

DESTINY BUSINESS

ESSENTIAL BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE FOR SMART WORKING WOMEN



Powerhouse Q&A

THERE'S NO SIMPLE EQUATION TO EMPLOYMENT CREATION: IT'S NOT AS THOUGH INDUSTRY PLUS CONSUMER DEMAND EQUALS 10 NEW JOBS. ON THE CONTRARY, IT'S A COMPLEX SUBJECT INFORMED BY A VARIETY OF ISSUES. WHICH IS PRECISELY WHAT DR MIRIAM ALTMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CENTRE FOR POVERTY, EMPLOYMENT AND GROWTH AT THE HUMAN SCIENCES RESEARCH COUNCIL, HOPES TO ENCOURAGE

WRITTEN BY LISA WITEPSKI

How close are we to finding a solution to unemployment in SA?

Our economy needs to generate 500 000 net new jobs annually to halve unemployment by 2014. The rate of job creation is rising and has met this target in the past few years. The private sector has been the most important source of employment, which speaks to sustainability. However, market-based jobs are created from one thing leading to another, so it multiplies over time. The economic downturn will really slow this multiplier process. This is a serious problem which will lead to high numbers of unemployed, plus the 500 000 school-leavers who enter the labour market each year.

What are the major inhibitors in terms of job creation?

We need to create conditions that are conducive to the creation of new industries and activities. The most obvious first challenge is to improve the capability and employability of South Africans. This includes skills development in its widest sense – entrepreneurship, IT skills, the ability to search and access opportunities, problem-solving and communication are essential, but not widely held. On the commercial side, major network infrastructures such as telecoms, energy, transport and water need to be super-efficient and cost-effective to facilitate investment and business expansion. Investment to develop capacity in manufacturing and services will make us more competitive in global markets. In particular, insufficient attention is devoted to promoting capability, efficiency and trade in business services, construction, insurance, finance and retail.

SA has substantial capability – what economists call “revealed competitive advantage” – but very little is done to stimulate this as national commercial opportunities. We also need to see greater diplomatic efforts to strengthen commercial activity and promote access to finance for small businesses. It would help to turn an eye to regulatory practices. Issues like BEE and labour regulation are important, but companies spend large amounts on compliance – and increased costs take away money from job creation. These processes need to be simplified. Finally, a stronger accent on



PHOTOGRAPHER: JUSTIN BARLOW, MAKE-UP: NIQUI DA SILVA @ GLAMOUR MECHANICS, WAISTCOAT: MANGO

research and development is critical.

How will the economic downturn impact on our job creation efforts?

We’ll have to keep targeting the same areas, but more intensely. This will have the impact of raising the growth rate faster than it would otherwise be. I’m deeply concerned about the loss of home-ownership that’s begun in this period, as it could

ultimately result in the loss of income and assets for many low-income households. Also, government will have to step up its efforts to create work through public works and special employment programmes, as well as dramatically expand its food security interventions.

What are your thoughts on a social grant for SA?

About 40% of our population live on or below a proposed poverty line – even people who do have jobs. About 46% of working people earn less than R2 500 per month, while one-fifth earn less than R1 000 per month. Many of these households have four or more dependants. So people can work full-time, but still be so deeply poor that they fall below the poverty line. This situation offers little hope for breaking the cycle of poverty and for gaining control over one’s destiny. The idea of a social grant is to ensure that vulnerable people, like children and pensioners, at least have enough to eat.

People blame the high rate of unemployment among the youth on laziness, but if it’s going to cost you R20 on transport to look for a job – the possibilities of which are slim – is it better to spend that money on food? Remember, more than 50% of black school-leavers below the age of 24 are unemployed – that includes matric graduates. I’m sure there are people who really are lazy, but for others, job-seeking and earning money require superhuman effort. In fact, we’ve done surveys which show that people want

jobs not just to earn money, but to give their lives meaning.

What personal experiences shaped your career interests?

When I was 19, I worked in the Canadian Arctic as a summer job. There I saw the impact of extractive industries (like mining and oil) and of migration on communities, many of whom were affected by alcoholism and social dislocation. We see similar issues in SA, where the tradition of migrant labour has broken up communities and social structures. My Arctic experience taught me that interactions are complex.

The next year, I was President of Amnesty International at McGill University. That was my first major organisational challenge, where we expanded the membership from about five to more than 200 in a short time. I learnt many skills in building an organisation, such as how to draw people in and keep them interested. Also, the student body was pretty apathetic, so it was a lesson in conscientising people about the world around them.

You have a 20-year-old son. Has he inherited your passion for community welfare?

You think your kids should be like you are – but actually, I just want him to be happy. He probably does feel some pressure, but he’s a great, loving person who can talk to absolutely anyone, and that’s a very special quality. I want him to be a good person, but I also want him to enjoy his life. His father and I are very serious: I’m an intense person – I work hard and I don’t have much work/life balance. I hope my son will be better at that.

Do you have time for hobbies?

ALTMAN’S SUCCESS STRATEGIES

- Keep your eyes open, think about where you’re going and try to create something special.
- Find a passion, because if you’re excited about something, it will show.
- Get involved in different interesting activities, even if they’re not related to your career. You’ll develop new sides of yourself that can lead in interesting directions.
- Don’t be confined by what people think – find your own voice. **D**

Learning Curve

We all face challenges in our lives. Sometimes our biggest mistakes turn into our greatest moments. Dr Miriam Altman recalls her defining moments

“Effectively balancing a team has been a critical challenge in a business that relies almost entirely on its people. Some people are creative and others are good managers, but both these qualities are rarely found in one person. Giving scope to each individual’s strength is sometimes difficult when there are tight organisational targets. I’ve lost really critical people, especially the creative ones, through not giving sufficient clarity and scope to how they can fit in. I’ve held onto people who were ‘deliverers’, but who were poisonous to the work environment. Big, disastrous mistake! I hope each of these experiences helps me to become better at what I do.” **D**

Mostly, I focus on staying fit, so I gym and road-run. I love hiking and camping, but unfortunately don’t get to do them much now. I used to draw and paint, mostly figurative work, and a long time ago, I seriously studied to be an opera singer. I really miss these areas of expression and plan to pick them up again.

How do you cope with the challenges of being a woman executive?

It’s important for professional women not to push the ladder away from others. I think we’re becoming better at networking. Also, my generation didn’t have the benefit of women mentors, but there are now professional women who can and do provide that guidance and actively draw women together into networks.

What are your future plans?

Right now, I really enjoy my work. It’s a great balance of producing new ideas and influencing national and local strategy. Unemployment is everyone’s biggest concern, so I feel committed to making an impact in that area. **D**

ALTMAN’S CAREER TIMELINE

- Dr Miriam Altman holds economics degrees from McGill University, Canada and the Universities of Cambridge and Manchester, UK.
- Worked closely with the SA government since 1994 as a strategist for the economic development programme of the Greater Alexandra Urban Renewal Project, as well as designing the Department of Trade and Industry’s core investment incentive programmes.
- Worked as Chair of the Ministry of Agriculture’s Employment Strategy Commission and Project Leader of the 1998 Employment Strategy and Presidential Jobs Summit.
- Joined the Human Sciences Research Council in 2002 as Executive Director for Employment and Economic Policy Research.
- In her current position, which she’s held since 2005, her work focuses on developing practical policy options aimed at reducing unemployment in SA. **D**