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AN Ergonomic EVOLUTION

noonee is rethinking the way we view furniture with an innovative chairless chair that is heralding a new era of wearable ergonomic leg devices.

Images by Selina Meier

It's an innovative and forward-thinking concept: the ability to sit anywhere and everywhere with the aid of a chairless chair. The concept was first conceived two years ago by Keith Gunura, co-founder and CEO of noonee, and since then the company has developed its Chairless Chair and entered talks with a number of leading manufacturers.

The wearable mechatronic technology offers a powered, lightweight, and energy-efficient lower-limb posture-support device. Designed for static and dynamic industrial market applications, the Chairless Chair aims to increase users' health, comfort, and productivity.

The CEO Magazine sat down with Keith to discuss this groundbreaking innovation and the wide-ranging possibilities it presents.

***The CEO Magazine:* What was your journey to joining noonee?**

Keith: I'm originally from Zimbabwe. I was there until I was 16 and then I moved to the United Kingdom. One of my first jobs in the UK was working in a packaging factory under one of those employment agencies. It wasn't the best working conditions because minimum wage at the time wasn't enough to live on for most people. I worked there for a week or two and then I decided to leave because I didn't want to work in

packaging for the rest of my life and also it was very uncomfortable working there.

The other main reason I left was that I couldn't start my education, my A levels, due to differences in academic years between Zimbabwe and UK. I had one year to think of what to do and find a job. I got into college and I chose subjects that were in line with my interest in robotics and a future career in that field. I then looked for universities that offered courses in robotics or mechatronics or something similar to that, which didn't have anything to do with cars.

I ended up going to Lancaster University where I did a bachelor ›



degree in mechatronics. After three years, I was one of four students to be offered a scholarship in nuclear engineering. I did that and during that time I started looking for PhD positions in robotics. I came across the Institute of Robotics and Intelligent Systems at ETH Zurich, which was a new robotics lab that had just opened so I was one of the very first PhD candidates there.

When I got into that, my idea was still to do humanoid robotics and exoskeletons. However, ETH was not happy with my masters by research because it didn't have any modules. They wanted numbers, not just that you got your masters, so because of that I had to do six master-level qualifying exams. I failed one of them and you had to pass all six of them so I left the lab.

During my time there, I had helped start a lot of different research projects. Then, I worked for a start-up. I was there for about nine months but I didn't like it so I decided to go and start something for myself.

How did you establish noonee and what was your thinking around that time?

noonee started about two years ago and the idea stage was around two to three months before that. The initial idea was sparked when I got invited by my old professors to one of the lab parties and we started talking about commercialising or trying to get something out of the labs because everything just goes on the shelf. At the time, I was trying to find a way of using the research that I'd started and some of the stuff that I'd left behind. My whole idea to do research was to help people, not to just research and publish as many papers as I could. I wanted to do something that could actually be used in my generation.

We were just randomly chatting and we both agreed that we wanted to be able to sit anywhere and everywhere. We were complaining about standing at the

train station and having to stand in line in queues. We thought maybe we should make something that people could use in this area.

Of course, in my head I was already thinking of an exoskeleton. That's how the idea started and I was back in the lab again as a technician where I started doing all the prototypes and proof of concept.

After two years, what have been the major changes? Where do you see noonee growing and what are those main growth areas?

My way of thinking at the time was that anything cool would pass off as amazing and people would adopt it quite quickly. However, that's not the case. Cool for an engineer or researcher is not cool for a normal person. I learned a lot about ways people think, in terms of product development and services for people that you actually want to help. You have to think like the person you want to help. You have to have this mindset that you want that person in your target audience to enjoy your product and what it offers. You should not be thinking about how you're enjoying the product and its features but how they would.

That change in approach has definitely impacted the way I approach things. When people are trying out the device, I ask them questions about their experience and how comfortable it is. If I'm just asking myself then I'm not getting an objective response.

I've also realised that it's a device that's not ready for the general public yet. I think that needs a bit more time and understanding. Therefore, the growth area I see over the next three to five years is mainly in the industrial market. We've got a lot of interest from companies in that market, asking if they could buy one and how much it would cost. This puts a smile on my face because it shows us that we have the attention of the general public and they're not too fazed by the design. In any case, we'll still wait for a time until we



can give them something that we're confident everybody would recognise and not ask, 'What's that thing strapped to your legs?'

Where does your inspiration come from as an innovator and how do you translate that into a modern business? What is your philosophy to ensure noonee's success from this point on?

One figure that I find very inspiring is Nikola Tesla. Tesla was an innovative guy and he was always in this invisible war with Edison over electricity. Tesla moved on and did his thing and he wasn't afraid to challenge the unknown with his hypotheses, including this notion of free energy for all, which was quite forward-thinking. These were big things and back then people still frowned and said he was getting too ahead of himself. Now, people are thinking about it.

My philosophy is that it might sound crazy now but in the future it's not going to be as crazy. When I think about my idea, I don't even think of it as a stupid or impossible idea. I just think to

myself, if people don't accept this then it's the wrong time for such an idea. You push it as far as you can and if people still don't accept it then maybe it means when you're older or gone it's going to come back and people will recognise it and accept it. My philosophy is to not be afraid of the big things or the stupid questions—just do what you want to do and be happy with that.

You are in talks with a few car companies about implementing the noonee chairless chair into their production lines. What are the next steps that you'll take to develop noonee as a successful business?

The next steps right now are to finalise the product and focus on that. I'm never satisfied with what I have, in terms of product, so I have a clear vision of what I want this product to look like and I won't be satisfied until it looks like that vision. Another step will be to get that positive reaction and acceptance from people when they wear the Chairless Chair.

After that, there are many other ideas that we believe would contribute to the success of noonee. For instance, implementing some more innovative ideas in the future like a full-body exoskeleton. The concept itself is that it's supposed to be low-cost and easy to use. We believe that's our strength. I think it's going to push all the other exoskeleton markets to lower their prices to make them competitive. I think one day an exoskeleton will be like a bicycle in that anybody could buy one.

That's how we believe we'll be successful. We want to be the leaders in that area. We're the ones that are pushing the innovativeness and really exploring how simple this product could be. We want other players in the market to come down from their high horses and force them to come down to our level and prices. That's how I believe we'll get a lot of differentiation there.



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- Keith Gunura

The next steps basically involve building the product to the highest quality possible for the customer and introducing more features and products that they need. We talked about strategic partners and that's one area where it's particularly crucial. You need the right strategic partners—people who share the same vision as you; people who understand your product and see where it's going. It makes things a lot simpler when you're explaining things to them or negotiating. These could be the people that you merge with in the next 10 years or so, so it's important to have strong relationships with them.

On that point, how are you developing those partnerships in the years to come?

The importance of your partners depends on their reliability. We include them in our development. For instance, our designer, Sapetti Design, has been involved and immersed in our development. Our relationship is



open and we understand each other's needs fully.

Developing our partnerships is about making sure that we're not just thinking about our success but about our suppliers' and partners' success as well. We're the middleman when you think about the money flow. We want three parties to be successful: the consumer, us, and our partners. That's how we think it will grow and to do that we need to handle the needs of each of these parties. •

A Business-minded BOUTIQUE DESIGN CONSULTANCY



Sapetti is your innovation partner with an integrated approach to design development.

Sapetti is a boutique design consultancy based in Switzerland. Founded by Marc Sapetti, an Andorran-born product and furniture designer with more than 10 years' experience in the design industry, and experience with leading studios in Barcelona and London.

Sapetti has an integrated approach to design: research, analysis, concepts, and design development, prototyping and full support to the engineering and communication's teams.

We value collaborations with other studios, as we understand cross-discipline knowledge can add value and increase the impact of our projects. We often team up with specialised professionals such as communication and user-experience designers, engineers, and photographers to provide clients with complete solutions.

Our understanding of design

We believe that design should not only be understood as a 'beautiful shape', but rather as the sum of different factors such

as engineering, aesthetics, user experience/ergonomics, and communication.

DIAMOND Produced by Júlia



A good product is one that is visually enjoyable, that improves the user experience and that works for the client. Finding the right balance between these three pillars is what defines good design.

Our creative process

At the conceptual stage, we give extra attention to the market research, behaviour analysis, global tendencies, geographic particularities, and technical requirements. We focus on understanding where the opportunities lie and what are the users' real needs. We also believe on the importance of learning and evaluating, from an external point of view, our clients' businesses. We aim to understand our clients'

needs of today and tomorrow, and how we can position them closer to their goals through design.

JULIA



Then comes the 'make it happen': from the idea to a tangible product. This stage involves a close collaboration between our team, the client as well as their providers. We consider every aspect and parts of the product together with the client's engineering teams, aiming to optimise the manufacturing process and the resources. This synergy between design and engineering leads to innovative solutions and well-thought out products.

Design language

Each project, market, and client is different. We understand that and make sure our proposal is tailored to reflect those singularities.

At the same time, our designs convey a common language of clean lines with personality, but never invasive. Our products are thought to be blended within the space and its context.

Key ingredient to success

Holistic approach to design. Collaboration. Innovation. Positive thinking and hard work. We believe these are the drivers of our work.

Our target: the market

Through experience in a wide range of projects, we acquired a rich and diversified know-how that can be applied across different markets and industries. This is reflected in our designs, benefiting our clients with fresh and innovative solutions for their industry.

How we see our clients

We like to see our clients as longstanding partners. We trust that keeping a close relationship with the people and the businesses



2013 ■



GO Produced by Cavaletti S.A.

allows Sapetti to provide the client with an organic development of coherent and market oriented products. In a few words, we strive to become a key partner for innovation and growth, someone they can rely on for their next generations of products.

A successful partnership

Our most recent launch: the chair IDEA produced by Cavaletti S.A. The synergy between design, manufacturing, and business strategies led to the production of an intelligent family of chairs

that uses the minimal amount of parts, with the highest standards of comfort and technology, and with the differential of a competitive price.

From a business perspective, this product line has been the result of a close partnership with the client and attention to their portfolio strategies, consolidating them as a leading and innovative manufacturer in their segment.

Find out more about Sapetti at www.sapetti.com

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