

# Future of the Business World: Adventures in Group Innovation and E-Learning

Date : February 1, 2021

<http://media.blubrry.com/kwhs/p/kwhs-media.wharton.upenn.edu/podcasts/20210122-WGYP-FBW-Robb.mp3>

Podcast: [Play in new window](#) | [Download](#)

Subscribe: [iTunes](#) | [Android](#) | [RSS](#)

On this month's episode of Future of the Business World, Rylan Robb, a high school student from Mozambique, Africa, shares his experience of launching an entrepreneurial idea as part of a team. While attending the Wharton Global Youth Program's [Future of the Business World online course](#), Rylan and his co-founders launched [Zenarc](#), an online learning platform for their peers. While it's still a work in progress, Rylan talks about how he hopes that Zenarc will make education more accessible for teens around the world.



**Wharton Global Youth Program:** Hello, everyone! Welcome to *Future of the Business World*, where we get to spend time with exceptional high school entrepreneurs.

I'm Diana Drake with the Wharton Global Youth Program at [the Wharton School](#), University of Pennsylvania. At [Wharton Global Youth](#), we design programs, competitions and content that introduce students to all areas of business education while they're in high school.

One of the things I love about our programs is how global they are. We meet students from all corners of the world and get to learn from their unique cultures and ideas.

Today's guest is a great example of that macro perspective. Rylan Robb is a high school student from Mozambique, Africa, who joined us last summer for our Future of the Business World online course.

It was there that Rylan's latest entrepreneurial venture, known as Zenarc, was born. We're going to catch up today on its progress — and so much more.

Rylan, thanks for joining us on *Future of the Business World*.

**Rylan Robb:** Thank you for having me.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Entrepreneurship aside, you have had a fascinating journey in the past year. What have you been up to during the pandemic?

---

**Robb:** What a year 2020 was. And when I reflect on the past year, I can't help but think just how different everyone's experience was. The world precedent changed, but so did everyone's life and therefore everyone's life story.

My year started out pretty great. I had a school trip to the Netherlands at the end of January [2020]. School was very calm. In Mozambique in particular, things were quite calm with COVID. No one really was freaking out. But toward the end of March our school decided before any cases were in-country to start the transition to online learning, which was inevitable. I remember being in science class when that email got sent out and the atmosphere in that class was very joyful, almost like we were being rewarded. Little did I know that would be the last time for the next nine months that I would see any of my friends in person. And that was tough. About a week after school closed, I left on an embassy repatriation flight in the middle of the night. One suitcase, back to Houston [Texas], where I had previously lived. Over the next months, I spent living out of suitcases, rental homes, it was quite tough. Finally, in the summer something I had looked forward to for a very long time – I attended [Wharton's online summer course] Future of the Business World, Session I. And there I met a lot of great people and started Zenarc, which to this day has given me something grounded, something constant that I've been able to work on.

After the course, we worked on building it up and most of us started our 11<sup>th</sup> Grade year of high school. Being in the U.S. away from my school, my friends was tough. Due to time zones and other unchangeable forces, I ended up attending school from 2 a.m. to 8 a.m. virtually. Going to bed at 5 p.m., getting up at 1:30 for class at 2 a.m. That was kind of how my life went for a while. Some people may have felt sorry for me or thought my situation was bad, but the change and adaptation is ingrained in me. I've lived abroad, moved abroad, I've moved a lot, changed schools, changed friends, so when I come across something like that, I'm also pre-programmed to do it. It's an opportunity to challenge, and it's something that has benefited me my entire life.

Going into November, we finally learned we were going to return to Mozambique, and at the end of December we finally did. Flying back into my home on December 31<sup>st</sup>; seeing the buildings, seeing the familiar sites, and city landmarks was an unforgettable experience in my life.

**Wharton Global Youth:** You're home! That's great. What is embassy repatriation?

**Robb:** While the COVID original threat and worry was going on, the U.S. Embassy in Mozambique decided to offer a repatriation flight to Americans in the country. Originally, we weren't supposed to be on that flight. We had actually booked tickets out of Mozambique on our own on a normal commercial flight. But as things started to rapidly progress, all the flights out of Mozambique were canceled, so the embassy had a flight that left at 1 a.m. into Madrid and then into Dulles [Airport in Texas]. We ended up with one bag, and that was all we had. All our stuff remained in Mozambique. My dad remained in Mozambique, so our family was even split up. There was no option. That was that. Those were the cards you were dealt, and you had to play them.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Many of us can't travel right now...so take us to Mozambique for a second. What do you love most about living in Mozambique?

**Robb:** Arriving in Maputo, in the capital where I live...even flying in is such a cool experience. You see this mix of coast and city and depending which way you come in, safari. I get asked so many times to compare the U.S. to Mozambique. You just can't. It's completely different; apples to oranges. Really my favorite part about living here in Maputo is the atmosphere. It's almost like living on a forever vacation, as weird as that sounds even though people go to school and work and it's not quite a vacation. I can drive an hour and thirty minutes from my house and see giraffes and elephants. To this day, that's one of the coolest things I can ever say. The calm atmosphere here: being a couple minutes from the beach and long, sprawling roads around the coast. It's always grounding. Sometimes I can get really hectic in my life, but just being here just calms me down. I'll always enjoy it.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Okay, on to business. Tell us about Zenarc. This was launched, as we said, during our Future of the Business World online course. What is it all about?

**Robb:** Zenarc is a peer-based e-learning platform. We operate a full ecosystem and all of our instructors and staff are on a volunteer basis. Our aim is to strive to educate teens through free, concentrated peer learning. Everything we have out there is completely free.

**Wharton Global Youth:** This concept of peer learning — why did you focus on that model?

**Robb:** When I think of peer learning, all I see is great opportunity. Peer learning is the ability to learn something new from somebody you already know. In turn, you'll be able to increase your skill set and turn around and teach them something which increases their skill set. You'll be in a forever loop of increasing knowledge and understanding. Through Future of the Business World, I got that experience. Through the Stock Market Challenge with Professor Wayne, I learned from my peers. And in turn I'm able to teach my peers here those skills and concepts that I learned through my course and through my peers.

One of the biggest issues I see across the world today is one of education inequality. I also see that predominantly in my home of Mozambique. I see a strong push to word-for-word “educate the population.” But the metric they use is how many people are enrolled in a formal school. Although I think that's a good start, I think the real issue is getting the right knowledge into the right minds. In that sense, I think education is not equal. Those with the opportunity to learn the specialized skill hold a much stronger place in the world than those that don't. At Zenarc, that's something we plan to improve. We intend to allow access to all levels of education to everybody.

“One thing I love about group innovation is that it never stops. There's always a new idea, question or comment, and that allows us to keep rounding the ball toward a more perfect sphere.” — Rylan Robb, co-founder of Zenarc

**Wharton Global Youth:** It sounds like your global perspective really became part of this entrepreneurial idea and is helping to fuel it. You are really a team of people working to create this. Can you talk a bit about your team and how you came together in the beginning?

**Robb:** At the beginning of the Wharton summer courses and in turn the online [GYM \[Global Youth Meetup online community\]](#), which we all loved, I sent out a message in one of the discussion boards that talked about starting a Discord, which is a popular messaging application. Very quickly, we had 250 people on the Discord within the first two weeks. Through that, we were allowed to discuss outside of our course sessions. A lot of the courses were broken up into sessions and the communication between [people in different] sessions was very limited. By quickly thinking how we could network together, we were able to set up a framework to ideate with each other. Very quickly a lot of us got together and said, ‘Oh, wow, we're learning all this great stuff. This is really cool, but what can we do to further this understanding to more people.’ Yes, we're lucky to be here, but how can we go further? Through that and through many hours of calling, discussion and ideas, we decided we wanted to make an open platform, completely free, that allows people to share ideas, knowledge, perspectives and stories with each other.

**Wharton Global Youth:** How many people were in your core Zenarc group?

**Robb:** We originally started with 12 staff, then quickly grew to 13 and then finally 14.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Were members of your team located around the globe?

**Robb:** Something I find really cool about our network of volunteers is that it's quite diverse. That adds to the

perspective that we give and the approach we take to solving certain issues. The majority of our current staff and volunteers are spread out across the U.S., we have one member in Europe and me in Africa.

**Wharton Global Youth:** I want to settle on this idea of group entrepreneurship for a minute. People often think of entrepreneurship as a solo venture; one person kind of having a Eureka moment. But innovation often happens in groups. Can you talk about the process of innovation for your team? What have been some strengths of taking that team approach?

**Robb:** One thing I love about group innovation is that it never stops. There's always a new idea, question or comment and that allows us to keep rounding the ball toward a more perfect sphere. One thing that I learned from ideating and creating in a group was the concept of a mean [minimum] viable product. This completely changed how we went about taking Zenarc from an idea to a mockup to a full-fledged project and working platform. Through this newly introduced-to-me concept, we were able to very v quickly get something out there that we could show and test, which led to further development. Without working with the group, that would never have happened.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Can you define mean viable product for us?

**Robb:** Mean viable product in our case was getting the lowest acceptable production version of our product that we could out there. By having that out there, we moved from just an idea to a creation. And when you move from the idea to the creation that sometimes is the biggest step you're going to take. A lot of startup ideas or business ideas or project ideas get stuck either between idea and creation or in the process of creation. The introduction through group learning and group ideating was that and we were able to get a workable production model out there very quickly.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Have there been any weaknesses to your team approach?

**Robb:** Our team approach has always allowed us to be operational because we tend to have more people than tasks to do. However, the downside of this relaxed approach is the lack of focus. Due to the operational nature that's unfortunately how it's been. And we've lost some people along the way. As a leader, that has been the biggest challenge for me. Leading so many diverse people with diverse schedules and diverse commitments is a real challenge. We started out with a great deal of passion and motivation and we built our ideal system, and now moving into operation we want to continue the operational standard that keeps us running.

**Wharton Global Youth:** It's been about 6 months or so since you initiated this idea. What progress have you made on the platform? Can you give us some examples of existing courses or courses that are under development? Have you been able to recruit instructors for the peer-to-peer learning?

**Robb:** The past six months or so is our total project timeline right now. Within that, we've gone from literally a concept discussed over a call to a fully functioning, self-supporting system that functions the same as any other e-learning, software suite. As a group of high schoolers that spent less than \$100 in self-funded money, that was a big feat for us. We got something done that would typically be outsourced or a big-budget item. In the past couple of months as we look at the timeline, we've been focused on refining the experience so that when someone starts engaging with our product, they stay engaged. Customer acquisition is one thing, but customer engagement and continuing contribution to our platform is something that we really strive for. Right now, published for everyone on Zenarc, is a how-to course on how to create your own course. And if you'd like to participate in the Zenarc platform and create your own course, I highly recommend you check out that course. I've also created my own course on some introductory steps to investing; talking about some basic fundamentals, like asset classes and accounts. Creating this course on my own platform furthered my understanding of not only what I was teaching, but of how my system works. I think that's really important. You want to build something that you know you're going to use and that you enjoy using. In the development pipe right now, there's a course on Roth IRAs that a couple of us are working on. There's also some business development courses and one I'm

really looking forward to because it's something I never would have pursued on my own is Japanese writing systems.

Again, that's a peer thing. That's something you would only want to learn from your friend. That's the environment we're working in. In total, we have 11 registered instructors and 53 registered students.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Is there a learning curve with the peer-to-peer learning approach, in that learning from a peer is not like learning from a professor? People might be a little skeptical about the information they're getting. How do you feel about that?

**Robb:** Every type of learning and content acquisition is going to have its pros and cons. Certainly, a con of peer-to-peer learning would be the depth and the establishment of the knowledge you're being taught from your peers. But I think that's worth the tradeoff. The real advantage of peer-to-peer learning is that you're also going to get stuff that's digestible; things you're going to be able to understand. Peer learning is not going to be an end-all to education. Education never ends. So, if I'm able to teach one person about one thing and they're able to go take that one thing and understand the broader concept on their own time and then work into a broader concept — and then they go on to teach a course on the broad concepts, now a web of education has started. One thing that I said has turned into a content journey for someone else. So, I think every means of education is going to have pros and cons. What's unique about peer learning and what makes it so special is the engagement and the interest that is fostered after it's been obtained.

**Wharton Global Youth:** At this point, do you consider your platform a real business?

**Robb:** I think the term business can hold many meanings. Some schools are run as businesses. Governments sometimes operate as businesses. For us at Zenarc, this platform has always been a contribution to society and to how we can further humanity. By design, we chose to make it a nonprofit. Every goal is going to bring on different priorities. That's the goals and the priorities we've chosen, and I think that really shapes our path. I think what people get caught up in a lot is the notion of everything having to be the next big thing. Everything has to be the next giant invention, like Facebook, Google, even sliced bread. But for us, it's not about that. It's not about changing the world, though even if we help one person for them their world is changed. That really drives us.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Think back to the energy and passion of your original group last summer and where you are now. What has that revealed to you about entrepreneurship? What are your greatest entrepreneurship lessons from this journey?

**Robb:** Something that was talked upon in the Future of the Business World course and I thought was a cool concept, it hit me right away as soon as I put it to practice. That was: you have to pivot or perish. You have to change or things won't work out. That is a fundamental law of life. Somethings bound to change and what's going to really matter is how you adapt to that change. We've had the change. We're all very different people with very different commitments and schedules. That change is what's making us think toward the future. We understand that things are not going to be the same. By doing that, we're allowed to think deeply about our choices we're making. In the calls we discussed, well, should it be a purple or blue logo. But if we change that, other things are going to change. We need to be prepared. Maybe we'll have to change a media kit or a banner on the website. Now I need to redo this, and I may have accidentally deleted the entire database once. By understanding that pivoting is going to have to happen will set you up better in the long-term and you'll be more prepared when a fall to failure or a change does come along the way.

**Wharton Global Youth:** It sounds like it is still very much a work in progress. Give us a snapshot of Zenarc in another 6 months; what is your mission? Will you continue to offer free knowledge?

**Robb:** Our commitment for the foreseeable future is to never charge a penny for anything we offer. That goes back to our main mission of being a contribution to society. In the short term, we're excited to see new instructors join Zenarc. That's something we enjoy seeing and are really looking forward to. You can visit our platform at Zenarc.org. And even

in the long-term, we want to continue this project forever. We want to eventually pass the torch on to another group of kiddos that want to make the same contribution. That gives us a lot of hope. We're putting in the work today to someday hand it on to someone else to help more people.

**Wharton Global Youth:** One question I like to ask on Future of the Business World is: If you could change one thing in the world, what would it be?

**Robb:** I think I'm going to have to go with education inequality. I know I talked about it before, but I think it boils down into so many other issues in the world. You see unemployment, you see world hunger. You see a bunch of issues and a lot of people say, it's because of their education. We can put more people in classrooms; that's a plausible feat. But can we get those people in the classrooms to learn skills they want to learn and learn skills they're going to apply. We can employ more people through more trades they will enjoy and trades that will provide a benefit to society. I think if we can address that and address the gap in our current educational system and our educational means, I think we'll go a long way in solving other world problems.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Are you ready for our lightning round? Answer these questions as quickly as you can.

A technology that blows your mind?

**Robb:** Airdrop. It has to be Airdrop. I use it almost every day and I still can't understand why I can transfer things so quickly.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Something about you that would surprise us?

**Robb:** I was born in Caracas, Venezuela.

**Wharton Global Youth:** What is your favorite company slogan?

**Robb:** It's gotta be the Eat More Chicken Chick-Fil-A slogan with the cow holding the sign. That gets me every time.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Your favorite global business?

**Robb:** Boeing. Connecting the world.

**Wharton Global Youth:** A subject you would really like to study that you haven't yet explored?

**Robb:** Philosophy.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Which businessperson would you most like to take to lunch?

**Robb:** Cathie Wood of ARK Investments. Her perception of innovation is so enviable and her focus on the market disruption sets her apart, but it also allows the companies she's supporting to really innovate and succeed.

**Wharton Global Youth:** Rylan, thank you so much for joining us on Future of the Business World.

**Robb:** Thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure.