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## Lack of good toolmakers drives SA product development offshore

**Author:** ...XYZ Design

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A crucial process in the development of South African designed products is sent offshore because there is insufficient high-quality toolmaking capacity in the country, says Richard Perez, operations director of award-winning product design firm Dot Dot Dot Ex Why Zed Design (...XYZ Design).



"Much of the tooling for our high quality consumer products is done offshore, specifically in China, and then brought back to South Africa for converting. The Chinese are able to deliver top quality toolmaking, at a competitive price and, crucially, within tight deadlines.

"While there are a few toolmakers in South Africa who can compete with the Chinese on quality, they are so overloaded with work they can't meet our clients' tight deadlines." Toolmaking can account for up to half of the non-recurring engineering costs of product development, so it has to be top quality. "Getting the tool made is a massive investment for the client.

Choosing the right toolmaker is a critical part of the process and needs to be considered very carefully," says Perez. He says that the critical shortage from the post-World War II years when skilled toolmakers immigrated from Europe to establish a niche for themselves but 'unfortunately the skills transfer was not enough to sustain the level of quality that our current clients now require in the products that we develop with them.

"Now that South African companies want to compete in world markets, where the demand is speed to market for high-quality products, local toolmakers find it difficult to compete with Chinese timescales. Chinese toolmakers can, in four weeks, make a top-quality tool that would take a local toolmaker six to eight weeks." ...XYZ Design is involved with the Department of Trade and Industry's National Tooling Initiative (NTI), established in 2005 in collaboration with the Toolmaking Association of South Africa, to encourage entrants to the trade and develop skills.

The NTI, assisted by regional bodies such as the Western Cape and Gauteng Tooling Initiatives, are busy with a number of skills development initiatives. Two new centres of excellence in tooling have been established through the Department of Education and the Further Education and Training recapitalisation programme.

The R35m Northlink campus at Wingfield was launched in February. Two Institutes for Advanced Tooling (IATs)—at Tswane and Stellenbosch—have been established through Department of Science and technology funding. The DTI and NTI are working closely with the US Institute for Metal Working to bring across their skills framework for competency-based apprenticeships and curriculum for certification, diplomas and degrees. ...XYZ Design's Perez says that it will take many years of initiatives such as these and on-the-job experience to produce internationally competitive toolmakers.

"Using overseas toolmakers does have its own problems regards logistics and language so, where possible, we try to use South African toolmakers, but this tends to be for products where timescales are more generous and the consumer is less demanding of top quality product with sophisticated post finishes. "Another deterrent to using local toolmakers is that they can lack the technical knowledge of how to process the wide range of engineering plastics that we use for our designs. South Africa doesn't attract sufficient product manufacturing volumes to be able to acquire the experience in processing such materials."

Over the years that ...XYZ Design has developed products for South African firms it has learned the hard way that inadequate toolmaking can be fatal for enterprises aiming for niche markets in a tight timeframe. A poorly made tool means the product is likely to be abandoned and a marketing window missed, incurring significant financial losses.

"We are obliged to go offshore because our clients have lost confidence in local toolmakers. Our clients are no longer prepared to take the risk, so have taken parts of the product lifecycle into the global production arena." During the past few years ...XYZ Design has established a proficient relationship with Chinese toolmakers. "We have learned that they prefer us to be as specific as possible in the information we provide them, and they go out of their way to provide us with exactly what we ask for, at the right quality and on time." Toolmakers in India, Europe and the US are also called on to become crucial players in the process of producing South African developed products onto world markets.

### About

Dot Dot Dot Ex Why Zed Design (Pty) Ltd is the leading product design company that put South African design talent on the world map with its wind-up radio for the Freeplay Foundation. This product is on permanent display in the London Design Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The company, formed in 2000, is a frequent winner of awards for design excellence, among



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them SABS DISA awards for domestic, commercial, industrial, ICT and engineering products. Operating internationally and locally ...XYZ Design is an integrated product design studio that offers end-to-end management from product design and prototype development to manufacture. Its unique approach to solving problems can be applied to industries including medical, telecommunications, high-tech and FMCG products, homeware, furniture, packaging and industrial goods.

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