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Meet UBONGO – a social enterprise revolutionizing education for kids in Africa

**Juan Carlos Solidoro** | [Follow](#)

MBA Candidate at Babson C...



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According to the World Economic Forum, “Of all of the investments needed to achieve sustainable development, none is more important than quality education for every child. In a knowledge-based world economy, a good education is vital for finding decent work; achieving good health; building functioning communities; developing the skills to be a dependable parent; and growing up to be an engaged and responsible citizen” [1] – and I agree 100%. Humankind faces the impending challenge of providing access to quality education to everyone in the world. Thanks to technological developments such as the internet and smartphones, there has been great progress in offering more accessibility and high-quality education to populations around the world.

Many great companies are working to close this educational gap. Good examples are Coursera and EdX. Both offer free online courses from top universities, and you can pay a small fee to obtain a certificate. Udemy, another contender in the educational technology space, lets anyone create and upload an online course to their platform. Udemy has evolved to offer more than 80,000 online courses at an average price of \$10 each. These three great examples served as an inspiration for me, and my three partners, to start NETZUN.com three years ago. An EdTech startup, NETZUN.com trains professionals with free and paid online courses (\$10 each course) and helps them get their dream job by matching them to employers looking for talent with these newly acquired skills.

Education is changing and there are many exciting companies and technologies helping to close the gap, but today I want to tell you about Ubongo, a very special company I recently discovered and the leading ‘EduTaining’ company in Africa. Ubongo has an out-of-the-box model to educate a very particular (and in much need) niche: children from 3 to 14 years of age in Africa. This particular population is one of the most disadvantaged groups in the world when it comes to access to quality education. Ubongo creates fun and educational media in the form of a cartoon series in which each episode is a lesson. The cartoons, offered in five different languages, are aired through TV and radio in more than 31 countries and reach over 9 million households in more than 31 African countries. Ubongo states that their programs “significantly improve school readiness and learning outcomes for kids, and also promote social and behavioral change for kids, caregivers, and educators.” [2] They currently have two

different shows: “Akili and Me,” which is a cartoon series created for kids from 3 to 6 years old and focuses on numeracy, pre-literacy, social-emotional learning, English as a second language, health, and art. The second show, “Ubongo Kids,” which is a cartoon series for older kids, ages 7 to 14, helps them learn math, science, engineering, technology, character strengths, and life skills.



Source: www.ubongo.org

Ubongo has developed a unique approach to developing meaningful educational content. As its website explains: “an in-house user testing team conducts research, focus groups and prototypes ideas with kids, to craft content that is going to be very engaging and that meets

the learning objectives to which it was intended.” [3]

A very interesting feature of the TV shows is that the kids can interact live via SMS with their favorite characters. This feature increases the level of engagement for the kids, while also generating revenue for the company. Ubongo has also created Apps and e-books through which kids can interact with the lessons, answering questions and receiving feedback from their favorite characters. Many African radio channels are playing Ubongo’s cartoon series, and partner websites are streaming them as well. As you can see, Ubongo has leveraged the technologies available in Africa to reach kids from 3 to 14 years old on a massive scale.

The company also has developed a strong culture around data to measure their impact on children: “they track viewership and listenership for all programs, conduct focus groups, collect user feedback digitally and also do experimental research to evaluate effects rigorously. From mobile surveys to randomized control trials and longitudinal studies, they work with partners to design and implement research that enables us to learn and improve quickly”, [4] and many of their results are impressive. For example:

Kids who watch Ubongo outperform their peers by 24% in counting.

Kids who watch Ubongo have 12% better scores on “higher school readiness exams” than kids who don’t watch Ubongo.

The company also has partnerships with more than 50 NGOs and companies across Africa that help Ubongo with funding, educational content creation, media reach, distribution, research, and other core activities needed to fulfill the companies’ mission.

There is no doubt that Ubongo is an impressive company, with an impactful mission—to reach 440 million kids in Africa. It is data-driven, innovative, and thinks outside the box—all attributes that can validate that the team behind this social company is unique. Ubongo will continue to impress with new solutions to close the gap of accessibility of quality education to all children in Africa. Without a doubt, Ubongo will inspire current and future entrepreneurs to think about innovative ways to close the gap in education, which would solve many of the problems we face today.

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[1] <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/03/how-to-achieve-a-quality-education-for-all/>

[2] <https://www.ubongo.org/what-we-do/>

[3] <https://www.ubongo.org/what-we-do/how-we-do-it/>

[4] <https://www.ubongo.org/what-we-do/how-we-do-it/>



Juan Carlos Solidoro

MBA Candidate at Babson C...

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