

Design thinking proves game changer for SA tech start-up

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Serial tech entrepreneurs Matthew Westaway and Lethabo Motsoaledi used a customer-centric approach to build their latest venture Voyc - a speech analytics service - into an award-winning company that currently monitors a million customer interactions a month in the UK and SA and helps clients cut customer complaints and build value.

On a cold night in winter, early in 2022, UK doctor, Helen Mott's [car broke down](#). She called the UK Automobile Association (AA) for assistance and was told by a call centre agent that she would have to wait as the AA did not prioritise lone women with broken down cars. She went onto social media and her story triggered a furore in the UK, with a deluge of negative press for the AA. The company was forced to apologise and clarify their position, saying it did prioritise women in risky situations.

Avoiding such a scenario – and providing better experiences for companies and customers alike – is the very reason that Matthew Westaway and Lethabo Motsoaledi, two UCT engineering students, started Voyc. This speech analytics software has been customised to monitor and analyse call centre traffic to identify vulnerable customers, and pick up on complaints before they spiral out of control, and deliver a superior customer service. The company was founded in 2018 and has won numerous awards including the Accenture Blue Tulip Award in 2021 and the KPMG Digital Innovation Matchmaking Challenge 2021.

The company is supported by entrepreneurial investors Techstars and is credited with helping its clients [achieve](#) an 80% reduction in manual quality assurance work and a 50% reduction in formal complaints. One financial services client reports that since implementing the software, it has been able to reduce regulatory complaints by 22%. Social media complaints have also dropped by 27% and the data has also helped this company identify agents in need of coaching and training and this has improved the customer experience even further. Quality assessors are also able to monitor five times more calls. Voyc software automatically picks up and alerts managers to specific calls where potential problems are identified, allowing companies to get back to a customer much more quickly and preventing a situation from escalating. This means less customers going to an Ombudsman, taking legal action or going onto social media to complain – as Dr Helen Mott did.

Westaway and Motsoaledi attribute the success of Voyc to a single, simple idea: the importance of listening to what your customers want and need. It's an approach they both encountered at the Hasso Plattner Institute (HPI) of Design Thinking or d-school, where both were part of a sponsored Foundation Programme in Design Thinking in 2016.

"Before learning about design thinking, our thinking was similar to the 'build it and they will come', philosophy," laughs Westaway. "There was not that much focus on the user or the customer, on how they would use a product or why they would want it." They joke that this probably explains why their first few tech ventures were not as successful as Voyc. Changing their approach to start with the customer has, quite literally, been a game-changer.

Westaway and Motsoaledi stumbled upon the idea for Voyc while working on another project where they needed to transcribe and analyse interviews. When they couldn't find the speech-to-text technology with natural language processing to help them, they set out to build it themselves. Realising they had something special they looked at marketing it, and call centres were mentioned as a possible client. This then led them to speak to call centre agents and companies to identify their biggest needs and start fine-tuning the analytics and reporting aspects of the software accordingly.

"Call centres are under such pressure," says Motsoaledi. "Call agents are constantly trying to put out fires and companies often don't have the capacity and resources to properly monitor and analyse each call that is made". [A 2021 US study](#) shows the stress call centres are under around the world. Up to 36% of agents have been violently threatened, with 81% complaining of customer abuse. In the US, up to 1.2 million agents quit their job each year. Since the outbreak of the

COVID-19 pandemic, there has been even more pressure on call centres to take over vital customer care interactions, says Motsoaledi.

In addition, [government](#) is also in the process of finalising the Conduct of Financial Institutions (COFI) Bill, which will bring enforceable principles to financial institutions, with legally binding principles around Treating Customers Fairly (TCF). Motsoaledi and Westaway believe their product is ideal for companies wanting to step up their compliance, improve customer experience or simply gain more data faster on how customers feel about products and services.

Perez says that there are many examples where design thinking has helped companies exponentially – for example accommodation site Airbnb followed design thinking principles when it set up their global business back in 2008. Early on, the team found out that people were nervous to book on the site due to low quality pictures of the accommodation. They then spent time with hosts to help them take high quality pictures and income went up 100%. According to agency [IDEO](#), testing ideas and understanding customers remain a big part of Airbnb's business operation and are integral to their ongoing success.

Westaway and Motsoaledi agree. "Design thinking changed how we thought about everything regarding our product; not only the way we were building it, but why and how it would be used. It made us think about who we are as a company and what we wanted to achieve. It really has been a part of Voyc from the beginning and has been woven into every fibre making up the company now. We are confident that it will guide us to keep designing solutions that make our clients smile."

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