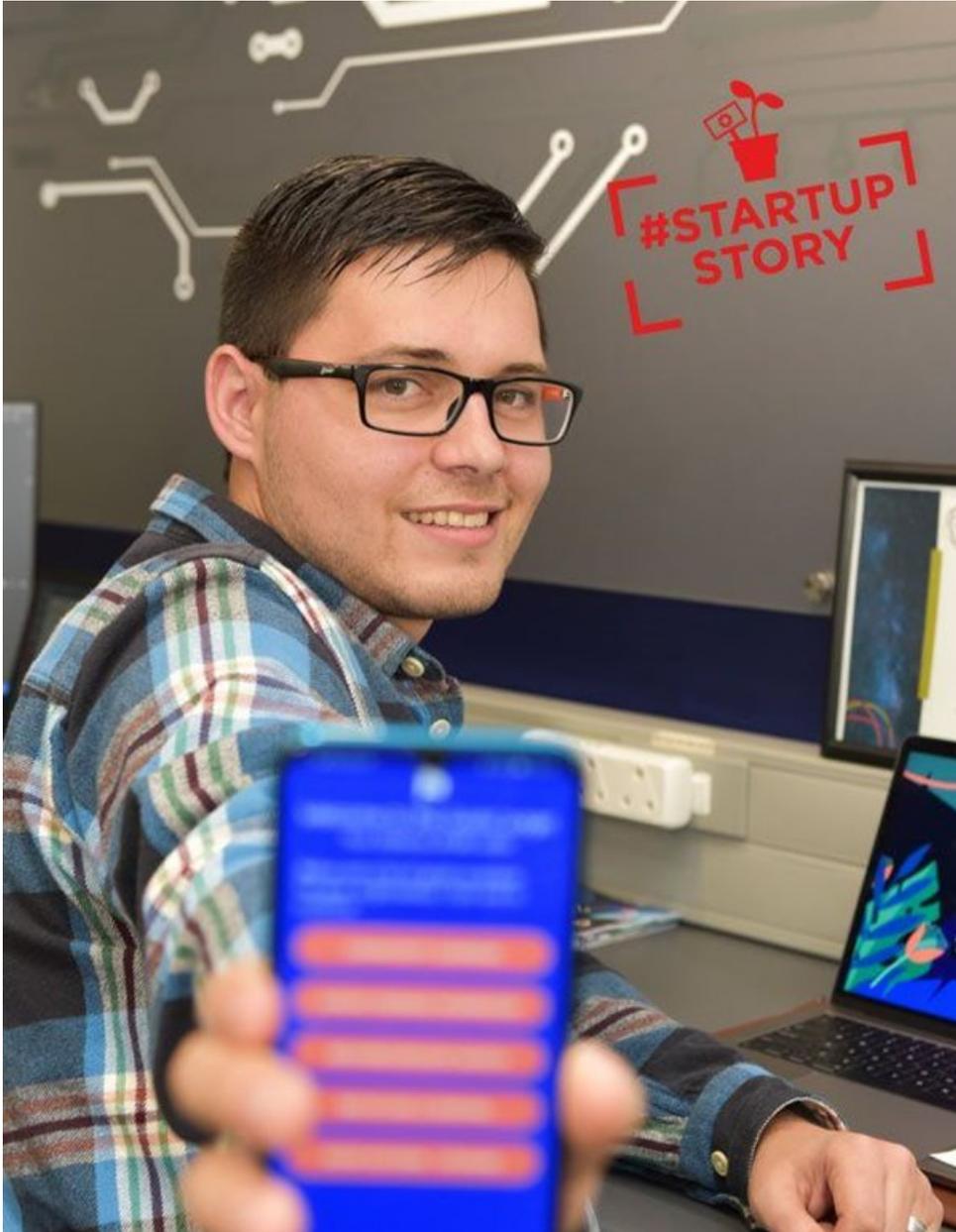


Get rewarded for daily Covid-19 symptom checks

By  Evan-Lee Courie

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[Vollar](#), an online platform that allows organisations to incentivise and reward members of a community for doing volunteer work to help others in their area. But when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, their customer market disappeared as organisations could not run social development programmes due to the lockdown. The team then had to go back to the drawing board.



Kyle Ueckerman, founder of Vollar

As a result, the Vollar team developed a chatbot called [Concorona](#) that rewards people for doing daily Covid-19 symptom checks and for completing quizzes about the virus. Concorona users can use their reward points on Vollar's website to purchase discounts from participating businesses.

"We hope that Concorona can help people access essential products and, in the process, bring new customers to small businesses," explains Kyle Ueckerman, founder of Vollar.

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Since launching the innovation, Vollar has already recorded over 26,000 symptom checks and they hope that the data will assist health workers to better understand and respond to the virus.

Ueckerman, a 2019 SAB Foundation Social Innovation and Disability Empowerment Award beneficiary, shares more about Vollar.

■ ***When, how and why did you get started?***

I spent most of my 20s confounding VOMO, a volunteering platform in the USA. After six years of working in the volunteering space with VOMO, I started exploring the idea of using a virtual currency to incentivise and reward volunteering.

I quickly realised that if we could use a virtual currency to reward people for volunteering, and they could use this currency to purchase essentials like food, we could solve many systemic problems plaguing communities across South Africa. Just imagine the impact if we could take the human potential that's lost to unemployment and channel it into neighbourhood watches or community gardens.

Moved to action by the potential impact of this idea, I left VOMO in 2018 and moved back home to South Africa with my wife to start Vollar (volunteer-dollar).

▣ **What is the core function of Vollar?**

The core of Vollar is our virtual currency, which is positioned as a currency for rewarding volunteering.

“ Vollar is special because it can only be used for payments at pre-vetted small businesses. ”

Organisations use our platform to fund the Vollar virtual currency (R1.00 = 1.00 Vollar), and to distribute it in their programs.

As a company, Vollar develops the technology and supports organisations that are using the platform. Organisations have found many interesting use cases for the technology; rewarding volunteering, rewarding progress in educational programs, and even some have looked into using it to reward progress in fighting diseases.

▣ **What are some of the obstacles you've had to overcome since starting out?**

Accessing funding for the project has always been an obstacle. My wife and I are by no means wealthy, starting Vollar has taken everything we have and more. It's easy to look at someone from the outside and think they had it easy, without seeing the hard work that's gone in.

When we started Vollar we believe deeply in the vision and mission, so much so that we sold everything we owned and took a loan, to get together the \$12,000 we needed to start the company get through our first year of operations. My wife worked to sustain us, while I worked on the company for a year without pay. We chose not to buy a car in order to save money, and instead rode bicycles for the first six months to complete the 16km round trip from our apartment to the incubator (LaunchLab) we worked from.

Two and a half years later we are incredibly grateful for angel investors like Daniel James and funders like the SAB Foundation that have invested in the project, helping us take it forward.

▣ **Covid-19 and the national lockdown has impacted many businesses. What impact did it have on Vollar?**

Covid-19 has been difficult for all small businesses and Vollar is no exception. Since all of our customer projects at the time required face to face interaction, our business halted overnight and we subsequently lost customers with projects in the pipeline. It easily set us back 3-6 months. We are only now starting to see organisations continuing their work, but many have lost funders and we are seeing a lot of uncertainty from organisations as to how they adapt their programs for the environment created by Covid-19.

“ One thing is for sure, we know Vollar is more necessary than ever, and honestly, we need corporates and philanthropists to work with us to bring this solution to many desperate communities. ”

In 2019 we ran a pilot where Vollar invested R15,000 per month into incentives to activate volunteers in the community of Kylemore. Just R15,000 per month provided up to 50 people per week with enough additional income through volunteering to ensure they had food at home. As a result, people had the opportunity to work, the community itself took ownership for developing the community, and the local small businesses doubled their revenue. Unfortunately, the pilot had to stop because we couldn't find donors to sustain it.

While the pilot only gave people a few hundred rands extra money each month, when put in perspective that over 55% of South Africans, or over 30 million people, live on less than R1,000, it's a lot of money. Most people don't realise how great and desperate the need is.

🔱 ***How did you prepare for the lockdown?***

In preparing for lockdown, our team decided to move out of our office space and go fully remote. Our team was very close-knit, and we enjoyed each other's company, so not having the face to face interaction has been difficult, but we've all been able to continue working very well.

🔱 ***What's the biggest challenge you are facing during this pandemic?***

There are two equally difficult challenges; firstly, the uncertainty facing organisations makes it difficult for them to make decisions about how to continue their work and secondly, there is too much information and people are overloaded, making it difficult to connect with organisations as many are overwhelmed with requests.

🔱 ***What sort of assistance will you need going forward?***

Networking, partners, and exposure. Vollar is a unique solution that can provide so much hope and dignity during this time, but it needs to rise above the noise of COVID-19.

🔱 ***With South Africa on Lockdown Level 3, if you are able to operate, what steps are you taking to continue operating?***

We are continuing to operate remotely. Previously we would go on site to onboard customers and small businesses, we are instead supporting our customers remotely and giving them the knowledge and tools to implement in their context.

🔱 ***Now is the time to innovate and experiment. What is Vollar doing?***

When we recognised that projects could not continue when lockdown hit, as a team we brainstormed ways in which we could still be useful even if we couldn't operate in our normal capacity.

“ We recognised that misinformation was a major threat to South Africa, so we used our expertise in behavioural incentivisation to create a chatbot called Concorona, that rewards people for keeping informed about Covid-19. On Concorona, people can do daily symptom checks and weekly quizzes, which they earn reward points for completing. These points can be used at participating businesses in exchange for discounts and special deals. ”

Since launching Concorona, we've been able to onboard over 32,000 users, who have completed over 26,000 checkups and 33,000 quizzes, with many individual users completing over 50 symptom rechecks!

Concorona is completely data-free thanks to our partnership with Moya Messenger, which has given us a lot of traction in the low-income sector. We'd love for a mobile network to partner with us and provide airtime vouchers as this has been the biggest reward request from our users.

🔱 ***What do you predict the next 6 months will be like?***

I believe we'll get a lot of traction with Vollar over the next six months. We've adapted our business model to suit this new normal by getting rid of our monthly subscription. We now only charge a transaction fee each time an organisation tops-up their wallet. This has made Vollar accessible to so many more organisations regardless of their size.

🔴 **What has been your biggest lesson from all this?**

Stick to the mission. We also almost got lost in the fog of the pandemic.

“ *When your existence as a company is suddenly on the line and you have bills and staff to pay, you start searching for any opportunity for security.* ”

This put our team under a lot of strain and honestly, I personally almost lost sight of our mission. I'm thankful that our main investor, Daniel James, reminded me of the mission that captured his attention. More importantly, he reminded me of who I am.

ABOUT EVAN-LEE COURIE

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