

# Women rock the stocks

ALAN COOPER

**M**ORE women than ever are going into business for themselves. But with most sectors still dominated by men, it can be a daunting prospect for fledgling female entrepreneurs.

If that sounds like you, don't lose heart. With a bit of courage and a lot of hard work, you will thrive despite the odds. That's the inspiring message from four Durban women who have made a success of their careers.

And if there's one thing they share, it's a sense of purpose and passion for what they do.

Darlene Menzies, for example, the award-winning founder and chief executive officer of SMEasy, which provides finance and accounting solutions for small businesses, started out as a bank teller.

She worked her way up into high-powered information technology roles, first at Absa, then Business Connexion. But she resigned in 2001 to do missionary and charity work.

"It sounds corny, but I really felt strongly that I could be doing more to help people," says Menzies, a committed Christian.

"I realised I could combine the skills I'd cultivated to make a difference. I also realised it takes money to make a difference and non-governmental organisations depend on donors for survival.

"I figured the easiest way to help people was to make money and the best way to do that was to start and grow a business."



SMEasy's Darlene Menzies.

Today, SMEasy supplies business management and accounting software to thousands of small businesses.

As divisional manager: communications and marketing at the Ithala Development Finance Corporation and the owner of a florist business, Thuli Galelekile juggles her corporate and entrepreneurial roles with remarkable aplomb.

After taking on increasingly senior marketing positions at companies such as Unilever, Nokia and Standard Bank, Umlazi-raised Galelekile said she reached a crossroads.

"My social consciousness led me down the path of effecting change. I've made it my business goal to work in development, centring on the unbanked of KwaZulu-Natal," she said.

As a pioneer in this field, Ithala was the perfect fit. "Vast numbers of people of this province do not have a stake in the economy. Providing access to



Ithala's Thuli Galelekile.

finance betters the lives of the masses. What greater reward can there be than that?"

When it comes to her own business, Orchida Florist, Galelekile has a similar approach. "Flowers are not just a business; they brighten people's lives," she said.

Any women considering a career in male-dominated fields like information and communications technology (ICT) should be inspired by Charlene Munilall, the recently appointed general manager for the Huawei Consumer Business Group SA.

Munilall, who grew up in Reservoir Hills, is a vocal proponent of getting more women involved in ICT.

"I believe there is a huge gap in the industry with the lack of women. I saw the opportunity to grow and showcase my capabilities," something she did successfully at companies like Nokia, Samsung and Lenovo before moving to Huawei.



Huawei's Charlene Munilall.

"Women bring a different dimension to the workplace and are more detailed when it comes to planning and implementing. There are a lot of opportunities to fuse this with our male counterparts and create a better business environment that ensures growth," said Munilall.

Her advice to schoolgirls? "Pursue a career in ICT. It is a rapidly changing environment and will shape the way we all live in future."

When it comes to traditionally male-dominated businesses, they don't come much more macho than debt collecting. But Saskia Hill, chief executive officer of MCS Debt Recovery, believes empathy and compassion, not forcefulness and aggression, are the key to her company's success.

"I tell my staff to remember that one kind word can change someone's day. Everyone you talk to is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always," says Hill.



Saskia Hill of MCS.

It's an approach that obviously works because, combined with a nurturing workplace and an uncompromising commitment to customer service, it's propelled MCS Debt Recovery from a start-up with three staff, including the founder, to one of KZN's premier collection companies.

All employees are assigned an anonymous "angel" who takes them under her wing, leaving motivating messages or chocolates. All managers have an open door policy, including Hill, who sits on the call centre floor with her staff.

The company has historically been a women-only business. "It has always worked well in the collection environment as, generally, women have slightly more empathy than men."

That said, the company has employed a few men to "test the waters".

Hill's advice to budding entrepreneurs is to dream big and aim high.