

THE VENTURE CATALYST: JOAN JOFFE

by Mike Aldridge



Joan Joffe is not the kind of person to let an opportunity pass. Her career has been a series of brilliant moves.

Apart from her early days as a programmer and systems analyst at a string of local and USA companies, where she earned the nickname Joan 'One Shot' Joffe for her ability to get computer programs to run first time, deal-making has dominated her career. Her first foray into entrepreneurship was in selling newfangled HP calculators – a natural choice for Joffe, who majored in mathematics at Wits University and did her graduate studies in computer science at Stanford University.

"When I started out on my own, I had no business experience at all; no office, nothing. I didn't think I could sell anything to anyone, either," she says, recalling how she rehearsed her sales pitch with her husband the night before making her first call at an explosives factory on the West Rand. "The next day, when I started my pitch, the client interrupted me to ask, 'How much is it? I want it.' Those calculators were an amazing product. I used to load up my car each day and come back with no calculators."

Before long, Joffe Associates was threatening to swamp the office space she was sharing with her husband's civil engineering business. "My business was so big they told me, 'Either we're moving or you are.' I moved."

With her business booming, Joffe saw a gap in the fledgling PC market. "In 1982, I brought the first IBM PCs into the country and for a whole year was the only dealer in South Africa who imported them. When cellphones first came along nine years ago, Joffe, of course, was there. Right now, pen and yellow notepad in hand, she's using this interview, too. As Vodacom's image-maker, she doesn't miss any chance to check what messages the media is receiving about the company.

Joffe, an always impeccably dressed, well-coiffed woman who brings style and elegance to business, has embarked on a new chapter in her professional career. She says, "I call myself a venture catalyst – I am finding business opportunities and partners and putting together new business entities.

"I am staying in the technology area because there are so many opportunities. I'm working with foreign companies, finding products to market here. There is also technology in this country that is good enough to export and that needs someone to market it abroad. And then there is a start-up venture that I am involved in which is also in the technology field – it is quite a new concept and will be very big one day."

Joffe is reluctant to reveal too much about the new venture at this stage, admitting only that it is "an exciting, innovative start-up venture using a lot of technology in the telecoms and banking area." She is involved in a women's empowerment group, Nozala, where she works with high-powered businesswomen who are doing "very interesting things in minerals and mining."

The organisation has a trust to finance the empowerment of women in rural areas and as a commercial enterprise makes money for its shareholders. Nozala is a multi-cultural organisation: "it's an experiment in diversity that has worked very well," she remarks.

"Women in this country are being recognised for the fact that they bring a great deal of skill to the business situation and a great deal of diversity that is very valuable in today's business environment. In this country it is extremely important to have a diversity of viewpoints on projects – it's a new notion that diversity is strength as opposed to unity is strength."

Joffe believes that the dynamic women bring to business synergies with the demands of globalised economies: "most women's style is more of a consultative, sharing way of doing things. We are getting away from command and control management and women are being recognised for bringing a different viewpoint to the work situation."

But more than that: "Business is about distinguishing yourself from others and being a woman is a great distinguishing factor." She loves the freedom of running her own business. "I always suggest to people that when they find the need to advance it is not a bad idea to go out on their own. I enjoyed running my own business. It became a very big business and in business you can't stand

still. I had to get some partners. But I am very comfortable being on my own now – I like the flexibility and lack of structure in my life at the moment."

She feels there is a lot of potential for women to succeed in leadership positions in business and government in South Africa. "Things are looking good for women," she observes. "Our education is better today – but we still have a long way to go. Abuse against women is a major concern and there needs to be a huge focus on solving this dreadful problem."

Technology is an area that needs a strong push to get more women involved, and Joffe is doing her bit in this regard on the executive committee of the International Women's Forum of SA, an organisation that aims to develop women's leadership capacity.

Another is the Digital Partnership, an initiative to get second-hand computers imported from abroad into schools to bring the benefits of the information age to children and communities.

What does the future hold? She smiles. "I feel for the first time in many years that I have the space to think, look around and be receptive to ideas. That is something that you don't have when you are very involved in your career. I am enjoying it." 🌟

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