

# Make it work, despite the challenges, says Brimis' Andile Nqandela

By  Sindy Peters

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*As part of our #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.*



Andile Nqandela, founder and managing director of Brimis Engineering

We chatted to Andile Nqandela, founder and managing director of Brimis Engineering, to get his take.

■ **What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?**

**Andile Nqandela:** The response from our company was to quickly issue formal communication to staff emphasising the president's call to do a total lockdown, share whatever information with all, make arrangements for remote work for office staff and to arrange logistics for essential teams.

We were indirectly doing work for power-generating entity Eskom and water supplier Rand Water that was categorised as part of essential work services. Only four staff out of 34 had to work in the workshop and 23 were part of the project site team at the power station who had to continue work to support both these industries. We quickly had to cater for PPE needs and arrange transport as per the new regulations promulgated. We tried to take advantage of the relief funds, but the response from funders has been poor, including the UIF.



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■ **Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on your organisation or economy as a whole.**

**Nqandela:** Staff morale is down as majority of staff did not earn salaries in April due to being home. The UIF that we applied for still has not been processed, therefore affected staff are angry at us and government. New business has slowed down and we currently want to finish up the work in progress that is affected by our non-essential-supplier shutdown due to lockdown. We are incurring a lot of expenses in buying PPE and products to fight the pandemic, many prices of which are being increased during this time.

📊 ***How is your organisation responding to the crisis?***

**Nqandela:** With remote work, especially on sales, we have sent several letters to buyers informing them of the essential services we currently are able to do. We keep buying PPE to safeguard our essential employees against the virus. Fortunately for us, we support the water supply and electricity production industries and the need for our existence will continue and will only drop for the mines and other production plants that use pumps and valves.



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📊 ***Comment on the challenges and opportunities.***

**Nqandela:** A challenge is our non-essential suppliers that are not yet allowed to trade and thus affecting the service delivery of essential services e.g. raw material producers, foundries, consumable wholesalers/manufacturers. Other challenges include ineffective productivity for many due to working remotely, and high costs on data and telecommunications for remote work.

📊 ***How has the lockdown affected your staff? / What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?***

**Nqandela:** Staff are angry due to no payments being made as we were relying on UIF claims that are taking long to process and there is no constant communication from the UIF office. We keep re-emphasising government regulations on a continuous basis, information sharing on any SHE improvements, reminding staff of rising statistics, regardless of lifting of lockdown and maintain remote work principles even for essential workers.

Currently, our HR policy is no-work-no pay. We have 24 of our 79 staff members working as part of the essential service team, and 26 working at a hospital construction project. The rest are support staff and learners.



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📊 ***How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned?***

**Nqandela:** We have Zoom meetings and teleconferencing even with staff that is physically working at the office and workshop. We regularly encourage everyone to limit contact and keep a safe distance whether at work or home.

📊 ***How have you had to change the way you operate?***

**Nqandela:** We are doing more remote work with most office staff utilising more telecommunication technology. We communicate more via email, WhatsApp and telephone contact. Sales are key in our industry and we now have to rely on telecoms to do our sales which is difficult to do, but we believe it will work as people get used to the idea of social distancing.

### ▣ Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?

**Nqandela:** Many companies are introducing more Covid-19-related products like masks, shields, gowns etc., either as manufacturers or distributors. IT and telecommunications has become key during these difficult times and our industries must quickly catch up to effective tools and systems.



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### ▣ Your key message to those in the sector?

**Nqandela:** We have to get used to this situation, we have to make it work, despite the challenges. If the services or products are not allowed, you have to think of the most basic services you can offer during this time to keep your head above water (selling food, chemical disinfecting services, Covid-19 medical products, test kits, IT, etc.). Businesses have to find innovative ways of sustaining operations during these challenging times. Use of technology in your company is key, we must have a change of perception for alternative means of contact technology.

### ▣ What do you predict the next six months will be like?

**Nqandela:** The situation will worsen in SA, and a stricter lockdown is bound to happen again. The economy will be down and there will be more job cuts.

## ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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