

Michelle Atagana on a practical approach to diversity



By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Race and gender diversity is good business sense; so says Michelle Atagana, Google SA's head of communications and public affairs. The former Memeburner was asked to share her views on the role of race and gender diversity within the tech sector to the crowd of entrepreneurs and tech enthusiasts at the much anticipated Net Prophet conference that took place in Cape Town yesterday.



Image via [Memeburn](#)

But how does one approach a topic of such mammoth societal relevance and ensure that the audience leaves affected by the message? Atagana did it by serving up a reality check and some very doable practical solutions.

Diversity barriers

Atagana pointed out a harsh South African reality: entrepreneurship is not viable for young black people. The 'black tax' refers to the duty of the first qualified in a black family to support their extended family members if they happen to land a job. This responsibility, more often than not, leads young graduates to opt for the corporate job inclusive of employee benefits instead of an entrepreneurial venture. A business is nothing without its people and a willingness to understand them can go a long way.

Another obstacle to technological diversity is the limited access to it. Atagana is passionate about barriers to technology being removed. Data is expensive and people are data conscious. "Technological access is a right, not a privilege ... technology can change lives," she exclaimed.

Practical steps

For diversity to move from a pie-in-the-sky ideal to a transformative reality, businesses need to make practical changes from the ground up. Atagana offers the following practical steps to encourage diversity in business.

Be honest: Be honest that South Africa is a young country in that it has a young democracy. Be honest about race and gender and engage in discussions surrounding it. Silence does not bode well for success.

Pay your interns: Paid internships balance privilege. A very small portion of the South African population has the kind of support system in place that allows them to work for free. A financial and familial support system is a privilege that not many have access to. Pay for lunch and transport at the very least.

Bridge the language divide: Make an effort to understand the ideas of those for whom English is not the mother tongue. Do not allow creative entrepreneurial ideas to go ignored due to a language barrier.

Hire humans: Recruitment requirements often dictate the hiring of employees based on certain demographics - two women, one black man, a UCT graduate, etc. Adapt recruitment to focus on human qualities, not necessarily numbers.

Diverse businesses are profitable, with Atagana reporting that “companies with a racially diverse leadership are 35% more successful.” Businesses need to be cognisant of the challenges facing the South African workforce and then implement actionable steps to promote equality. Sometimes it’s a matter of making a small move to bring about big change.

ABOUT LAUREN HARTZENBERG

Managing editor and retail editor at Bizcommunity.com. Cape Town apologist. Dog mom. Get in touch: lauren@bizcommunity.com

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