

Innovation is key for SMEs

The evolving Covid-19 situation is changing the way most businesses are operating in South Africa, such as working remotely. Although this has already started happening in some companies following the rise of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, businesses have now done what they can to continue operations.



Lauren du Plooy, director at Rae & Associates

Lauren du Plooy, director at Rae & Associates, manages a small, dynamic team that has been operating remotely for the last four years, relying on tech and cloud applications to run the business. However, du Plooy notes that many local small businesses still use software and hardware that is restricted to the physical office.

“In 2020, we are lucky that in the face of changing conditions, businesses can access information remotely, which can facilitate a remote workforce and easy collaboration from multiple locations,” she adds.

“When it comes to implementing software during this time, it’s key to identify the tech stack that best suits the business and then trim it down to the absolute essentials. This should be done by settling on a hero software, such as leading cloud accounting..., which allows other apps to plug into it,” du Plooy continues.

Along with cloud computing, du Plooy lists tools that are essential to facilitate remote working like instant messaging apps, video conferencing tools, and reliable internet access from portable modems and data. “For many, the equipment needed

includes a laptop or a computer monitor, keyboard, and mouse.”

Once the business is set up to work remotely, du Plooy has a few tips for a seamless transition to a remote workforce:

- **Create a handbook:** This is a go-to tool for all the pressing questions that your staff may have. It should also clearly feature the expectations and common questions around new apps and technology as well as how to access the systems and other instructions to streamline this new process.
- **Select a responsible leader:** It is crucial to have a central contact who will drive this change. They will also be the motivation behind leading your team down this new road and will be in charge of keeping the handbook up to date with challenges and new solutions.
- **Set up a communication plan:** “In our business, we have briefing meetings every morning at 9am to discuss our plans for the day. I also set aside free time from 3 pm - 5 pm where I am available for any employee that needs to touch base. We use Zoom for these team meetings and collaboration spaces so that we can manage expectations and communicate clearly with each other.”
- **Provide training:** When implementing any new technology it is vital to ensure that your staff is comfortable and trained extensively. It’s important that they can use the tools they are given to be efficient.
- **Outline clear expectations and learn to trust your staff:** This change in culture can be challenging, but as staff follow their leadership, make sure you have the buy-in from the leaders in your company. “I believe this could become the new normal even after this tough time subsides, so now is the perfect time to make sure you are not left behind in this constantly evolving economy.”

“For companies that aren’t able to work remotely, now is the time for business owners to plan and strategise for the future,” says du Plooy, who lists some questions that business owners can ask themselves to kickstart this process:

1. What opportunities do you have that you can take advantage of during this interruption?
2. What have you learned about your business during this time that you didn’t know before?
3. If you could have done something before the interruption what would it have been?
4. In the future, what opportunities are there for you to better serve your customers?

“With all of this in mind, we understand that this is a very stressful time for most local small business owners in South Africa,” says du Plooy.

In closing, she explains how her business has been helping its clients:

“We are advising them to be upfront with their suppliers and to let them know what is happening in their businesses. We have also had great success with helping them speak to their financial institutions and requesting a payment holiday for vehicles, bonds, overdrafts and other loans that are financed. The banks have been extremely helpful and we are hoping this is going to make things easier for business owners.”