

## **Western Cape genome informatics success story**

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The Cape Information Technology Initiative (Citi) has pronounced genome informatics company Electric Genetics (EG) a 'Western Cape success story'. Citi marketing manager Judith Middleton says that it is the initiative's job to trumpet the success of local companies, highlighting their accomplishments in the information technology field. EG was chosen because the initiative views the company as a role-model for the art of what is possible in transforming various sectors, which in EG's case involves leading the transformation of the South African biotechnology industry.

Founded in 1997 by Tania Broveak Hide and Prof. Winston Hide, the company is an example of the power gained by combining top academic research with open-source software and sound business experience. EG has not only clinched prestigious research and development awards in its short existence, but has also developed employment opportunities for South African life-science students – all while maintaining a profitable bottom-line. Moreover, it is one of the first examples worldwide of a start-up company originating from an academic national bioinformatics institute, in this case the South African National Bioinformatics Institute of the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The technology developed by EG and UWC forms the basis of its flagship products, including its market-leading stackPACK, and facilitates the university's foray into the competitive life sciences research arena.

An emerging leader in the open source technology process, EG, together with the South African National Bioinformatics Institute, also based at UWC, is producing revolutionary, tangible results by leveraging the close ties between research (academia) and development (commercial), resulting in software that can be developed more quickly and more closely targeted to the needs of real users.

Their groundbreaking work has been recognised by the South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology's prestigious Innovation Fund, which in 1998 awarded the team a grant for its 'Human Disease: A Genomic Approach' project, resulting in the development of novel technology that is currently being deployed via an extensive academic and commercial customer base. Current users include The European Bioinformatics Institute, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale, The Institute for Genomic Research, Harvard Medical School and The Pasteur Institute, as well as Novartis, Affymetrix and Gene Logic.

To date, the self-sustaining company has earned the coveted prize of top South African research and development company as part of the 2000 Technology Top 100 awards presented by South Africa's Minister of Trade and Industry to recognise companies that demonstrate excellence in the development and design of new technology.

It has established partnerships with world- leading research institutions and bioinformatics experts, yet despite its overseas customer base, EG remains committed to its roots.