, challenges, and growth areas. This exploration aims to provide a deeper understanding of the program's processes, its impact on participants' professional development, and the value it brings to SMMEs' digital marketing efforts. The insights gathered will inform future iterations of the program, ensuring it continues to empower youth, strengthen small businesses, and contribute to meaningful economic transformation.

- *Assess the effectiveness* of the Hire-A-Grad initiative in reducing youth unemployment and enhancing the digital capacity of SMMEs in South Africa.
- Gain insights into the experiences of graduates, mentors, and SMMEs, highlighting their challenges, successes, and areas for improvement.
- Examine how the program contributed to graduates' skill development, confidence, and readiness for long-term careers in digital marketing.
- Explore how SMMEs benefited from the program, focusing on improving brand awareness, digital marketing strategies, and customer engagement.

- Highlight the role of mentorship and collaboration in ensuring the program's success and in meeting the needs of graduates and SMMEs.
- Develop suggestions to refine and improve future program iterations, ensuring better alignment of resources, logistics, and stakeholder engagement.
- Create an impactful narrative to inspire further investment in initiatives addressing youth unemployment and SMME digital growth.

### 3. CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

This case study was used to provide concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world (Crowe et al., 2011). The study employed in-depth virtual and paper-based interviews with three key participants central to implementing the Hire-A-Grad program. (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Smith, 1996). The participants represented different stakeholder perspectives: a graduate, a mentor, and an SMME representative. (Manohar et al., 2018). This diverse representation allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the program's successes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

The graduate, a recently trained digital marketer, was responsible for creating content, managing campaigns, and analysing data while working with an SMME. This participant offered insights into the practical application of their training and the professional growth they experienced. The mentor, tasked with guiding the graduate, played a critical role in facilitating skill development and ensuring the graduate's outputs aligned with the SMME's needs. Lastly, the SMME representative, a business owner, highlighted the program's impact on their digital presence and overall business strategy.

Data was collected through semi-structured virtual interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes per participant. (CREST, 2015). These interviews were designed to elicit detailed responses tailored to each participant's role. Graduates were asked about their roles, tasks, mentorship experiences, and challenges. Mentors provided insights into how they supported graduates, the challenges encountered, and their contribution to the graduates' professional growth. SMME representatives reflected on the graduates' effectiveness in meeting business needs, the improvements in their digital marketing efforts, and their willingness to recommend the program to other SMMEs.

The collected data was thematically analysed to identify key patterns and insights related to collaboration, professional development, and program impact (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For instance, the graduate shared how they developed strong campaign management skills, noting, "I am now able to handle a campaign from start to finish, which has boosted my

confidence tremendously." The mentor emphasised their role in ensuring structured planning, stating, "I ensured the graduate conducted audits and followed structured plans to meet the SMME's expectations." Meanwhile, the SMME representative highlighted measurable improvements in their digital engagement and sharing: "The graduate exceeded my expectations. The strategies they implemented helped increase our brand awareness significantly."

Synthesising these diverse perspectives, this methodology provided a holistic understanding of the Hire-A-Grad program's impact on youth employment, SMME growth, and mentorship dynamic.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. Key Themes in the Digify Africa x SAB Foundation Hire-A-Grad Initiative

The Digify Africa x SAB Foundation Hire-A-Grad initiative has yielded critical insights into its implementation, highlighting the key elements contributing to its success and areas for improvement. Each theme reflects the program's core dynamics, showcasing its impact on graduates, SMMEs, and mentors while identifying challenges that offer valuable lessons for future iterations.

| Key Theme                              | Description                                                                                                                                           | Examples/Insights                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Collaboration and Communication        | Effective collaboration between graduates, mentors, and SMMEs was crucial for success, and clear expectations and alignment drove impactful outcomes. | <i>Graduates reported clear guidance from SMMEs, with frequent feedback enhancing campaign alignment.</i>                    |
| Professional Development for Graduates | Graduates experienced significant skill growth in campaign management, content creation, and client communication.                                    | <i>Thabang reported learning to handle campaigns from start to finish, boosting confidence and employability.</i>            |
| SMME Growth and Impact                 | Through graduates' efforts, SMMEs saw tangible improvements in digital presence, customer engagement, and brand awareness.                            | <i>Thabong Bakery experienced increased social media traction and storytelling, translating to brand visibility.</i>         |
| Mentorship as a Success Factor         | Mentorship enhanced graduates' learning experiences, providing guidance and helping align graduate efforts with SMME needs.                           | <i>Mentors like Morwesi provided structured support, helping graduates overcome challenges and meet client expectations.</i> |

|                                                |                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Challenges in Logistics and Resource Alignment | Geographic separation and resource constraints affected efficiency, highlighting the need for logistical improvements. | <i>Graduates noted challenges in remote collaboration and on-site execution due to distance, requiring additional travel and planning support.</i> |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## 4.2. Case Study: Empowering Digital Transformation Through the Hire-A-Grad Program

### 4.2.1. Graduate's Story of Growth and Transformation: Thabong Bakery and the Hire-A-Grad Program

#### A Partnership That Sparked Change

Thabong Bakery, a beloved small business known for its delicious baked goods, had big dreams of reaching more customers and telling its story online. But, like many small businesses, it needed more resources and expertise in digital marketing. Enter the Hire-A-Grad program, a Digify Africa and the SAB Foundation initiative designed to connect skilled digital marketing graduates with SMMEs.

Through this program, a talented graduate was assigned to Thabong Bakery, armed with the tools and enthusiasm to bring the bakery's vision to life. What unfolded was a journey of collaboration, mentorship, and professional growth that transformed the bakery's digital presence and set the graduate on a promising career path.

#### Bridging Gaps Through Collaboration and Communication

Collaboration was the foundation of the success story between the graduate and Thabong Bakery. From day one, they worked closely to develop a tailored content strategy, crafting engaging posts, designing captivating graphics, and managing the bakery's social media accounts. The bakery owner's regular feedback and open communication ensured that the graduate's efforts aligned perfectly with the business's goals.

The graduate noted, *"The collaboration with Thabong Bakery went well. The communication was clear, and I knew exactly what was expected of me."*

This alignment led to impressive results: a surge in Facebook engagement and increased brand visibility. However, the collaboration wasn't without challenges. The physical distance between the graduate and the bakery made on-site tasks difficult. *"The biggest challenge was that I was based in a different province. It made tasks like on-site photoshoots difficult to manage,"* the graduate explained. Despite this, their commitment and structured workflows allowed them to deliver impactful results.

### **Guiding Potential Through Mentorship**

Mentorship played a pivotal role in the graduate's journey. The mentor provided professional advice and practical support, helping the graduate navigate challenges and refine their skills.

*"My mentor was incredibly supportive. They helped me with travel arrangements and guided me through managing shoots and campaigns,"* the graduate shared. This support was crucial in overcoming obstacles and ensuring successful project outcomes.

The mentor's constructive feedback also helped the graduate grow. *"My mentor showed me where I needed to improve and gave me the confidence to take on new challenges. I wouldn't have achieved as much without that support."*

Yet, the graduate recognised a limitation: *"I felt we could have benefited from more time with our mentors. The sessions were helpful, but more interaction would have made a big difference."* Expanding mentorship hours could enhance the program's impact.

### **Building Skills, Confidence, and Careers**

The Hire-A-Grad program was a career-defining experience for the graduate. Through real-world tasks like social media campaign management, shoot planning, and graphic design, they developed critical technical and soft skills.

*"I learned how to manage a campaign from start to finish. This experience improved my organisational skills and taught me how to plan effectively,"* the graduate reflected. The hands-on experience sharpened their skills and ignited a passion for digital marketing. *"I now feel confident working with clients directly, and I discovered a real passion for digital marketing through this program."*

This transformation gave the graduate the confidence and clarity needed for a long-term career. *"This program allowed me to apply my skills in a real-world environment. It made me feel ready for a long-term career in digital marketing."*

## Challenges for SMMEs and the Role of Digital Marketing

SMMEs like Thabong Bakery often face unique challenges:

- **Limited Resources:** Small budgets and time constraints make consistent digital marketing difficult.
- **Lack of Digital Skills:** Many business owners struggle with modern marketing techniques.
- **Customer Engagement:** Reaching new customers is challenging without an online presence.

The Hire-A-Grad program addressed these hurdles effectively. The graduate's expertise helped the bakery improve its digital presence and engage more customers. *"The strategies we implemented brought new life to the bakery's Facebook page, and seeing more people interacting with the brand was rewarding."*

## Navigating Challenges with Strategic Solutions

The pilot stage highlighted several challenges for both graduates and SMMEs:

- **Graduate Challenges:**
  - Geographic Separation: *"The biggest challenge was that I was based in a different province. It made tasks like on-site photoshoots difficult to manage."*
  - Content Delays: *"Sometimes there were delays in getting the content I needed, which slowed down the workflow."*
- **SMME Challenges:**
  - **Time Constraints:** Small business owners often struggle to balance operations with digital marketing efforts.
  - **Communication Barriers:** Delays in providing feedback sometimes hindered progress.

Despite these obstacles, creative solutions emerged through teamwork and mentorship. *"Despite the distance, we found ways to make it work. The support from my mentor helped us stay on track and deliver what was needed."*

## Suggested Improvements

- **Enhanced Logistical Support:**
  - Provide travel subsidies or stipends for graduates needing to visit SMMEs for on-site work.
  - Introduce better remote collaboration tools to streamline workflows.



- **Increased Mentorship Time:**
  - Expand structured mentorship hours to give graduates more guidance.  
*"I felt like we could have benefited from more time with our mentors."*
- **Content and Resource Planning:**
  - Develop precise content schedules to ensure the timely delivery of materials.
  - Offer SMMEs training on supporting digital marketing efforts.

### **A Win-Win for Graduates and SMMEs**

For Thabong Bakery, the Hire-A-Grad partnership was a game-changer. The bakery's online presence flourished, attracting new customers and boosting engagement. The graduate explained, *"The strategies we implemented brought new life to the bakery's Facebook page, and seeing more people interacting with the brand was rewarding."*

For the graduate, the experience laid the foundation for a promising career. *"I feel ready to take on new clients and manage projects independently. This experience gave me the skills and confidence I needed to pursue a career in digital marketing."*

### **Looking Ahead**

The Hire-A-Grad program has proven transformative, benefiting both graduates and SMMEs. However, addressing logistical challenges and expanding mentorship can further enhance its impact. As one graduate suggested, *"If there were more resources for travel and more time with mentors, I think the program could be even more impactful."*

This story exemplifies how empowering young professionals with real-world experience and guidance can create lasting change. *"This program didn't just teach me skills; it showed me how those skills can make a real difference."*

## **4.2.2. SMME's Story of Growth and Transformation: Thabong Bakery and the Hire-A-Grad Program**

### **A Partnership That Sparked Change**

Thabong Bakery, a community favourite known for its delicious baked goods, had long dreamed of expanding its customer base and enhancing its online presence. Like many small businesses, however, it faced challenges due to limited digital marketing expertise and resources. When the

**Hire-A-Grad program**, an initiative by Digify Africa in partnership with the SAB Foundation, offered the opportunity to work with a skilled digital marketing graduate, it seemed like the perfect solution.

The graduate brought fresh ideas, enthusiasm, and technical skills to help realise Thabong Bakery's vision. What followed was a journey filled with collaboration, mentorship, and professional growth that transformed the bakery's digital presence and gave the graduate valuable work experience. However, along with these successes, challenges arose that offered helpful insights for improving future iterations of the program.

### **Bridging Gaps Through Collaboration and Communication**

From the beginning, collaboration was key to the partnership's success. The graduate worked closely with the bakery owner to create a tailored content strategy, manage social media accounts, and design engaging graphics. The bakery owner appreciated the graduate's efforts and communication style.

*"Thabang understood the brief and executed it in detail. He was very patient with me as an entrepreneur and explained why certain strategies were necessary,"* the owner noted. This transparent communication helped ensure that the graduate's work aligned with the bakery's goals. The results were impressive: increased Facebook engagement and a revitalised online presence.

Yet, collaboration wasn't without its challenges. The physical distance between the graduate and Thabong Bakery, located in different provinces, made on-site tasks difficult to coordinate. *"The biggest challenge was that the graduate was not based nearby. It was difficult to coordinate on-site activities and photoshoots because he wasn't always physically present,"* the bakery owner explained.

**Suggested Improvement:** Providing travel subsidies for graduates could facilitate on-site work and reduce logistical hurdles.

### **Guiding Success Through Mentorship**

The mentorship was crucial in supporting the graduate and ensuring the partnership's success. Morwesi, the graduate's mentor, provided invaluable professional advice and practical assistance, significantly boosting the graduate's confidence and efficiency.

*“Morwesi served as Thabang's sounding board, someone he could talk to about challenges and ideas. Her support made his work more efficient and effective,” the bakery owner said. This mentorship not only benefited the graduate but also improved the outcomes for the bakery.*

However, the bakery owner recognised that the mentorship hours were limited. *“I felt like we could have benefited from more time with mentors. The sessions were helpful, but more interaction would have made a big difference.”*

**Suggested Improvement:** Expanding mentorship hours would allow graduates to receive more comprehensive support, improving their performance and confidence.

### **Measurable Impact on Business**

The graduate's contributions to Thabong Bakery brought clear improvements. Social media engagement increased, and the bakery's story reached more customers. *“Thabang was able to tell the whole story of Thabong Bakery, which allowed us to connect more with our current customers and attract new ones,” the owner shared.*

Encouraged by these results, the bakery extended the graduate's contract. *“I will be extending the contract with Thabang with new terms. I am confident that by March 2025, the brand awareness will start translating into sales and new customers,” the owner said proudly.*

Despite these successes, balancing the business's demands with digital marketing tasks proved difficult. *“There were times when I was so busy running the bakery that I couldn't respond quickly. This sometimes slowed down the process.”*

**Suggested Improvement:** Implementing a structured communication plan with set timelines for feedback and approvals could help reduce delays and maintain workflow efficiency.

### **Navigating Challenges with Strategic Solutions**

Resource constraints were another hurdle. Like many SMMEs, Thabong Bakery needed more budget and tools for high-quality content creation. *“Sometimes, we didn't have the resources for high-quality visuals or materials needed for the campaigns. It made it hard to produce the kind of content we wanted,” the owner admitted.*

Additionally, the bakery owner's limited digital marketing knowledge sometimes created gaps in understanding the graduate's strategies. *“I didn't always understand why certain strategies were suggested. Thabang had to explain things to me, and while he was patient, I sometimes struggled to keep up.”*

**Suggested Improvement:** Offering basic digital marketing training for SMMEs would help business owners better understand marketing strategies, improving collaboration and outcomes. Additionally, providing resource assistance or stipends for content creation tools could empower graduates to deliver higher-quality work.

### **A Win-Win for Graduates and SMMEs**

Despite the challenges, the partnership was a win-win. The bakery's online presence blossomed, attracting more customers and increasing engagement. The graduate's creativity and commitment made a lasting impression. *"Thabang exceeded my expectations. He was professional, respectful, and dedicated. This program has been a blessing for us,"* the bakery owner said.

The experience was equally transformative for the graduates. The Hire-A-Grad program provided a platform for them to apply their skills, gain confidence, and set the foundation for a promising career in digital marketing.

### **Looking Ahead**

The Hire-A-Grad program has proven to be a powerful catalyst for transformation, benefiting both graduates and SMMEs. While the program's successes are evident, addressing logistical challenges, expanding mentorship, and offering additional support can unlock even more significant potential.

As the bakery owner reflected, *"This is a wonderful opportunity, and I wish more SMMEs would participate, especially those needing to build a digital footprint."*

This story of growth and transformation shows how empowering small businesses with skilled graduates and the proper support can drive meaningful change. The owner concluded, *"This program didn't just help us grow; it showed us what's possible with the right skills and support."*

#### **4.2.3. Mentor's Story of Growth and Transformation: Thabong Bakery and the Hire-A-Grad Program**

### **A Partnership That Sparked Change**

Thabong Bakery, known for its delectable baked goods and strong community presence, was ready to share its story online but needed more digital marketing expertise. Enter the *Hire-A-Grad* program—a collaborative initiative by Digify Africa and the SAB Foundation. A

skilled graduate joined forces with Thabong Bakery through this program to boost its digital presence. But behind the scenes, a critical player supported this journey: the mentor. The mentor's insights, patience, and strategic support helped the graduate and the bakery navigate challenges, turning their partnership into a true success story.

### **Mentorship: A Guiding Force**

The mentor played a pivotal role in ensuring the graduate succeeded. From the beginning, the mentor guided strategy, communication, and professionalism. The mentor described their role as *"eye-opening and reassuring,"* emphasising the importance of helping the graduate set realistic expectations and clear objectives. *"I needed to step in to show him how he needs to communicate clear objectives for the campaign and not over-promise or under-deliver,"* the mentor explained.

The mentor's approach included frequent meetings and hands-on support. *"We scheduled more than one weekly meeting, which would last about 2-3 hours. This helped us stay on track and prepare effectively for the SMME's needs,"* they noted. This structured guidance allowed the graduate to build a strong content bank, ensuring they could produce consistent, high-quality digital material.

### **Bridging Challenges Through Patience and Strategy**

Despite the successes, the journey was challenging. One of the key difficulties was managing the graduate's anxiety when expectations shifted. The mentor recalled, *"There was slight anxiety and an overwhelming feeling when the scope of work changed. I reminded him that flexibility and resilience would see him through"*.

Another challenge was time management during on-site visits. The mentor observed, *"Adaptation to new situations was a challenge. During our Free State trip, the graduate's first time shooting content and conducting interviews led to time constraints. I had to step in and guide him to keep things on track"*. These experiences underscored the need for better preparation and realistic timelines for on-site work.

### **Challenges and Solutions: The Mentor's Perspective**

The mentor also identified some challenges related to the overall program structure. Limited mentorship time posed a constraint. *"I gave more than 3 hours a week initially, but towards the end, I had to limit it to 2 hours max. More structured mentorship time would make a significant difference,"* the mentor suggested.

Another issue was consistent check-ins between mentors, graduates, and SMMEs.

*The mentor recommended weekly check-ins to help eliminate communication breakdowns and allow us to address issues early on. This strategy could enhance collaboration and ensure all parties remain aligned throughout the program.*

### **A Win-Win for Graduates, SMMEs, and Mentors**

Through the mentor's guidance, the graduate delivered exceptional work, and Thabong Bakery saw a notable improvement in its digital presence. The bakery owner praised the graduate's adaptability and respectfulness: *"He was very patient and always gave me space to approve his work. He understood the business and respected the process"*.

The mentor's contributions also left a lasting impact on the graduate's professional growth. *"The mentorship elevated the graduate's confidence and work ethic. He learned that being an account manager is about discipline, resilience, and serving the client well,"* the mentor reflected.

### **Looking Ahead: Recommendations for Improvement**

To build on this success, several improvements were suggested:

- **More Structured Mentorship Time:** Increasing dedicated mentorship hours would provide graduates with the support needed to overcome challenges and refine their skills.
- **Enhanced Preparation for On-Site Work:** Providing clear guidelines and logistical support for on-site shoots could mitigate time management issues.
- **Regular Check-Ins:** Weekly meetings between mentors, graduates, and SMMEs could address communication gaps and keep everyone aligned.
- **Support Channels for Mentors:** A system where mentors can quickly reach program managers for assistance would alleviate potential overwhelm.

## **5. DISCUSSIONS**

The findings from the Digify Africa x SAB Foundation Hire-A-Grad program reveal significant insights into the experiences of graduates, SMMEs, and mentors. These insights highlight the program's successes, challenges, and potential areas for improvement. This discussion section explores how the findings align with the program's core objectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the outcomes achieved and areas for enhancement. The analysis is divided into two main subsections: Program Objectives and Case Study Objectives, with a focus on their integration to demonstrate the overall impact of the program.

## 5.1. Aligning Program Goals with Real-World Outcomes

| Program Objectives                                                                                                       | Case Study Objectives                                                                                                   | Integration                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Objective 1:</b> Facilitate employment for graduates by connecting them with SMMEs.                                   | Assess the effectiveness of the Hire-A-Grad initiative in reducing youth unemployment.                                  | The program successfully connected graduates with SMMEs, providing practical work opportunities and enhancing employability. Graduates gained hands-on experience that built their confidence and prepared them for the workforce. For instance, one graduate noted, <i>"This experience gave me the skills and confidence I needed to pursue a career in digital marketing."</i>                         |
| <b>Objective 2:</b> Enhance SMMEs' digital presence and capabilities through targeted strategies.                        | Explore how SMMEs benefited from the program, focusing on improving brand awareness and customer engagement.            | SMMEs like Thabong Bakery saw significant improvements in their digital marketing capabilities. The graduate's tailored approach revitalized the bakery's social media presence, with the owner stating, <i>"Thabang brought new life to our Facebook page, helping us connect with our customers."</i> This highlights the program's effectiveness in enhancing digital strategies for small businesses. |
| <b>Objective 3:</b> Promote sustainable partnerships by encouraging SMMEs to extend contracts with graduates post-pilot. | Gain insights into the experiences of graduates, mentors, and SMMEs, and highlight successes and areas for improvement. | The program fostered long-term collaborations, with SMMEs extending contracts with graduates. The bakery owner remarked, <i>"We are extending the contract because the digital strategies are working, and we're seeing more customer engagement."</i> This demonstrates the program's ability to create mutually beneficial partnerships.                                                                |
| <b>Objective 4:</b> Support graduates' professional development by providing real-world challenges and mentorship.       | Examine how the program contributed to graduates' skill development, confidence, and readiness for long-term careers.   | Through mentorship and practical challenges, graduates developed essential skills and confidence. One graduate reflected, <i>"I learned how to manage a campaign from start to finish. This experience improved my organisational skills."</i> The mentorship provided by professionals like Morwesi reinforced this growth by offering structured guidance and feedback.                                 |

## 5.2. Unpacking the Key Themes: Insights and Impact of the Hire-A-Grad

### 5.2.1. Collaboration and Communication

Effective collaboration and clear communication between graduates, mentors, and SMMEs emerged as pivotal factors for program success. Transparent communication channels allowed participants to align on goals, maintain realistic expectations, and ensure accountability. Regular feedback cycles further enhanced alignment, fostering a culture of trust and mutual understanding. For example, Thabong Bakery's owner praised the graduate's communication skills: *"Thabang understood the brief and executed it to detail. He was very patient with me as an entrepreneur and explained why certain strategies were necessary."* This clarity ensured that the bakery's needs were met and that the content strategy aligned with the business vision. From the mentor's perspective, consistent communication helped address the graduate's anxiety: *"I needed to step in to show him how he needs to communicate clear objectives for the campaign and not over-promise or under-deliver."*

These experiences align with literature that highlights the importance of clear data-driven narratives and digital communication strategies in establishing cohesive workflows, particularly in dynamic environments like marketing and entrepreneurship【(Dutt et al., 2024). Integrating such strategies, *Hire-A-Grad* participants overcame initial misalignments and built strong collaborative foundations that translated to impactful outcomes. Open lines of communication and structured workflows fostered a productive working environment. However, geographic separation posed challenges for real-time collaboration, suggesting a need for more robust digital communication tools and regular check-ins to bridge these gaps.

### 5.2.2. Professional Development for Graduates

The program provided graduates with valuable opportunities to develop practical skills in campaign management, content creation, and client relationship management. Many graduates expressed increased confidence in handling end-to-end projects. Thabang, for instance, reflected on his growth: *"I learned how to manage a campaign from start to finish. This experience improved my organisational skills and taught me how to plan effectively."* The mentor's guidance supported this professional development, helping graduates navigate challenges and refine their strategies. The mentor noted, *"I had to remind him that flexibility is key and that resilience would see him through."* Such mentorship reinforced professional confidence and adaptability.



Studies confirm that real-world exposure and mentorship are crucial for enhancing employability. Research on digital marketing careers highlights that hands-on experience boosts skill acquisition and job readiness (IMM Graduate School, 2020). The *Hire-A-Grad* program aligns with this research by equipping graduates with the practical tools and strategies necessary for the modern digital economy. Real-world exposure and mentorship were pivotal in enhancing graduates' skills and confidence. While the program succeeded in providing valuable experience, expanding mentorship hours could further amplify graduates' professional growth.

### 5.2.3. **SMME Growth and Impact**

The *Hire-A-Grad* initiative significantly improved the digital marketing capabilities of participating SMMEs. Businesses like Thabong Bakery reported increased customer engagement, enhanced brand visibility, and improved storytelling. The graduate's efforts revitalised the bakery's Facebook page and helped the business connect more deeply with its community. As the bakery owner noted, *"Thabang was able to tell the whole story of Thabong Bakery, which allowed us to connect more with our current customers and attract new ones."* This success was further reinforced by the graduate's tailored approach to digital strategy, which resulted in noticeable traction on social media. Encouraged by these results, the bakery extended the graduate's contract, confident that *"by March 2025, the brand awareness will start translating into sales and new customers."*

Literature supports the transformative role of digital marketing in small business growth, emphasising that well-executed strategies enhance customer engagement and drive long-term success. (Sharabati et al., 2024). The *Hire-A-Grad* program demonstrates how pairing graduates skilled in modern digital techniques with resource-constrained SMMEs can create a win-win model, addressing real-world business challenges effectively.

The program effectively addressed the digital marketing needs of SMMEs, helping them connect with broader audiences. However, SMMEs faced challenges providing timely feedback and resources, highlighting the need for structured communication plans and resource assistance.

### 5.2.4. **Mentorship as a Success Factor**

Mentorship was a cornerstone of the *Hire-A-Grad* program, providing graduates with strategic guidance, feedback, and support to navigate challenges. Mentors played an instrumental role in aligning graduate efforts with SMME expectations. Morwesi, the mentor in this case, provided structured planning and proactive communication. She explained, *"I gave more than 3 hours a week initially, which helped us stay on track and prepare effectively for the SMME's needs."* The mentorship also addressed the graduate's anxiety and helped manage expectations. When

challenges arose, such as time constraints during on-site visits, the mentor guided the graduate: *"I had to step in and guide him to keep things on track."*

Research underscores the importance of mentorship in professional development, particularly in rapidly evolving fields like digital marketing. Networking and mentorship not only accelerate learning but also provide critical insights to navigate industry complexities (Clear Digital Labs, 2024). The Hire-A-Grad program demonstrated how effective mentorship bridges skill gaps, boosts confidence, and fosters professionalism among graduates. Therefore, mentorship played a critical role in the graduates' success by providing structure, guidance, and confidence. However, limited mentorship hours restricted the potential for deeper engagement, suggesting the need for increased mentor availability.

#### 5.2.5. **Challenges in Logistics and Resource Alignment**

Despite the program's successes, logistical and resource constraints presented significant challenges, particularly for graduates working with geographically distant SMMEs. The distance between Thabong Bakery and the graduate made coordinating on-site activities such as photoshoots and content creation difficult. The graduate explained, *"The biggest challenge was that I was based in a different province. It made tasks like on-site photoshoots difficult to manage."* This separation often led to delays and inefficiencies in completing essential tasks. SMMEs also faced resource limitations that affected the quality and timeliness of content delivery. As the bakery owner described, *"Sometimes we didn't have the resources for high-quality visuals or materials needed for the campaigns."* These constraints sometimes disrupted timelines, requiring graduates and mentors to devise creative solutions to stay on track.

The **mentor's experience** further underscored these issues. They noted that logistical challenges often required additional planning and communication. *"Weekly check-ins would help eliminate communication breakdowns and allow us to address issues early on,"* the mentor suggested, highlighting the importance of maintaining consistent communication to mitigate potential delays. Literature on global logistics trends supports the need for seamless integration of digital tools and efficient planning to overcome such hurdles. (Mcewan, 2024). Implementing travel subsidies would enable graduates to visit SMMEs for essential on-site tasks, bridging the gap caused by physical distance. Providing remote collaboration tools like project management software, video conferencing platforms, and cloud-based storage could enhance communication and workflow efficiency. Structured communication plans, including regular check-ins and milestone reviews, ensure all stakeholders remain aligned and issues are promptly addressed.

Additionally, efficient planning and resource support are crucial for maintaining productivity and quality. Research suggests that integrating digital logistics tools can help streamline operations and mitigate the impact of geographic separation.(Pettit et al., 2022). By adopting these strategies, the *Hire-A-Grad* program can effectively overcome logistical barriers and ensure participants deliver impactful outcomes despite resource and location constraints.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and insights gathered from the *Digify Africa x SAB Foundation Hire-A-Grad* program, several areas for improvement have been identified to enhance the overall effectiveness and sustainability of the initiative. These recommendations are designed to address logistical challenges, strengthen mentorship, improve communication, and support the long-term growth of both graduates and SMMEs. By implementing these changes, the program can maximise its impact, ensuring better alignment of resources, smoother operations, and more sustainable partnerships.

| Issue Identified                   | Recommendation                       | Details                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Geographic and Logistical Barriers | Provide Travel Subsidies             | Support graduates financially for essential on-site tasks, such as photoshoots and meetings with SMMEs.              |
|                                    | Introduce Remote Collaboration Tools | Equip participants with tools like virtual meeting software and project management platforms to enhance remote work. |
|                                    | Resource Assistance                  | Ensure SMMEs can access high-quality visuals and campaign materials to support marketing efforts.                    |
| Limited Mentorship Hours           | Increase Mentorship Time             | Extend the number of mentorship hours available to graduates for more comprehensive guidance.                        |
|                                    | Structured Mentorship Plans          | Develop a framework for regular check-ins and feedback sessions to ensure consistent support.                        |
|                                    | Mentor Training                      | Provide mentors with training on communication and coaching techniques to maximise effectiveness.                    |

|                                       |                                |                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Communication and Workflow Breakdowns | Structured Communication Plans | Implement weekly check-ins and progress updates to maintain alignment and promptly address issues.                       |
|                                       | Feedback Protocols             | Establish standardised processes for timely and constructive feedback between graduates, mentors, and SMMEs.             |
|                                       | Digital Workflow Tools         | Use project management tools like Trello or Asana to track tasks, deadlines, and deliverables for better accountability. |
| Sustainability of Partnerships        | Post-Program Support           | Offer ongoing support to facilitate continued partnerships and employment opportunities post-pilot.                      |
|                                       | Incentive Programs             | Introduce incentives for SMMEs that extend graduate contracts, such as discounted services or training opportunities.    |
|                                       | Alumni Network                 | Create a Hire-A-Grad alum network to foster long-term connections and collaborations.                                    |
| Graduate Professional Development     | Skill Development Workshops    | Offer advanced workshops on digital marketing, client management, and professional skills.                               |
|                                       | Career Coaching                | Provide career coaching sessions to help graduates transition into employment or freelancing.                            |

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The *Digify Africa x SAB Foundation Hire-A-Grad* program has proven to be a transformative initiative addressing two critical challenges: youth unemployment and the digital capability gaps SMMEs face in South Africa. By strategically connecting skilled graduates with small businesses, the program facilitated meaningful employment opportunities while enhancing the digital marketing presence of participating SMMEs. Through real-world experience, mentorship, and collaboration, the initiative successfully empowered graduates with practical skills, confidence, and career readiness.

The experiences of graduates, SMMEs, and mentors reveal key themes that underpin the program's success. Effective Collaboration and Communication fostered trust and ensured alignment between all stakeholders. Professional Development for Graduates was significantly bolstered through hands-on tasks and strategic mentorship, enhancing skill sets and

employability. SMME Growth and Impact demonstrated the tangible benefits of targeted digital strategies, including increased brand awareness, customer engagement, and business visibility. The role of Mentorship emerged as a cornerstone for success, providing graduates with the support and guidance needed to navigate challenges and deliver quality work.

However, the program also highlighted several Logistics and Resource Alignment challenges, such as geographic separation, workflow delays, and limited mentorship hours. Addressing these issues through travel subsidies, better remote collaboration tools and structured communication plans can further enhance the program's effectiveness. Implementing the recommendations, such as expanding mentorship opportunities, improving logistical support, and fostering sustainable partnerships, can help the initiative achieve even more excellent outcomes in future iterations.

In conclusion, the *Hire-A-Grad* program exemplifies how innovative, youth-focused initiatives can drive meaningful change. By bridging the gap between graduates and SMMEs, the program provides career pathways for young professionals and supports the digital transformation of small businesses. With continuous refinement and investment, this initiative has the potential to scale its impact, inspiring further efforts to tackle youth unemployment and support small business growth in the digital economy.

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