

'Motswako'

with **Sebenzile Matsebula**

South Africans who dream of managing their own business face many challenges. Disabled entrepreneurs with this vision, face even larger challenges. Sebenzile Matsebula was diagnosed with Poliomyelitis, often called polio or infantile paralysis, at the young age of 10 months. Subsequently she became a paraplegic. She depended on crutches her whole life, however, due to her busy routine she says she prefers a wheelchair. "When you get older and you have post-polio syndrome, your energy levels are not as good as they were when you're younger. Sometimes I get tired, but I am still able to have a full day," she says.

Sebenzile is an entrepreneur and a businesswoman. She is also an activist for social justice. Most importantly, she says, "I am a mother of two amazing young men aged 28 and 25 years." Sebenzile is the Executive Director of Motswako Office Solutions. Motswako is a Tswana word that means "in the mix." Sebenzile explains that the company works as a singular team. All the divisions of the company are interrelated to ensure a seamless and holistic approach to delivering services to the client. She says therefore the "mix" of the various departments of the company, plus having people of differing expertise, experiences, backgrounds, race, disabilities, etc. - "all working together in rhythm to produce a wonderful melody projected in a successful and dynamic company. This ensures that Motswako Office Solutions offers high value add to all its business transactions. The company is based on principles of transformation and empowerment."

For Sebenzile becoming an entrepreneur was kind of accidental. "Initially I was approached by a company that wanted to up its score points on the Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) score card. I am black, a woman and have a disability. So they scored 3

different points for the price of one individual. Reading about successful black women in SA, who had grabbed the opportunities afforded to them to participate in entrepreneurial activities, also inspired me. I just couldn't resist the challenge. I thrive on challenge, so I convinced myself, I want to move into business."

This phenomenal woman has immeasurable work experience, which includes serving as Director in the Presidency of the Republic of South Africa and as head of the Office on the status of Disabled Persons. Sebenzile used to work as a development consultant at Lindandanda Consulting, before she joined the Motswako team. For the past 26 years she has been actively involved in business development to enable economic empowerment of marginalised and vulnerable groups in South Africa. Sebenzile currently chairs the Disability Workshop Development Enterprise and the Disability Empowerment Concerns Holding Company. She also serves as a board member of Action on Disability and Development, Centre for Alternative and Augmentative Communication, Cheshire Homes South Africa, First Rand Foundation, South African Development Trust for Disabled People and the Presidential Advisory Council on Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment.

According to Sebenzile, being a person with a disability in the South African labour market is extremely challenging. "I have always had to work harder than non-disabled people to prove myself in the industry. The perception out there is that if one is disabled, then one is incapable in many ways. They cannot cope with the pressure, they are poorly educated if at all, they are not smart, etc. I had to prove that these were all stereotypes and not true."

In 2012 Sebenzile was nominated to serve on the Committee of the United Nations Convention for Persons with Disabilities. She describes this as a

very big honor. "I was proud to be recognised for all the hard work that I have put in for both the development of the Convention and also for my achievements in the disability sector."

Sebenzile would advise people with disabilities who are considering starting a business to get a good education. "It's important for parents of disabled children to ensure that their children have the best possible education throughout their schooling lives. A tertiary education is also preferable to give one an advantage in working through the minefield of business." She further says that hard work, diligence and dedication are essential. "In the entrepreneurial space there is no charity and no hand-outs; it's all about the bottom line and profits. Avoid negativity and self pity - no one is interested in that!"

This successful businesswoman believes it's important for people with disabilities to read. "Be empowered by reading and understanding the industry you want to work in." She also recommends people with disabilities to register on network forums. "Network and market yourself aggressively with confidence that you can deliver. Partner with other players in the industry of your choice such as registration on networks, forums that talk to your particular interests of business."

When taking a break from her profession, Sebenzile loves treating herself to a day at the spa. For exercise she likes to swim. She enjoys reading and she says when she needs to relax her brain, she meditates or when all else fails, watches television.

According to Sebenzile life as a disabled person is not easy but it can be worthwhile and enjoyable if you take responsibility for your life. "It's important to remember no-one owes you anything so don't expect anyone to do favours for you - take ownership of our life! Respect others as you expect to be respected. Always remember that time is money, so honour appointments and keep time." 

