

Scrap the normal way of doing business, says Devmarks' Heinrich Ehlers

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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As part of our #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.

We chatted to Heinrich Ehlers, MD of Devmark Property Management, to get his take.



Heinrich Ehlers, MD of Devmark Property Management

■ **What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?**

Heinrich Ehlers: My initial response was panic. But then I took a few days to think about how our daily lives will be during the lockdown and what we'll need as a company in order to continue with business. I planned in advance, wrote it all down and after everything was in place, I felt much more at ease.

■ **Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on your company or economy as a whole.**

Ehlers: We deal with a big social housing project in Bellville South and rely on physical workshops in order to get the public's interest and to process applications. With the lockdown being in place, we had to change our entire approach. We had to offer the workshops and our applications on digital platforms. In fact, the lockdown has forced us to think outside the box and subsequently has helped improve our business. The lockdown has also made us realise that one doesn't always need a physical meeting, sometimes it can be as easy a quick video call.



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▣ *How is your company responding to the crisis?*

Ehlers: The biggest challenge is to stay motivated and keep our staff motivated. The initial 21-day lockdown was a shock. When they extended it for another two weeks it made it even more difficult to stay positive. Our company has adapted well to the new working conditions even though I realise some people have more difficult environments at home than others. I try to consider everyone's home environment before I give them something to do.

▣ *Comment on the challenges and opportunities.*

Ehlers: As mentioned above, the biggest challenge is staying motivated and the temptation is always there to rather sit on the couch and watch a series. I try to break my day into smaller sections and work to achieve small goals set daily.

As they start easing the restrictions on lockdown, more and more sectors in the economy can start trading. We're investigating whether we can tap into those sectors to allow us to expand our business.



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▣ *How has the lockdown affected your staff? / What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?*

Ehlers: As previously mentioned, our staff all have different situations at home. For some it may be easy to work from home and others find it exceedingly difficult with a full house and not much space to sit and work. We try and stay conscious of everyone's personal living situations and make the best of it.

We've had to make small cuts to salaries, but have also applied to UIF for the shortfall. We have purchased a thermo temperature scanner for the office when we can go back. We have also installed hand sanitisers and we'll be sanitising the office daily.

No-one is allowed to come to the office if they have any symptoms of any virus or even bacterial infection and everyone has to wear masks. Staff will be placed two metres apart from each other and no lunchtime gatherings will be allowed.

▣ *How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned and your clients happy?*

Ehlers: The physical distancing is easy as we operate 100% remotely. The only time we need to go out for work is if there is an emergency. Then we make sure we use masks and carry hand sanitisers with us. We stay in constant contact with staff and clients via email, phone and video calls.



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■ Have you had to change the way you work?

Ehlers: Yes, I have. I try to break my day into smaller sections and set small goals. Once I've achieved a specific goal, I'd get up and walk around for 10 minutes and then go back to work. I spend a lot of my time on video calls and constantly try to find innovative ways to improve our business during lockdown.

■ Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of the industry in any way?

Ehlers: The property management industry I do believe won't change much. There will always be a need to manage a building and for personal client/tenant interaction. I can't see landlords starting to manage all their own properties as some own numerous buildings and have big property portfolios. They simply don't have the expertise or staff to manage these properties by themselves.

■ Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?

Ehlers: I do see a decline in the demand for office space. There will always be a demand for office space, but you'll start seeing companies opting for smaller spaces and work-from-home options. We're also looking at the shared office scenario. With staff on a rotation basis, the opportunity to rent out desks on a daily basis seems like a lucrative idea.



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■ Your key message to those in the property sector?

Ehlers: It costs more money to get rid of a tenant and find a new one. Rather try and agree on a reduced rental term and a repayment plan. The property sector is going to get worse before it gets better. My dad, Hein, always told me when everyone is brave, it's time to be scared and when everyone's scared, it's time to be brave. There will be opportunities in the next six to eight months that we wouldn't have had, had it not been for Covid-19.

■ What do you predict the next six months will be like?

Ehlers: It's going to get worse before it gets better. Many businesses currently have no income and people are losing their jobs. Scrap the normal way of doing business. It's a time of finding innovative ways of generating income. Even if it's outside our field of expertise. We all have to go beyond our comfort zone to ensure we generate income during these difficult times. There is going to be an oversupply of workforce in most sectors and business owners must start thinking of ways to expand their business and to help ringfence the spiralling unemployment.

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