

# Takalani Netshitenzhe on connecting ICT to education

 By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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A renewed focus on ECDs is possibly the single most important factor in overcoming poverty, unemployment and inequality. In this respect, Vodacom, as a long-standing partner of government, has pioneered a multifaceted model that looks at ECDs, high schools and incorporates parents and local communities to significantly transform our education system.



Takalani Netshitenzhe, chief officer of corporate affairs for the Vodacom Group

We chat to Netshitenzhe to find out about her journey and how Vodacom is using its expertise in ICTs to offer modern solutions to assist the government to achieve its vision and key priorities in education.

## ■ ***Could you describe a typical day in your job?***

I am responsible for external affairs, so each day involves stakeholder engagement from all walks of life. We are also a digital organisation, so I have to go through my mailbox throughout the day, else I miss out on what's happening around me.

## ■ ***What did you want to be when you grew up?***

I did not have a specific desired professional designation. Instead, I wanted to be educated so that I could be financially independent. I dreamt of spending time abroad, and that dream came true when I was appointed Ambassador of South Africa abroad.

## ■ ***How did you get into the ICT and empowerment space?***

I am a lawyer by profession and my area of expertise involved law and policy writing and advisory services. I started my career in government, in the security cluster, and my focus was national security which entails the overall well-being of the state. Since the ICT sector cuts across all sectors of the economy, I contributed to and wrote several ICT policies and laws working closely with the Department of Communications and various stakeholders.

## ■ ***What was the best advice anyone ever gave you?***

To always be myself; and that I will not always get what I want when I want it - I must be patient.

■ ***What advice do you have for the future generation of women wanting to get into the tech space?***

There are fewer women in the ICT sector and therefore we need more women. They must eschew the stereotype that the ICT sector and the corporate world is a man's world.

The ICT sector is a sector of sectors and an enabler for socio-economic transformation. It is a dynamic sector with endless opportunities. The young women still at school must take STEM subjects; those already in tertiary institutions and working without STEM background should take short courses on different fields of ICT and also read on the Fourth Industrial Revolution because the jobs and skills of the future are more diverse.

■ ***Who or what is your biggest motivation?***

I do not have a specific role model, however, I admire different character traits from different people - honesty, self-confidence, hard work, self-awareness and conducting oneself according to high standards of ethics and integrity are key.

■ ***Are South African women getting enough of a chance to shine in the tech industry?***

Women are under-represented in the ICT sector. Vodacom has 43% women representation, 31% at senior management level; 30% in Group EXCO and 44% in Vodacom South Africa Board.

However, in the Vodacom Group Board, we only have 17% woman representation. In the sector itself, we just saw this year Microsoft and Naspers appoint women at the helm of their operations in South Africa. So the less representation of women in the ICT sector has to be seen in the context of the challenge of gender diversity in the corporate sector and generally in society.

Women have to be assertive in seeking their place around the table. The education system should encourage women to take subjects that will position them in the ICT sector. With the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the choice of subjects is wider, it is not only STEM subjects that would open the doors to the ICT sector because the skills required for the digital economy are soft skills that include creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, negotiating etc.

Lastly, employers should also create a conducive environment for young women to prosper because it is in the pipeline where we see a concerning drop-out rate.

■ ***As a female business leader, what's the least and most exciting aspect of your workday?***

Stakeholder management is both exciting and challenging because it involves balancing of diverse interests. In balancing the interests it is possible for another stakeholder to be unhappy and therefore you need to work more on the issues causing unhappiness and on the relationship.

The job gives me access to people from all walks of life, what I call the “good, the bad and the ugly” sides of life. It is possible in my day to meet and engage with very poor and destitute people, successful executives and highly influential politicians - overall, it is a humbling job.

What I love most is to hear young women and men aspiring to be like me, asking me to mentor or guide them; and when the destitute tells the story of how the Vodacom Foundation work has positively impacted their lives and given them hope.

■ ***Women are considered to be natural problem solvers. Why do you think this is perfect for the tech industry?***

There are reports I have read that indicate that the ICT sector, in general, is "macho". Therefore, it is important to change this "macho culture". Problem-solving is one of the attributes required for the jobs of tomorrow - it can be an innate ability, self-taught or can be learnt. Courses such as coding and programming are said to enhance problem-solving and we encourage young people to do coding.

More and more companies are repositioning themselves and their image to be purpose-led organisations meaning, they recognise that they can make a profit whilst at the same time doing good to change people's lives.

At Vodacom, our purpose is to connect for a better future and we are conscious that our purpose-led journey requires a change of behaviours and the culture of the company.

■ ***Could you list a few, if any, specific challenges females face in this industry?***

The corporate world, in general, is target driven and very competitive and is still perceived largely as a man's world and this is because of various factors such as the socialisation of men and women from a young age. Boys are socialised to be aggressive and competitive, so when you have more men in one environment it is inevitable that these character traits would dominate.

As mentioned earlier, the ICT sector is described as macho, it is fast-paced and demands long hours and sometimes there is a lot of travelling involved, and as a result, women feel unsupported and therefore isolated. This is because women are care-givers, they are wives, mothers or single and have to attend to household chores after hours and this leaves little room for self-development and growth.

As a result, some women do not aspire to hold executive positions or to join the corporate sector. When I decided to join the corporate world I sought advice and some advice was that it is a “dog eats dog” world. This got me timid, but I decided that because I am tenacious, hard-working and an expert in policymaking, which is the anchor of what I was hired for, I should try it out, all I needed to do was to invest time to understand the business in order for me to apply my hard-earned knowledge and skills from the public sector.

I am not an expert in ICT but I strive to apply what I am an expert on and to execute with the support of my colleagues to achieve the objectives of the company.

■ ***What is your advice for overcoming these challenges?***

All human beings have weaknesses and strengths. You need to know that in a management team each of us brings our area of expertise and we complement each other to achieve the objectives of the company. It's not about competition. So, believe in yourself, work hard and seek support. Leadership coaching comes handy to overcome some of the challenges because it enables one to understand one's weaknesses and strengths and then you surround yourself with people who complement you.

I have a leadership coach, so I know it enhances career and personal development and does not have the stigma that a psychologist has. Where coaching is not available especially at lower levels of the organisation, mentorship helps. Also take time to rest and to unwind through mild excessive, soft reading and surrounding yourself with people that are honest and loving.

■ ***In March 2019, the Vodacom Foundation was launched. Could you tell us more about this arm of the business?***

The South African Vodacom Foundation has been in existence for 20 years now and since its establishment, we have invested about R1 billion in education, gender empowerment, health and fighting gender-based violence.

The Foundation is the company's corporate investment arm and is a vehicle for the company to give back to the communities in which Vodacom operates. Since Vodacom is a digital telecommunications company, the foundation leverages the company's technological innovations to transform people's lives in the areas I mentioned previously.

The foundation's anchor field is education in partnership with the Department of Basic Education to promote digital literacy from early childhood level.

In March 2019, we launched an education ecosystem where we support government's comprehensive approach to education where the focus is not just on the learner, but also early childhood development, the teachers, infrastructure, parents, and communities. The work of the foundation is massive and requires a separate conversation to share the details program by program.

■ ***I believe that you're very passionate about empowering young women with ICT skills. Government has already made advances in improving the quality of education overall. How and what should businesses do to empower women with ICT skills?***

Our digital literacy programs focus on both men and women. However, we are increasing the intake of women in all our programs in the Vodacom Youth Academy and the bursary scheme. Our female intake stands at 58% in the Youth Academy. Our Discover Graduate Program has a 58% female and 42% male intake.

We have also been running a coding program for girls since 2018 because we believe that to create an equal environment for men and women we need to give girls what they need to succeed and to compete equally with their male peers.

In the gender empowerment program, we have launched a woman farmers' program which includes digital literacy and we also support the fight against gender-based violence with a victim empowerment program that includes digital literacy to the victims of gender-based violence that are in the safety shelters that are managed by the government.

■ ***Do you have any last words to the women of South Africa this Women's Month?***

The "man's world" is something created and promoted by society. However, together with men and women, we can break the barriers that impede gender equality and women from taking their rightful place in the world. Nelson Mandela said, *"it is in your hands..."*!

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