

Meet the mother of two who summits mountains in life and business

Bizcommunity recently caught up with Odette Faling, CEO of online travel agency, [Travelcheck.co.za](https://travelcheck.co.za) to talk about the six-month-old company she leads. This time, for Women's Month, she talks about women making a mark on the male-dominated tech scene, balancing family life and work, and her unshakeable thirst to explore, which recently took her to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro.



Odette Faling

After more than a decade in various e-commerce businesses both locally and abroad, joining Travelcheck in April as CEO has renewed her enthusiasm for the role technology plays in travel and a tech business environment primed for more women to taken on leadership positions.

"The tech scene is maturing in South Africa," says Faling. "In South Africa, particularly in Cape Town, there are several established companies and many start-ups that have created world-class conditions for upskilling. What you find now is that South African women in tech have broad experience in diverse fields such as engineering, product development, partnerships, marketing and all the other skills needed to compete in the global e-commerce industry."

“ Growth and competition stimulate innovation and I believe that the fairer sex has an intellectual and emotional contribution to make the tech space better. ”

The 34-year-old mother of two has been instrumental in bringing more women into technical roles. At Travelcheck, where she leads a growing, mostly female founding team of customer service, marketing and technical professionals, she is in a position to effect the change she wants to see in the working world including more female representation.

"In my career, I've always been drawn to roles that involve relationships with people, critical thinking, and figuring out how we can bring value to customers and our people while keeping shareholders happy. It's very important to me that work is meaningful and in Travelcheck I've been fortunate enough to end up leading a start-up that fulfils these ambitions."

Faling points to the importance of locally bred initiatives such as Code for Cape Town who empower young women to learn and leverage technology for social innovation. "We're also blessed in that there are initiatives purpose-built to develop talent at a grassroots level to drive the gender diversity agenda. Code for Cape Town does amazing work in terms of developing and promoting women software engineers."



Faling's eyes light up when we ask her about recently realising her dream to tackle Mount Kilimanjaro. "My husband and I survived what can only be described as one of the most challenging experiences of our lives. After a few days gruelling hike, we summited Kilimanjaro on 7 July in ideal conditions.

"It's a must for anyone with a spirit of adventure and to me really highlighted the abundance of unique travel opportunities we have on our doorstep in Africa. While Kilimanjaro was a once in a lifetime journey, I was excited to get home to my little ones."

Odette is mother to a five-year-old boy and his three-year-old sister; balancing her responsibility of running Travelcheck while enjoying motherhood is of paramount importance. "They're at an age where they're highly curious, learn so quickly and benefit from hands-on parenting. Having one or both of us available is crucial to their development and will have a bearing on the people they become.



"I'm very fortunate to have a supportive husband who works from home and a wonderful Au pair that fills the gaps when he is travelling. This gives me the flexibility to build our company while still ensuring I am part of a happy environment at home."

Regarding the online travel market in South Africa, Odette says there is room for more disruption as more people get comfortable with booking online: "We saw a gap in the market for dynamic packages – booking flights and hotels in a bundle open savings of 25 to 30% for travellers."

Even with savings and simplicity, Faling recognises that digital comes with its own challenges in the local market, including reduced touchpoints with customers. In the business of travel, she sees people as being core to the customer experience which is why Travelcheck prioritises building human relationships with their online customers.



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"We want to talk to and learn from our customers, so we have experts available at any time who do a great job supporting the online booking process without forgetting about our travellers after they've made a booking."

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Faling's parting words to women in tech?

"To make an impact, make sure you are exposed to the technical and human qualities of technology. Have a firm grasp on digital strategies, be vocal, participate, find inspiration beyond your professional life and bond with mentors who can help you sketch a clear path to achieving your goals."

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