

South Africa: Making a Material Difference At Home And Abroad

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ONE day in 2004 a Pakistani man called Mohammed Ali Millwala phoned teacher-turned-businesswoman Jackie Carroll. He wanted to know if she could supply the airline he worked for with training material that would help staff speak better English.

"I was very surprised," she says. "I didn't take it seriously at first, but he came out to see us and (the deal that resulted) has worked out nicely."

The call nudged Carroll and her business partner Dennis Lamberti to market their adult basic education and training (Abet) products internationally.

A further hint came at the 2006 CeBIT trade show in Hanover, Germany, which they attended because they had won the trip when they received the 2005 Proudly South African Service of the Year award in the small- and medium-size d enterprise category.

CeBIT claims to be the world's largest trade fair showcasing digital information technology and telecommunications "solutions" with the key target groups being industry, the wholesale and retail sector, skilled trades, banks, the services sector, government agencies and science. "We had so much interest -- and then we thought that we had to tap into this interest," Carroll says.

Media Works now sells to seven countries other than SA, from Pakistan to Egypt.

"Our latest dot on the globe is Syria. We are selling Braille material to the Higher Institute of Languages in Damascus".

Since 1996 Carroll and Lamberti have developed and sold customised "computerassisted" adult basic training and education products to businesses across SA and the world.

"I get very picky, it is 'computer-assisted', not computer-based. The learners spend time with facilitators too, and that's important," says Carroll of the training programmes provided.

Students spend 30 minutes working on computer, 30 minutes with a work book and another 30 minutes with a "facilitator" three times a week, working up to 240 hours of study per "learning area" or subject level.

"To teach a total illiterate to L evel 4 (on the National Qualifications Framework), the equivalent of Grade 9 at school, takes two-and-a-half years. People say that's so long, but it's nine years of schooling," Carroll says.

Most of Media Works' work is focused on National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 1, the equivalent of Grade 3 at school, and in the nine years to 2005 the company recorded a 90% pass rate.

The NQF is a formalised system for recording and rewarding academic achievements, and is in the process of being rejigged by the departments of labour and education after years of uncertainty over how it should be managed.

When Carroll and Lamberti decided to go it alone in 1996 after working for another Abet provider, they didn't realise that their move was timely: they had a four-year "jump" on the government's introduction of the sector education and training authorities (Setas). With the Setas came new government-led focus on skills development, and, through the national skills levy -- 1% of payroll for businesses with more than a minimum annual turnover.

"When the skills levy hit, Abet became a national priority. It still is: we've still only touched the tip of the iceberg (of adult illiteracy in SA)," says Carroll.

The government has recently launched its own R6,1bn, five-year campaign to teach basic literacy and numeracy to 4,7-million of the estimated 9,6-million South Africans who are functionally illiterate.

The government programme comes out of work done since 2005 when Education Minister Naledi Pandor admitted publicly that SA had had little success with post-democracy adult literacy programmes, even though eradicating illiteracy had been a government priority since 1994.

The Setas have to meet several national skills development strategy targets -- including raising the level of education of the many South Africans who are still not able to read and write effectively -- and have poured billions into this.

"For probably three of the four years we had no idea that the Setas were coming, we just kept our heads down producing a consistent product and service. When the Setas emerged (in March 2000) we had established ourselves as one of the players, not the player, but one of them, in this field," says Carroll.

The advent of the Setas did not, however, narrow Media Works' market; in fact it widened it, and the company has to date done training work for 22 of the 23 Setas.

The Setas are not responsible for actual training, they were established to co-ordinate and fund training.

Carroll and Lamberti decided to set up their own company when the training provider they both worked for decided against adapting the training courses it had developed to fit with "a whole lot of new guidelines and national standards" that had come in with the introduction of the NQF.

"We said, 'We have to realign our work,' and they said they wanted to recoup their costs first (by doing training using the unaligned training material). I can understand that, but we said,

'But you won't get work unless our stuff is aligned'," Carroll says.

The two set up in a Rivonia basement and spent 1996 creating learning materials from scratch and doing "a whole lot of street pounding and cold calling", with Carroll doing the marketing and Lamberti sorting out the software.

They were ecstatic when their startup company produced an annual turnover of R360000.

"We thought we should get out the champagne. A lot of meals had been Royco Cup-a-Soup -- the one with the noodles," says Carroll.

With the calming knowledge that they had found a niche in the market -- few companies were offering computer-assisted training at that time -- Carroll and Lamberti kept on working and by 2000 had reached an annual turnover of R12m.

Last year turnover reached R37m, and Media Works supplies all sorts of companies from multinational conglomerates such as Anglo Platinum, national heavyweights such as Tiger Brands to "the man down the street with five employees".

That Carroll and Lamberti created their own learning materials from scratch back in 1996 is now one of their largest strengths. This is because they own copyright and so do not have to pay royalties every time they adapt the materials to suit the particular needs of a client.

This was particularly helpful when Millwala's call came.

Learning to read and write English is a huge adaptation for people who speak languages that are not written in the Roman alphabet, and -- as in Millwala's case -- read from right to left. "It's a completely different kettle of fish for them, but we have a development team working on making the adaptations and because we own the copyright we can tweak freely," Carroll says.

Taking the business out of SA involved a huge personal lesson for Carroll. "What it's taken from me personally is trust. You can't do it all. You have to trust that people are capable of doing things alone, and they actually do carry on if I'm not here. It was a big surprise for me," Carroll laughs.

That, however, was only the start of Carroll's learning curve -- doing business in countries that have a culture completely different from SA's involved a lot of adaptation and means that Media Works has to ensure that there is as much long-distance support for their product as possible.

"We travel to the countries several times a year, but we try to do as much as possible here and ensure people can be helped telephonically and over the internet. What has to change is your frame of mind. You have to let go," she says.