

'Sustainable innovation can build a better South Africa' - Lesley Williams

As part of their ongoing efforts to help South African SMEs navigate the post-pandemic "Great Staggering" back into the new post-normal, post-lockdown world, Bronwyn Williams, partner at Flux Trends, interviewed Lesley Williams at the Alinea Innovation Master Class to find out South African businesses can use innovation to become more resilient and sustainable.



Lesley Williams is the CEO of Wits University's Tshimologong Precinct that aims to take African digital innovation to global markets through entrepreneurship and skills development. She also serves on the 4IR Advisory Panel for Gauteng Province. Lesley has 20 years of international experience in curating innovation ecosystems and networks with a primary focus on social and digital innovation. As such, Lesley is the perfect person to ask about how to cultivate a spirit of innovation in your organisation.

■ ***You work with young innovators and entrepreneurs every day, is there a commonality that you see in terms of personality or aptitude that drives innovation?***

You know, for me, the first is this deep sense of curiosity. There's a curiosity about what's happening in their own communities, but also what's happening within a certain territory that they're interested in. They are always trying to figure out how it works. There is also this kind of engineering mind that wants to understand how the system works - not just looking at things, but breaking it apart to see what the mechanics are that keep it together. This zooming in and out to see the individual parts that make up the whole goes from actual product-based solutions to how society works as a whole - unpacking it and reconstructing to find the solutions.

“ I would say innovators also have a habit of operating both in the present - doing the operational stuff that has to be done - and in the future, always checking over their backs and looking for the next frontier. ”

So, there is this idea of constant movement, with entrepreneurs. I think what I love the most is that even when there's a lack of confidence, even when they have imposter syndrome and fear, they're moving anyway, just climbing on top of whatever needs to get done.

And you know what? Your confidence will catch up into action. I would also say like there's a balance between the optimistic, and the pessimistic.

So they may be super cynical about what's going on in the world and have dissatisfaction with what's going on in the world, but while they are doing the work that needs to be done, they are super optimistic about the task at hand. The trick is to use optimism to create forward motion.

And then also, there's always this obsession or some kind of idea, whatever that idea is.

“ Quite often, when innovators are struck with one key idea, you'll find them manifesting it in different ways. They may even create multiple startups or multiple ventures over time, they may even go out and get a job, but that key idea within them sticks with them and guides them - light or a shadow. ”

To summarise, I would say the overarching commonalities of successful innovators include looking to the future, curiosity, and forward motion.

■ With the entrepreneurs you work with, how many of them are engaged in “pure profit plays,” and how many of those businesses they're working on have some sort of extra layer of social impact baked into them?

So that's quite an interesting question for me because I come with a background of social entrepreneurship. We know where the good guys are who want to create impact. And I kind of like to lean on that side of my life to build credibility in the work I now do in the tech space. In the past year, I've really been trying to put the two parts together.

What I've seen with a lot of tech entrepreneurs who are obsessed with solving some real-world problem, is that they often don't relate to the terminology of social entrepreneur or social impact. A lot of geeks, tinkerers, inventors that focus on the tech and forget about the people whose problems they are solving.

“ At the same time, there is a disconnect in the social entrepreneurial space, where people fully understand what their communities need, but they often don't have the technical capability to do something about it. ”

So, for me, there is a real beauty getting those two sides to meet and solve real-world problems with technical capability and solid revenue model and route to market.

■ ***Absolutely, that's a fantastic point, because depending on how you look at it, there is an argument to be made that any business that solves the problem for a consumer that they're selling to and does in an ethical way without doing harm to society could be considered to be a social business, you adding value to the environment. So, there's definitely a path between those two views that can be they can be converged very successfully.***

But, I want to pick up on what you just said right there about the whole disconnect between technology and the problems being solved in a slightly different way to ask - what are your thoughts on the overlap between technological innovation and "offline" innovation? Is technology being central to innovation? Or are there ways to be innovative without using the latest new, shiny technologies?

So, I don't believe in intake for the sake of tech. And to be honest, as a facilitator, I'm super low tech - I love working with white sheets, and some markers - I love using post-its, which is about the most low tech you can go.

“ *Innovation is about understanding how you can use technology. Technology is a tool. And we need to see where and how we can use it to enhance what we're doing.* ”

Intention drives technology, it can be used for harm, it can be used for good. And that's where social entrepreneurs come in because I think they're far clearer that the mission is about making a positive impact in the world.

■ ***So, what at the core, are the most common problems that the innovators that you're working with are trying to solve? And what is your opinion, as an expert in the field, on some of the problems that have not yet been solved? Where are those gaps that innovators are both going for - and perhaps missing - right now?***

So, this whole season of Covid-19 has been quite fascinating, because I feel like we've gone back to solving basics.

For me, those basics are the human needs for housing, food, water, and sanitation - and solving gender-based violence. These core topics have been trending for millennia, even as we've moved on to existing new innovations. As Covid-19 remains with us, we haven't addressed these basics yet.

I would love to see some entrepreneurs stepping forward and say we're going to come up with some sort of tech solution to address these needs.

■ ***We love what you were saying about the distinction between the problems that need solving in the real economy compared to the more financialised and virtualised economy solutions that we tend to find a lot of our innovators and startups want to go focus on. It seems like low-hanging fruit, try to play in the virtual space, make a lot of money really, quickly building platforms and tools. But while virtual, financialised economy is dependent on getting the real economy, right: Only one of those two markets requires the other one. Can you tell us a bit more about how innovators and entrepreneurs who want to solve real problems, like the ones you've mentioned can make use of your facilities?***

For those who don't know, we (Tshimologong) occupy a massive market space in Johannesburg CBD. If you want to make hardware, that is a space where you can go and develop your product. We've got a software facility for coding and networking - right now, our key focus is to get the unemployed trained in coding. And then the final arm is a content lab.

Fast digital innovation is at the intersection of hardware, software, and content. From the content perspective, we've got a thriving animation studio, focusing on 2D animation. So, essentially, we have built an ecosystem around digital innovation.

■ ***What is the disconnect that you find with corporates and organisations who are trying to innovate and failing? - How can larger organisations learn from the innovators you work with?***

For me, one of the big problems with enterprise development models right now is that corporates are partnering with innovation spaces and incubators to get "points". That is not exciting. And it's not strategic.

The forward-thinking corporates I see, are the ones working with us. They often come work us for either for a digital transformation requirement, or because they need to innovate. But the difference is that they participate in the incubation offering they're paying for.

As a result, we're seeing some really interesting partnerships taking off between our innovators and entrepreneurs and corporate.

This interview was part of the Flux Trends Alinea Mini Masterclass Series dedicated to helping South African entrepreneurs and SMEs use trends as business insights to get back to work after the manifold challenges of 2020.

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