

SA startups need to play a longer game to succeed

By [Reitumetse Kholumo](#), issued by [Hasso Plattner d-school Afrika](#)

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Succeeding as an entrepreneur in South Africa is trickier now than ever before. Slow economic growth, high inflation and load shedding create a cocktail of challenges that are especially formidable for small and medium businesses. But one award-winning startup owner has found a way to circumvent the obstacles while staying true to the core values driving her, inspiring other entrepreneurs to stay the course during these troubled times.



Reitumetse Kholumo, Kwela Brews

Reitumetse Kholumo has achieved more than most people twice her age. At 25, she's graduated with a degree in chemical engineering from UCT, become a business owner, and won multiple innovation awards. And she's done it all while managing debilitating fibromyalgia. What truly sets Kholumo apart from the crowd, however, is the passion she has for her business idea – that it can help to preserve and promote indigenous knowledge systems and beliefs while uplifting communities and creating jobs.

Her business, Kwela Brews, brings the brewers of traditional African beer together under one brand, where she provides business expertise, marketing as well as new markets and customers. She helps improve conditions for brewing and supports home brewers by making them aware of legislation and compliance issues. "There is a stigma attached to African traditional beer, but not many people know that, when brewed according to old recipes, African traditional beer is very healthy and nutritious, high in Vitamin B and amino acids with good bacteria for the gut."

With a grandmother and great-grandmother who were homebrewers, the tradition is a firm part of Kholumo's family heritage. But the entrepreneurial bug really bit her when during her undergraduate degree in chemical engineering, the class was taken to South African Breweries (SAB) to witness how beer was made industrially.

When she graduated in 2021, her grandmother and other family members expected her to go into a well-paying corporate job, but Kholumo knew it wasn't for her. "Initially, I thought I wanted to be a brewer but then I realised that by using my skills in engineering and design thinking, I could drive social impact and really support home brewers in a more meaningful way."

A design thinking course that Kholumo took in 2021 was instrumental in shaping how she set up her business. A strategy for tackling complex challenges, design thinking is used in business and development work, policy making and other sectors. It prioritises human experience when designing solutions, consulting extensively with the prospective users of whatever product or services one conceptualises. This invariably leads to uncomfortable discoveries – like Kholumo saw herself, when a brewing machine she acquired for home brewing was rejected by the brewers.

"Design thinking teaches you to not become too attached to your solutions. Even if you are a chemical engineer, you don't necessarily know the answer to a particular problem. You have to fail fast, to try something else, to see what works in a real situation," she says.

Entrepreneurs need to learn this lesson quickly, the sooner the better. According to Angus Bowmaker-Falconer, SA lead on the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor South Africa report, much needs to be done to improve the entrepreneurial landscape in South Africa. He talks specifically about creating enabling environments, improving the confidence of entrepreneurs, and

addressing their fear of failure.

According to a recent news report, African entrepreneurs say their biggest challenge is funding and access to finance. But as entrepreneurial support company, Founders Factory Africa's co-founder Sam Sturm says: "Money doesn't solve problems. People solve problems."

Kholumo agrees with this. But often, there is pressure from potential funders regarding expectations to make money. This can make life tough for entrepreneurs as there are limited supportive spaces, which nurture them to grapple with the problems. She advises entrepreneurs to be aware of how long it can take to secure funding and how difficult it is to rely on financial support and therefore to be conservative with your initial capital and input. Research shows up to 80% of small businesses in South Africa fail in the first five years of business and Kholumo believes that taking things slowly can be a more sustainable way of operating in the long run.

Since starting Kwela Brews in October 2021, she has worked steadily to build the business and spread awareness, focusing on fomenting relationships with home brewers in their own communities. As the company's only employee – who is also undertaking a master's degree full-time – there is only so much time and energy she can dedicate to the business. She believes that slow and steady growth is not only more sustainable in the long run, but also healthier for her.

By definition, entrepreneurs are risk-inclined and highly self-motivated. Kholumo is risking more than many in this arena, but she is also compelled by a deeper mission. "Having my own levels of being disenfranchised as a black woman living with disabilities, I'm even more motivated to leverage the privilege that I have," she says. "I want to imagine a world in which the various systems of oppression no longer exist."

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