

The admin that comes with being a 21st-century citizen is a chore that most people try to avoid. Now, though, a novel platform has fused technology with life, estate and financial planning to make that admin infinitely more manageable, writes ANDREA VINASSA.



THE KEY TO LIFE MANAGEMENT

IMAGINE HAVING ALL your personal information in one secure and easily accessible place: your ID, passport, visas, driver's licence, will, power of attorney, policies and firearm licence. Imagine it even includes a time capsule to leave letters and video messages to loved ones.

Well, the future has arrived, along with a novel platform that enables you not only to do this, but also to keep the information up to date and relevant.

It all started when Marius van Niekerk, a co-founder of b4yougo and now founder of Rattlehub Digital, and his wife Charlene relocated to London in 2004 so that he could take up a position at BHP Billiton. A chartered accountant, Marius travelled extensively for the company and although he was only 32 at the time, he worried that Charlene would not know how everything fitted together if he should suddenly pass away.

"I wanted to make sure that she and our young son would be looked after," he explains. "A search on the Internet for a solution returned a blank, so I drafted a first version of what I labelled 'b4yougo'. This was a manual Excel file in which I pulled together our entire portfolio, relationships and important information. It also identified key individuals and their contact details and certain requirements. I got into the habit of updating the file, marked 'In case of emergency', and leaving it on my desk before setting off. If we all travelled together, I emailed the password-protected file to my brother and the password to my brother-in-law."

In 2015, when the family moved back to South Africa, Marius decided to formalise the system and, with co-founder Gustav Griessel, turn it into an entrepreneurial venture that they called b4yougo. After 13 action-packed years at BHP Billiton, he was looking for a new challenge and believed this would have a direct and positive impact on people's lives and the legacy they left for their loved ones.

"Using ignorance as a strategy, just like PayPal, where non-bankers built a payment solution for banks, or Uber, where

techies who were not taxi-owners built an app for the taxi business, we are a bunch of ex-miners looking to find solutions for the financial services industry," Marius adds. But what started out as a mission to create order from chaos, so that when clients die they leave their loved ones with dignity and clarity, turned into a much bigger technology venture. b4yougo was subsequently absorbed into 'permyssion', a new product powered by Rattlehub Digital.

The platform currently has three distinct but integrated products that form a set. At its core, 'permyssion' enables you as the end-user to manage your information across eight distinct categories: yourself, your family, your estate, your profession and work, your health, your financial portfolio, your accounts and your social footprint. As an extension, the Advisor Console caters for interaction between the end-user and a financial advisor, enabling the latter to understand his or her client's unique situation better while responding to certain life triggers and events. Finally, the Estate Console has been developed for the deceased estate industry, making a copy of the end-user's information for the executor and facilitating the automatic completion of documents and the management of the estate.

Data security is paramount. Gary Goetsch, the chief technology officer, joined the team in July 2017 from Nedbank Insurance. He explains that in the new era of digital data exchange, the Microsoft Azure platform-as-a-service (Paas) cloud infrastructure is used. All data are secured by mutual SSL authentication and all traffic is sent in encrypted form, which prevents information outflow even if it is intercepted. Certificates and keys are generated by a separate mechanism, which is not available on the application code as it is encrypted and stored in a secret repository. Each end-user's account generates a secret key that provides access to the repository linked to their account.

The platform is making use of the latest trends in technology. For example, bots are being utilised to automate document management, whereby information is read and then allocated directly to the relevant folder. Similarly, the platform utilises chatbot technology to drive better customer engagement while improving user experience.

This is a truly smart system that can solve one of life's most pressing problems: data overload. People are drowning in data and most of it, albeit entertaining and informative, is irrelevant. Sadly, it sometimes takes a crisis to compel us to filter out the priorities and strip our personal data down to the essentials. Marius was reminded of the importance of how we manage personal data when his best friend died unexpectedly at the age of 43. "Theo lived life to the fullest, but his house was not in order," he says.

A friend for 28 years, Marius was one of the people called upon to help wrap up Theo's affairs. As well as suffering the emotional toll of losing someone so close to him, he had to deal with an unstructured estate and complex financial matters. He was the only remaining trustee in his friend's family trust and the responsibility of bringing order to the chaos fell on his shoulders.



“Successful disruption is not just about



coming up with ideas; it’s also about execution,” says Marius.



Clockwise from top: Marius van Niekerk, founder of Rattlehub Digital; Carel Greyling, chief data officer; Gustav Griessel, co-founder b4yougo; Gary Goetsch, chief technology officer.

comments Marius. “Our platform empowers all our customers to organise and manage their personal data with confidence, so they can spend more time on the things that matter.”

The focus is not only on the morbid side of life. ‘permyssion’ includes fields where you can upload, for instance, your personal bucket list, new year resolutions and life ambitions – and even add them to your social media platforms. There’s a field, too, for your financial plan and goals, which has been devised to prompt you to become more financially savvy and enables you to monitor your progress as you meet each goal.

Carel Greyling, another chartered accountant and the company’s chief data officer, explains that they view the introduction of the POPI (Protection of Personal Information) Act and the more recent GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) in Europe as business enablers that better serve the end-user as the ultimate owner of the information. “This is an added and extremely valuable service that the platform offers to its target clients,” he says.

Gustav, who is based in Stellenbosch, remembers the startup experience as a “roller-coaster ride”. From being experienced corporate executives with a lot of clout, he and Marius found themselves having to go hat in hand to potential corporate partners. Sometimes it took 12 to 15 months from an expression of interest to get a contract signed, he says. “It takes a long time from startup to going live in a commercial environment. As Michael Jordaan, a former CEO of First National Bank, tweeted, ‘The death knell to many a startup is the inability of large organisations to say yes or no, and to say it quickly.’ There were many times when we felt like giving up. The first year was the worst. One thing that a startup will teach you is humility. But we drew on our inner resources, and our corporate experience definitely counted when it came to credibility.”

Their perseverance paid off and they are now an official service

provider to Investec Private Bank, whose clients will have access to the platform through the ‘Manage my life’ application. Marius says it is a surreal feeling to come up with an idea, research it, conceptualise it, build it and then deploy it to one’s own bank.

Says Lyndon Subroyen, head of Investec Digital, “We’re always looking to add value for our clients beyond banking, and introducing new features and apps on our digital platforms is one way to do this. However, innovation for innovation’s sake is never enough and the tools we offer must meet a need or take away a pain point for our clients. ‘Manage my life’ is already proving very popular with clients using Investec Online, for its simplicity in streamlining life’s often time-consuming admin tasks.”

The attooh! group of companies, led by entrepreneur Wouter Snyman, is represented across South Africa and provides financial planning, employee benefit, short-term insurance and wellness services. With a client base of more than 69 000 individuals in South Africa, it was the first live reference site for the platform.

Based in Centurion, Gauteng, the business has so far been bootstrapped, using the founders’ own money and some equity funding from investors. Marius maintains that the key to ensuring a startup’s viability is to have cash for 12 months stashed away instead of relying on the popular ‘hockey stick’ business plans that start off slowly and then show phenomenal growth. He laughs when he recalls the first business plan they drew up after coming straight out of a multinational. “A good business model requires figuring out how to generate cash quickly and consistently, which will keep the business viable,” he explains. “If you can keep your marginal cost close to zero, you are perfectly poised to scale up and you can add an almost infinite number of users.”

At first a number of functional activities, including product development, were outsourced to a few service providers, but a year ago it was decided to bring all the core capability in-house and the company now boasts an internal product development team.

Nevertheless, says Marius, there were a number of people who have positively influenced the company’s direction since inception and they will always be grateful to them all.

Rattlehub Digital spread its wings in South Africa at the Financial Planning Conference in Cape Town in October and will soon be releasing the entire product set to financial planners and deceased estate executors, and ‘permyssion’ directly to end-users.

Since the system has the advantage of being both scalable and flexible, the team’s strategy is to also target the North American market in the short term. Several patent applications have been lodged, with one successful in South Africa, and the patent rights are being extended to international jurisdictions, including the USA and other prominent markets.

Fridays are innovation days at Rattlehub. “Staff are free to explore different technologies, ideas and case studies – and we invite people to work with us,” explains Marius. “Successful disruption is not just about coming up with ideas; it’s also about execution. As a tech company, we don’t own any on-premise servers. Our whole world is in the cloud. All our efficiency tools are provided as software-as-a-service offerings, which is in line with our thinking of how we distribute our product set.”

He believes the company’s convergence-designed strategy will deliver a durable competitive advantage. Done well, it will also make implementation more intuitive for the company and more seamless for its customers.

The team prides itself on the culture of passion, innovation and accountability it has built up in such a short time. Ultimately it will be individuals – whether through their own subscriptions or through a third party – who benefit from the platform the team has created. And that platform, used efficiently, will help us all become digital citizens in a digital age. **V**

• For more information or to download the mobile app, go to www.rattlehub.com.

