

WINNING WOMEN

Angel Jones established the not-for-profit Homecoming Revolution in 2003 to entice professionals in the SA diaspora to come home. A decade later, she commercialised it as a brain gain company to repatriate skills to the African continent, writes **Sue Grant-Marshall**

She doesn't look like a revolutionary as she flies through the Parkview coffee shop door, but that's the label Angel Jones wears with pride and she's just swum for a full hour, rising before 5am to do so. "It keeps me cool and calm."

Nothing can dampen the fiery spirit of this former advertising guru. Her aim is to ensure Africans living abroad bring their skills home.

"Each returnee creates nine new jobs in the South African formal and informal sectors," she declares.

Jones has called it a "revolution" - because revolutionaries see opportunities where others see problems.

In the past five years, 359 000 South African professionals have returned, bringing vital skills to an economy with 800 000 vacancies in areas as diverse as engineering, health, education and financial services.

"The department of home affairs has put out figures showing we need vital skills in 53 different categories that need to be filled by qualified professionals.

"Furthermore, it has been said these vacancies can be filled by foreigners - it doesn't just have to be South Africans."

The need for more skills also applies to the wider African continent. Many an African professional in the former British colonies tended, in the past to send their children overseas for tertiary education. Numbers of them remained in the UK and those who returned continued the practice of an international education for their children.

"Now that the African basket case scenario has been overtaken by the Africa Rising, one - as there are growth spurts of between 6% and 9% in many east and west African countries - they too have vacant posts.

"You cannot believe how huge a pool of Kenyan, Ugandan, Nigerian and Ghanaian talent there is now in the UK."

Jones describes the difference between her Homecoming Revolution and personnel recruitment companies as "fundamental".

"For people who want to come home, it is far, far more than simply about getting a job. It's about friends and family, a sense of belonging, about lifestyle and African weather. And, because we know this, we tell stories - good and bad ones - about people who've come back. We don't bulls**t."

Jones adds that Homecoming Revolution has in-depth research and practical information concerning relocation companies, buying homes, finding schools and immigration problems.

"Our prime objective is to match-make local employers with African talent. We do this by hosting worldwide 'speed meet' events."

"This unique interactive format brings together hundreds of Africans, and employers and relocation providers in different cities, from London to New York; Washington, DC; Joburg; Nairobi and Lagos.

"We line up prospective employers and each one is allowed only five minutes to present their brand on our platform. That is followed by short matchmaking sessions. It's fun, dynamic and vibey."

At the homecoming events there are also practical workshops and inspirational case studies.

"Our next one happens in London in March and we're expecting a huge turnout," Jones says enthusiastically.

The Homecoming Revolution's interactive website has 12 000 visitors a month and its newsletter goes out to 44 000 Africans throughout the world.

"Our career portal receives 6 000 visitors a month, making it the perfect place to advertise job vacancies," says Jones.

She has walked the homecoming talk.

She backpacked overseas as a postgraduate before joining the Saatchi brothers' advertising agency in London, initially as a "runner" before becoming a full-time copywriter.

Then, in 1999, she was one of thousands of South Africans who packed Trafalgar Square to listen to Nelson Mandela.

His beaming smile, warmth and inclusive approach to all, regardless of race, made her decide to come home. "Although, I always knew I'd return to my big Joburg-based family," she adds.

"The best way to do it was to tell the Saatchi brothers they needed an office here. They agreed."

In 2000 she co-founded MorrisJones Advertisings, where she created, among other things, the kulula.com brand, the Wimpy "foreign" ad and the Batana Batana World Cup parade ad.

But a website she built to attract South Africans home from abroad kept growing. She formalised it in 2003 as Homecoming Revolution and began holding events around the world to bring companies and professionals together.

She ran it as an NGO, with funding initially from FNB.

It seemed a logical step to commercialise it two years ago, "but I did wonder if we'd lose the impact we had. In fact, it has gained credibility and people now take us more seriously. We're seen as a brain gain company."

Today, Jones flies around the world - speaking on platforms as diverse as Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania in the US to Oxford University in England - encouraging graduates to come home.

"We don't say everything's perfect here. It's like every other emerging economy and we muddle along. But we're a robust democracy."

Many of the negative calls she gets are from "enraged South Africans living in Australia, who ring me up around midnight. I just listen and eventually they say Jones says her message is "please don't run down South Africa in order to justify leaving it".

Crime and Eskom's power problems are two of the issues always raised by possible homecomers. Jones urges them to return and help fix our problems.

"Help build Medupi and other power stations. Even better, work on renewable energy sources, as that's where the World Energy Outlook Report says the future lies in sub-Saharan Africa," she says in her typically upbeat manner.

Little black book

Business tip: It's more of a risk not to take a risk. We need to say 'we tried',

Mentor: Paul Harris of FNB, who has supported us from the get-go.

Best book: A Prayer for Owen Meany by John Irving. I try to reread it every year because it makes me feel more intensely alive each time I do so.

Inspiration: Nelson Mandela. When he became president, I felt for the first time I was proudly South African.

Wow! moment: Many years ago, a young legless man in India pulled himself over to my night-train window in an empty station to blow me a kiss and say I was beautiful. He didn't want money.

Life lesson: Life is never going to be perfect. We just have to keep moving forward, keeping on keeping on.



Muhammad Yunus

International examples

Bangladeshi microfinance institution Grameen Bank, founded in 1983, is a pioneer in providing microcredit to the poor.

Founder Muhammad Yunus won a Nobel peace prize in 2006 for his work at Grameen Bank, whose structure is unique in that it provides group-based credit.

Yunus was inspired after he loaned a group of 42 families \$27 in 1974 during a famine in Bangladesh. The bank targets the poorest of the poor.

Some believe the bank's loans trap the communities it serves in perpetual debt, while the bank itself struggles financially and relies on loans.

A similar institution modelled on Grameen Bank is Indian bank SKS Microfinance. It targets poor women in villages and urban slums and only supports these women's income-generating activities.

There's also Opportunity International, a not-for-profit organisation that provides loans for income-generating activities and to help poor people work their way out of poverty.

Opportunity SA is part of the international network and was started in 2006 to provide loans to small businesses and for school fees. - Mammello Masote

Addressing

housing

challenges and

educational

outcomes

MARK VAN WYK

Eduluan won't follow in the steps of African Bank

Van Wyk points out Eduluan's collection method and its targeting of government employees and their children counts in its favour.

"With Eduluan, the money is deducted from the payroll before the parent even receives his or her salary - whereas with African Bank it was debit orders."

He's also bullish about Lendcor's future. "It's not the size of African Bank, because with a company like African Bank the fixed components need to be fed - and that will mean you keep hiking interest rates.

"Here [at Lendcor], the fixed-cost component is small and you can afford to be selective about who you lend to and not just lend to anyone in the hope you get the money back," he explains.

Mergence concentrates on long-term investments - it isn't for those looking to make a quick buck and get out.

There are currently three institutional investors managing pension funds who are on board with Mergence's vision.

Van Wyk hopes to reach out to more of these funds. But are the returns worth it?

Van Wyk says that when Mergence enters into an agreement, it dictates the return expected.

"We say: for this risk we should get the prime interest rate, for instance - as long as [clients] business can survive on prime plus 1 or 2 interest rate percentages.

"But we're also not trying to kill the business, but support it and hope we can reach a compromise," he adds.

Van Wyk highlights that his portfolio has always outperformed its benchmark and "in this rising interest rate cycle should continue to constantly outperform it".