

# Can you do well while making a difference?

By [Lisa Witepski](#), issued by [SAICA](#)

18 Nov 2021

According to chartered accountant [CA(SA)] Mandy Muchnick, the answer is "absolutely!". As the chair of the African chapter of One Young World and founder of Imagine.Nation, an NGO dedicated to furthering education, she should know.



Speaking at the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants' recent Trainee Summit, Muchnick indicated that not only is it possible for young business leaders to hold down a thriving career while finding a way to contribute to society; it makes good business sense to do so. "Impact and business are not mutually exclusive. To the contrary, people want to support companies that support their communities," she pointed out.

But there are significant implications on an individual level, too. While we all wish to establish meaningful careers, the definition of 'meaningful' may vary between people according to what they value. Yes, success certainly plays a role here, but the rewards that one enjoys from lifting others can be so much more fulfilling than gaining a name as the best dealmaker. They're more long lasting too, Muchnick points out, noting how events such as the riots

experienced in South Africa during July can wipe out everything a company has worked to build – and yet could be avoided by individuals committed to furthering their communities.

## Harnessing the skills you have

Muchnick's own journey as a social entrepreneur has its roots in her Parys upbringing. While her father's family were small town business owners, her mother was a remedial teacher, and the values instilled by both were crystallised in her drive to help others. As she completed university, she found herself facing a conundrum: did she discard her learnings so that she could dedicate her life to this cause, or did she harness the skills she had acquired through her studies to achieve her goals?

□

Focusing on the latter, she joined forces with her brother to establish Siyaya, an NGO which provided training to unemployed bread winners so they could start and run their own businesses, supporting them with microloans. "During our first year, only two of the 10 businesses we supported were successful. But this taught us something: you have to be able to accept failure." Taking her own advice, Muchnick pushed on, and by the second year of the NGO's existence, had helped to launch 25 successful entities.

The siblings' second venture was introduced after Muchnick moved to Johannesburg to complete her articles. She, alongside several of her trainee peers at Investec, volunteered with Seeds of Africa, and through this organisation adopted a crèche in Muldersdrift. The team developed a curriculum for the crèche, and later helped to entrench it in 22 other crèches in the area. "This got us thinking: if this is what a few CA(SA) trainees at one Johannesburg firm can do, what would we be able to achieve with greater numbers?" Muchnick muses.

This insight led to the establishment of Imagine.Nation: a project which allowed her to combine her twin loves of business and education. Imagine.Nation not only built schools; it provided training and resources so that they would be able to function as self-sustaining social businesses. Since its establishment five years ago, the initiative has helped to educate more than 500 children; shifting its focus during the hardest period of lockdown last year to provide food packages and education kits to families. It's not surprising that these schools have become a beacon of hope in their communities.

Again, Muchnick looks for lessons gleaned from her experiences. "Initially, I thought that my two worlds – business and

social impact – ran parallel to each other. However, I came to realise that my skills as a CA(SA) have helped me achieve sustainable impact on the ground by equipping me with the know-how to roll out teams. Meanwhile, the leadership and empathy I have developed by confronting the diversity and issues facing South Africa have seen me invited to tables I otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to be part of." Combined, these attributes make for a powerful proposition, and helped Muchnick earn her invitation to One Young World; a platform where young global leaders brainstorm solutions to the world's most pressing problems. From here, Muchnick became instrumental in the establishment of FinBiz2030's South African chapter, which seeks to unite South Africa's finance and business communities in addressing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

## Taking the first step

Muchnick maintains it is possible for anyone to create a similar impact. Her advice for those who wish to do so? First, get started. It may sound obvious, but many people don't know how to go about this – so ask your organisation. As Muchnick says, most people are willing and eager to help, but aren't sure how they can get a team together or which area to target. This is where your firm can help, by lending resources and taking a hand in organising.

Remember, too, that you don't need to start your own initiative. Rather than reinventing the wheel, find an organisation that is already involved with causes that matter to you, and look for ways to support them. This is a win/win situation for both of you: these organisations always need manpower, while you will enjoy the opportunity to learn from people who have already navigated the space and know what works. Importantly, choose a cause that resonates with you.

Next, focus on what is achievable and realistic. "You need to remember that when you are working with communities, the key lies in partnership. You might be a professional with the best of intentions, but ultimately, you are only a visitor in the community – you don't have an insider's view on their challenges and resources. You need to use what you have to build the community's vision."

She adds that, in the current context especially, the only constant is change. You need to prepare for this by being ready to adapt. A commitment to lifelong learning is a huge asset here, as is the company of those who can teach you.

Clearly, the ability to learn from others is a trait Muchnick holds dear – and one she urges others to cultivate. "We have to learn to listen. Just because you hold a leadership role doesn't mean you always have to be the leader. Take time to find out what galvanises the people in your teams and communities, and use this to turn their challenges into inspiration," she concludes.

" **Directors' role as the cornerstone of the governance ecosystem** 25 Apr 2024

" **2-pot system: Key considerations before you withdraw your retirement savings** 27 Mar 2024

" **Saica launches business podcast to empower small businesses** 19 Mar 2024

" **Accountancy and loss adjusting** 15 Mar 2024

" **Making the auditing profession attractive to Gen Z** 8 Mar 2024

## SAICA



SAICA is the professional home of #DifferenceMakers - A community of passionate accountants who are leaders in business, government, and the communities they serve. CA(SA); AGA(SA) and AT(SA).

[Profile](#) | [News](#) | [Contact](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [RSS Feed](#)