



## Victor Nendongo: “My first month in Switzerland was like a thunderstorm”

For the past three years, the Julius Baer Academy has proudly collaborated with B360, an organisation that coordinates internships to promote the exchange of knowledge and experience between companies in Europe and top students from Southern Africa. Victor Nendongo is one such student who shares his recent obstacles and triumphs, and what he thinks people in Switzerland could learn from Namibians.

Victor Nendongo is the kind of person you feel you’ve known your whole life. His effervescent character and seemingly innate ability to converse about anything under the sun are apparent from the get-go. And although his interpersonal skills are down pat, his professional and educational backgrounds are not to be overlooked – especially now, with a B360 internship at Julius Baer under his belt.

In August of 2019, Victor arrived in Switzerland, marking the first time he stepped foot outside of his motherland, Namibia. Born in the semi-arid, northern town of Ondangwa, where roughly 23,000 inhabitants go about their daily routine, Victor found his place as the youngest of nine siblings.

Upon graduating from high school, Victor began studying fine arts at university. He also began writing poetry, and even won a few slam poetry competitions. Shortly after, his father passed away. The emotional toll of his loss eventually became too much for Victor, so he dropped out of school and began working as an eyewear consultant.

Routine settled in, and Victor’s gregarious nature aided interaction with customers. It was one customer in particular, however, that changed the course of Victor’s life: “The guy walked in and started bragging about studying medicine in London and I thought ‘There’s no reason I can’t do something similar’”. And with that, Victor registered as a student in Informatics at

the Namibian University of Science of Technology, and with perfect timing – it was the very last day to register.

As a student, he gravitated towards computers, and even made a name for himself and his friends with a computer game, called 'Muhoko Runner', which won 'best prototype development' prize at the university's annual research fair. "The game was inspired by a lecturer who had promised us KFC if we could get a specific game up and running. Once he realised we'd actually succeeded, we sent him running for our prize," he laughs. "And 'Muhoko' means diverse and like family, which basically describes the group of people with whom I created such games."

### **Interning at the Julius Baer Academy**

Fast forward four years and Victor finds himself at the Julius Baer Academy as an intern with B360. "I get to work in not one, but two teams. In the team that develops learning opportunities for employees I redesigned and recreated online courses using a new software. And in the Learning Technology team I created a script that converted thousands of images to smaller sizes, which freed up a lot of storage space."

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It wasn't always 'a walk in the park' however, he admits. "My first month in Switzerland was like a thunderstorm. Although I'd taken basic programming courses at university, my skills weren't up to the challenge when I first arrived, so my supervisor took me to the library to take out three Python 'bibles.'" Victor studied religiously each night after work, bringing his programming skills up to speed. "One lesson I learned in all of this was to 'under promise and over deliver,'" he says with a smile.

In fact, it was hiking to the peak of a mountain with his host family which initially motivated Victor to conquer the complex programming language. "It was a grueling three-hour hike and, well, let's just say we Namibians don't normally hike for fun," he jokes. "But once I got to the top I thought 'If I can hike a mountain, I can tackle Python'."

### **Adjusting to Swiss culture**

One might deem many of Victor's other experiences in Switzerland as quintessential, like swimming in Lake Zurich (an ability he acquired in the lake itself) and eating bratwurst with a side of mustard. "My colleagues were kind and took me out for a nice lunch, but the mustard burnt my nose. I wasn't sure I was going to make it," he laughs.

As for the cultural differences between Switzerland and Namibia, Victor has plenty to say: "I had a hard time adjusting my first month, because the people are very different – the trains are silent, everyone has their headphones in and heads down," he explains. "Back home we take taxis to get around, and they pick up different people along the way. Everyone talks and shares their life struggles, big and small, like we already know each other."

Another observation he found surprising were coffee rituals at the workplace. "People will stand around with coffees in hand, chatting pleasantly. Suddenly, one person will set their cup down and walk away, which I've noticed is a sign that the conversation is over. Then everyone sits down and all you hear is the 'clickety clack' of keyboards."

### **Poetry at the workplace**

In an effort to get to know his colleagues better without disturbing the near silent working atmosphere, Victor started writing short, poetic verses on Post-its and hanging them on the wall in the Academy's coffee room. "I wanted to share who I was through my poetry. It piqued

my colleagues' interest and it actually opened the door to a lot of meaningful conversations," he says.

And although Victor respects the relatively reserved nature of the Swiss, as well as the overall efficiency of the innovative country, he does share some warm words of wisdom: "Keep the conversation or joke going throughout the day. Make an effort to get up and talk to your colleagues around you. I'm certain they'll appreciate it," he smiles.

### Leaving - with a bang?

Now, with Python fresh in his mind and a few novel experiences tucked away for memory's sake, Victor is ready to head home. "I truly enjoyed my stay in Switzerland, but did I make the most of it? At first I thought I'd leave with a bang. Instead, I'm leaving much more humbled with everything I've learned, like how to work independently and in a team, how to tackle complex projects, and to pay attention to detail."

Once settled back in Namibia, Victor will focus on job creation. "There is so much to do, so many people I want to help. I've been unemployed, so I know that feeling and just want to do my share." Does this mean his poetry will be put on the back burner? "I'll always be writing down my thoughts. At times I even wonder 'Is this really me writing down these things? Yes? Ok, so keep going,'" he smiles.

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