

MANUSCRIPT DETAILS

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Ayanda Mbatha: Resilience in action during the COVID-19 pandemic (A)

“Our parents taught us that to get something in life, we had to work for it. To get a soccer ball, I had to work hard at school in order to get good grades. This is the mindset I grew up with.” – Ayanda Mbatha¹

With his exceptional performance as a technician and draughtsman in the product design office of the product development team at Rheinmetall Denel Munition, it seemed Ayanda Mbatha was destined for great things in his career at Rheinmetall Denel Munition, a manufacturer of large and medium-calibre ammunition. However it was not to be. On May 31, 2020, Ayanda Mbatha was retrenched² from his position as a technician and draughtsman at Rheinmetall Denel Munition, joining the estimated 2.9 million adults³ who lost their jobs during the period February to April 2020⁴, contributing to South Africa’s stubbornly high rate of unemployment of 30.1% during first quarter of 2020⁵. Ayanda wondered about how he was going to stand out in his job search in an already poorly performing economy⁶ that was now experiencing havoc due to the coronavirus pandemic that had led to large job losses and sharp declines in the number of job openings.

Ayanda Mbatha

Ayanda Mbatha was born at the dawn of South Africa democracy in 1994. He is the youngest boy and the fourth child from a family of five, and grew up in Osizweni, a township⁷ in Newcastle, the third-largest city in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Although Osizweni was a poor township, Mbatha grew up feeling comparatively better as the family was surrounded by poorer neighbours. Mbatha’s father worked as a manager at a company in Johannesburg, South Africa's biggest city and capital of the Gauteng province. Mbatha described his mother, Thulisile, as a “township entrepreneur who never had a 9-to-5 job.” Although Mbatha started his education at a local township school, in 2005 his parents enrolled him and his younger sister at a former whites-only Afrikaans-medium school⁸ that only accepted English speaking students for the first time in 2005. Mbatha described his enrollment at this school:

My father was still alive in 2005, so he sent us to this expensive school because he wanted us to get the best education. It was easy for my sister and I to blend in with the

¹ Interview with Ayanda Mbatha, May 21, 2021.

² A form of job dismissal due to an employer’s decision to reduce the number of employees in order to continue operating or to significantly reduce losses.

³ Casale, D & Posel, D 2009, Gender and the early effects of the Covid-19 crisis in the paid and unpaid economies in South Africa, National Income Dynamics Corona Virus Rapid Mobile Survey, viewed 08 August 2021, <<https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Casale-Gender-the-early-effects-of-the-COVID-19-crisis-in-the-paid-unpaid-economies-in-South-Africa.pdf>>.

⁴ This period coincides with the period March 27, 2020 to April 30, 2020 described as a period of the “hard-lockdown” in South Africa. During this period, a restrictive list of essential activities was provided and leaving the home for any non-essential activity was prohibited.

⁵ Statistics South Africa, Quarterly Labour Force Survey Quarter 1: 2020, viewed 08 August 2021, <<https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02111stQuarter2020.pdf>>.

⁶ According to the South African Reserve Bank March 2020 Quarterly Bulletin, South Africa was in a recession, when it went into its first lockdown on March 27, 2020. (SARB, 2020).

⁷ In South Africa, township generally refers to urban living areas that are often underdeveloped and were reserved for non-whites (black Africans, Coloureds and Indians) until the end of Apartheid in 1994.

⁸ A school that used the Afrikaans language as the only medium of instruction.

White and predominantly Afrikaans speaking classmates because of the mindset we grew up with. Our parents taught us that to get something in life, we had to work for it.

Also, because I played sports – cricket, soccer, and rugby, I had to learn to communicate with my team members, work with them, and understand them. Furthermore, my mother taught us to always know what’s important – what we were there for.

In 2006, Mbatha’s father died. Mbatha teared up as he described what happened next:

When we lost our father in 2006, my eldest brother took over the role of leading the family. Although my uncle, my father’s younger brother also guided us, my eldest brother became a father figure to us⁹. And he sacrificed a lot for us. He couldn’t continue his studies to masters level because he had to work and support the family. Losing our father meant we no longer had the financial stability he provided but the family made things work with the money he left behind and help from my uncle.

After completing high school, Mbatha enrolled for a mechanical engineering diploma at the Tshwane University of Technology in Pretoria, the administrative capital of South Africa in the Gauteng province. Despite a few challenges regarding the funding of his studies, Mbatha noted that he thrived at the university, largely due to “pursuing something that I loved” and the parenting he received at home, particularly the lessons from his mother that from an early age, had a strong influence on him:

Growing up, my mother always taught us to remember what is important to us and that whether we were at school, university or work, we had to constantly ask ourselves why we were there and for who.

After countless rejected applications, during his final year at the university in 2015, Mbatha received a bursary from Barloworld Equipment. Mbatha noted that getting the bursary was important because it meant he would have a job on graduation which would allow him to “start contributing to looking after his mother and baby sister.” Mbatha’s stellar performance at Barloworld Equipment as he completed the practical training component of his mechanical engineering diploma was noted by his superiors, suggesting that he would be offered a permanent job. However it was not to be. In January 2016, Mbatha was informed that Barloworld Equipment was unable to offer him a job at the end of his training period in June 2016 because of a challenging operational environment. Mbatha recalled the thoughts that were on his mind after receiving this news:

It was a challenge because I had been looking forward to a permanent job and starting my engineering career with Barloworld Equipment. I pictured myself unemployed at home. Me, Ayanda sitting at home unemployed when my mother and my baby sister needed my support. This didn’t make sense to me. This thought drove me to find a solution to my job situation. I knew that life doesn’t stop just because my training is coming to end and they can’t employ me. That is my mindset – nothing stops. I thought of where I came from, how I grew up, the challenging financial situation at

⁹ In African families, fatherhood is often regarded as a collective social responsibility for brothers, uncles, and grandparents.

home, and the life I want to have for myself. I am a person who likes good things. But how can I have good things when I am not working? How can I become a successful engineer sitting at home?

A few days after the news had sunk in, Mbatha found himself grateful for three things: that he had a roof over his head, at the family home in Johannesburg where he didn't have to pay rent; that he didn't "sleep hungry"; and that his dad had been "smart" to buy a house in Johannesburg. "Although my dad is gone, the house makes me feel that he is there, physically taking care of us" reflected Mbatha. He noted that being grateful made him realize that he had to only "stress about getting a job." So, he came up with a creative way to find a job that he described:

I compiled a list of all the companies that I was interested in working for. I practiced my sales pitch every day, in front of the mirror. Then, I started cold calling them. I would speak to human resources managers and ask them to put me in contact with engineering or hiring managers. My strategy was to interview with them even if there were no job openings so that I could impress them. I knew that there was no guarantee that I would get an interview. There are no guarantees in life. You don't need to go to school to understand this. It comes from home. My mother taught me that there are no guarantees in life, you must work for what you want in life. So I cold called companies every day. My motto was keep calling because the more I called, the more I created my luck. I also told myself that by cold calling every day, I was increasing my chances of being put in contact with engineering or hiring managers.

After cold calling hundreds of companies over a period of six months, Mbatha got an opportunity to interview for a job at Rheinmetall Denel Munition. Mbatha described how this opportunity came about:

My cold calling skills, my expertise in selling myself, and generally being pleasant on the phone made it easy for me to connect with people and it made them want to help me. There was no opening initially. But because I kept on calling, the human resources manager got to know me and she finally invited me for an interview. On the day of the interview, I discovered that a project management internship position had recently been created.

Working at Rheinmetall Denel Munition

Mbatha started his job as a project management intern in September 2016 at the offices in Potchefstroom, an academic town in the North West Province of South Africa. On completion of the 12-month internship program in August 2017, Mbatha was offered a permanent job as technician and draughtsman in the product design office of the product development team. Jackie Sibeko, senior scientist and Mbatha's manager described Mbatha: "Ayanda is an epitome of energy; he is assertive, does things with purpose, and always gives more than 100 percent effort at any task. He had energy to start a side hustle while working for us." Mbatha started a side hustle as a distributor of a popular energy drink. Mbatha credits his mother who was a township entrepreneur for his entrepreneurial mindset.

In January 2020, there were rumours that the company was considering reducing the staff count through retrenchments because of a tough operating environment. Although Mbatha knew that the last-in-first-out principle was one of the ways companies use for selecting employees for retrenchment, he felt that he would not be affected. Mbatha explained why: "I associated retrenchment with older workers, so I never imagined it could happen to me." In

March 2020, as the first cases¹⁰ of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) were detected in South Africa, Mbatha was informed by Sibeko that he was among employees being considered for retrenchment. Sibeko described Mbatha's reaction as completely surprising given his age: "I don't mind, there is always another door that opens when one closes." Mbatha described his reaction on receiving the news from Sibeko: "I was sad. I imagined myself no longer working at this company and searching for another job."

Mbatha called his mother and shared the news of the possible retrenchment. Mbatha's mother described this phone call and what she told her son:

As a mother, it is my job to comfort my children when they are hurting. So, when Ayanda told me that he had been told that he might be retrenched, I asked him what he wanted. He said he wanted another job. I told him that he would get it but he must work for it. I told him that we had invested in his education to prepare for challenges like this. I reminded him of his dedication to his studies that led him to qualify as an engineer. I explained to him that because he was educated, that alone meant he had a better chance of getting a job than other people. Finally, I told him that while I couldn't advise him on how to search for job, he must do whatever it takes and he would find another job.

Mbatha called each one of his siblings to break the news. To his surprise, although they were all saddened by this turn of events, like his mother, they all matter-of-factly told him that he would get another job. Mbatha explained what happened after these phone calls: "I switched from being sad to becoming convinced that I would get a job."

A few weeks after being told by his manager that he was among employees being considered for retrenchment, consultations with affected employees commenced, including Mbatha. These consultations culminated in Mbatha's retrenchment on May 31, 2020.

¹⁰ On March 5, 2020, South African Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize, confirmed the first incident of COVID-19 in South Africa.

Ayanda Mbatha: Resilience in action during the COVID-19 pandemic (B)

“I associated retrenchment with older workers, so I never imagined it could happen to me.” – Ayanda Mbatha¹

Despite his exceptional performance in the product design office of the product development team at Rheinmetall Denel Munition, on May 31, 2020, Ayanda Mbatha was retrenched from his position as a technician and draughtsman.

Searching for a job

Ayanda Mbatha’s job search began soon after the March 2020 phone calls to his mother and his siblings informing them of his impending retrenchment. These calls had led to a shift in perspective in Mbatha since his family had matter-of-factly told him that he would get another job. Mbatha described his job search strategy and his thoughts:

With the government’s “hard-lockdown” in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, companies began announcing retrenchments². Given this, I realized that I was one of thousands of job seekers out there. So, in addition to searching for a job through job websites and employment agencies, I had to do something unique. I came up with the idea of sending video introductions to key people at the companies that I was interested in working for, after connecting with them on LinkedIn, an amazing platform. Video introductions are more powerful than written communication. I sent about fifteen personalized video introductions daily. Every time, I received responses to my videos, I felt good about myself and this tricked my brain to forget about the impending retrenchment. Also, I never doubted myself. Self-doubt is your demise in life.

I always reminded myself that I can’t control politics. But I can control my situation. Young people need to understand that they can’t sit and wait for the government to give them jobs. The government cannot give people jobs, it only creates an enabling environment for business to create jobs.

Just in case, he got retrenched, in between recording his videos for his LinkedIn video introductions, Mbatha approached his bank to take advantage of the debt relief extended by South African banks to customers experiencing financial distress due to the Covid-19 pandemic³. Mbatha noted that this proactive decision was to avoid worrying about car and personal loan repayments while job searching should he get retrenched.

After several weeks of consultations, Mbatha was served a retrenchment notice that indicated that his last day with the company was May 31, 2020. Mbatha described how he felt:

When I received the notice it hurt and I was briefly disappointed. Briefly, because I was mentally prepared for this. I told myself that I was searching for a job and I was

¹ Interview with Ayanda Mbatha, May 21, 2021.

² The period March 27, 2020 to April 30, 2020 is described as a period of the “hard-lockdown” in South Africa. During this period, a restrictive list of essential activities was provided and leaving the home for any non-essential activity was prohibited.

³ South African banks offered debt relief to their customers experiencing financial distress due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This relief took many forms including instalment reduction and payment breaks for a limited period.

going to get it. I don't care that we are in a level four lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic⁴. I told myself that in the future I was going to be one of the best CEOs. But I can't become a CEO if I can't get the work experience that I need. So, I have to get a job soon.

Jackie Sibeko, Mbatha's manager observed that in all their interactions after he received the news of his retrenchment, Mbatha refused to be pulled down by the job loss and often said "everything was going to be alright." After receiving the retrenchment notice, Mbatha received a call from the general manager of product development thanking him for his exceptional work at the company and apologizing that it had to end this way, since no other options were available to the company. By the time the call ended, Mbatha had realized that: "It's over. I have to find another job." Mbatha explained the role emotions play in his life during challenging times:

I am a person who expresses his emotions. I think it is one of my strengths. Some people can say it's a weakness for a man. Especially, a traditional Zulu man⁵. But for me, I find it a strength. When I am hurt, I will express my emotions. If I have to cry, I will cry to let out the frustrations and the disappointments. After wiping my tears, I go on with life positively.

Mbatha was a ball of emotions when he left Potchefstroom on May 31, 2020. Not only had he lost a job he was passionate about, but also his friends and his side hustle. When Mbatha arrived at the family home in Johannesburg, he was consumed by a single thought. He had to get a job very fast. Because he had decided to keep his car to make it easier to attend job interviews, he knew that once the debt relief arrangement ended on June 30, 2020, he faced the prospect of selling "Pretty", his first car that he loved dearly. Mbatha explained:

I asked myself how I will make my personal loan and car repayments at the end of the debt relief period if I am not working. There was only one answer to this question – get a job.

Despite the success of the LinkedIn⁶ video introductions in getting Mbatha to talk to the key people he targeted at the companies he wanted to work for, these discussions were not getting him opportunities to interview at the companies. It had been three months since he adopted this strategy and was sending up to fifteen videos a day. Mbatha felt he needed a new

⁴ South Africa introduced five COVID-19 alert levels. Level 5: Drastic measures are required to contain the spread of the virus to save lives. Level 4: Some activity can be allowed to resume subject to extreme precautions required to limit community transmission and outbreaks. Level 3: Involves the easing of some restrictions, including on work and social activities, to address a high risk of transmission. Level 2: Further easing of restrictions, but the maintenance of physical distancing and restrictions on some leisure and social activities to prevent a resurgence of the virus. Level 1: Most normal activity can resume, with precautions and health guidelines followed at all times.

⁵ Traditionally, Zulu men who express emotions through crying are perceived as weak or unmanly. Thus, Mbatha is defying this traditional view.

⁶ LinkedIn provides diverse information about organizations and as such enables job seekers to both communicate with people at organizations job seekers wants to work at and to discover career opportunities. Using the Internet for job seeking improves the speed with which people find jobs, hence, traditional job-seeking methods such as newspaper ads and employment agencies have increasingly shifted to social media platforms on the Internet making online job seeking an important channel for finding employment.

strategy. He once again found himself wondering about what he could do to stand out among other jobseekers. It didn't take long for Mbatha to decide on his new strategy. He explained:

I decided that I would post public videos on LinkedIn instead of only sending to the key people I had targeted at the companies that I wanted to work for. But before posting these public videos, I decided to get maximum visibility by handing out my CV at a busy traffic intersection, dressed in formalwear to stand out, and with a placard around my neck advertising my qualifications and my LinkedIn page (see Exhibit 1). I was beaming with pride as passing motorists accepted my CV. Some motorists took pictures of me and promised to post them on their online profiles. My strategy was to drive online traffic to my LinkedIn profile.

Before long, Mbatha was trending online as motorists posted pictures of Mbatha on Facebook and LinkedIn⁷; was being invited for job interviews; and was even interviewed by a local radio station. Mbatha noted that this outcome did not surprise him at all: "I had put in the work. When you put in the work, you reap the rewards. I believe that when people see that you are doing something about your situation, they will help you." After three weeks of handing out his CV at busy traffic intersections with a placard around his neck advertising his qualifications, Mbatha switched focus to preparing for the interviews that he had been invited to. One of those interviews was with Kirk Nash, CEO at Rhochrematics, a supplier of advanced automated logistics.

Getting a job with Rhochrematics

Mbatha started his new job as a project engineer at Rhochrematics on September 5, 2020. Kirk Nash, CEO at Rhochrematics explained how this came about:

My 14-year old daughter asked me to consider hiring Ayanda after she came across his creative job search story on Facebook. I immediately reached out to Ayanda and invited him for an interview. During the interview, Ayanda struck me as someone passionate about his future. He was out there on the streets passionately searching for a job. I felt, it made sense to bring someone this passionate about their future into our business.

Ian Marnoch Managing Director of Lilac Process Automation, a division of Rhochrematics described his first meeting with Ayanda:

I didn't know anything about Ayanda's creative job search story. I just saw a young man with lots of potential. He struck me as disciplined, able to face challenges, and very clear about what he wanted to achieve in life.

⁷ In general, people use Facebook for presentation of their personal lives and LinkedIn for presentation of their professional lives.

Psychological Factors	Social Support Factors
Personality traits (openness, extraversion, and agreeableness) Locus of control Mastery Self-efficacy Self-esteem Cognitive appraisal ¹ (i.e., positive interpretation of events and cohesive integration of adversity into self-narrative) Optimism Hope Cognitive flexibility Emotional regulation Positive emotions Spirituality/Faith Resourcefulness Social relationships Adaptability	Social support including relationships with family, friends, teachers, peers, and supportive community institutions.

Table 1: Categorising sources of resilience

¹ Cognitive appraisal is “the process of categorizing an encounter, and its various facets, with respect to its significance for well-being” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 31).

EXHIBIT 1



Source: Twitter (@AdvoBarryRoux)