

Manage risk appropriately, stay positive, look for solutions

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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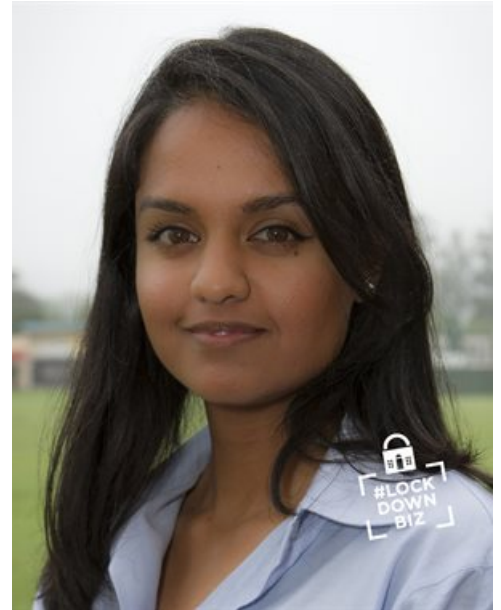
As part of our #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.

We chatted to Adele Naidoo, head of human resources at JoJo, to get her take.

■ **What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?**

Adele Naidoo: We were approached by the Department of Water & Sanitation to supply water tanks to water stressed communities across the country on the day of lockdown. Initially, there was a lot of uncertainty about what was required to stay in operation in order to deliver on the government promises during the state of the nation address.

Despite the challenges to get the required permits to transport our tanks and for our factories to stay operational, the organisation maintained the higher purpose of our business top of mind, we are - JoJo - for water for life. This helped to focus the team to settle down, get the right things in place, and deliver what we promised. The reality remained that our country needed our water tanks to fight the virus.



Adele Naidoo, head of human resources at JoJo

I don't believe anyone could have prepared for this experience, we maintain our agility and try our best to navigate obstacles as they are presented.

■ **Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on your organisation or economy as a whole.**

Naidoo: Although JoJo was still allowed to operate, as we have been classified as an essential service, we could only supply government and businesses that were also essential services. Our largest customer base is the end consumer who buys his/her tanks from a building materials merchant – and this market was unable to operate under Level 5 lockdown.

We could not access our main customer segment, which has had a severe impact on our business. Despite our relatively low sales, we remain positive and grateful that we were able to provide a vital service during this time.

The government was decisive in calling the lockdown – well done. It now has to be decisive in exiting the lockdown – as quickly as practical. The impact on JoJo financially has been severely negative, and we are way more fortunate than other sectors who have not been able to trade at all.



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■ **How is your organisation responding to the crisis?**

Naidoo: It has been a balancing act between our responsibility to limit the spread of Covid-19 on the greater population whilst still ensuring the well-being and safety of our staff.

Considering the uncertain realities the country was facing, our MD Grant Naser was very clear from the onset that no-one would be forced to work. Thus, during the initial phases of the pandemic, our staff were presented the choice of whether or not to remain behind to work with the commitment from management that they would not be limited by their individual choices. We ran operations at 30% capacity, and job roles and grades fell away as administrative staff and managers joined the various factories to deliver on our promises.

Through the UIF schemes, company advances on pay and annual leave, as well as some costs savings, we managed to guarantee full pay for the month of April, and have committed to staff that any pay cuts would be delayed as long as operationally possible and that retrenchments would be the last resort.

From an external perspective, we launched a campaign reminding SA of the innovators and innovations in our own country. Necessity is the mother of invention and South Africans have dreamed up some of the greatest ones on the planet. In these uncertain times, we wanted to celebrate South Africans who have dreamed and innovated, who have found solutions that have changed our country and the world. No matter how tough things are, South Africans find a way. We've profiled Umgibe Farming, EnviroSan, face shields from Wits University, the speed gun – go look.



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■ **Comment on the challenges and opportunities.**

Naidoo: Challenges - Remote working was initially a challenge, however after daily calls over Zoom, a lot of patience and a very tired IT manager, we have adapted quite well for an organisation that never had need for such applications prior to lockdown.

Lack of information from government on the details is particularly challenging. There is very little consistent information on the rule changes. It requires our teams to be highly flexibly and patient with one another as we navigate the different regulations. We may not be perfect, but enthusiasm and the right attitude has been a winning combination.

Opportunities - The crisis provided many leaders within the organisation to rise to the occasion and display talents and characteristics that may have previously been overlooked.

It has provided us with an opportunity to move out of our comfort zones and experiment with new technologies and innovations.

One of the ones we are proudest of is a partnership with EnviroSan that has created a rapid response handwash station. It is basically self-closing and self-cleaning taps and basins that are fitted into a JoJo tank. The City of Cape Town has already installed some and we are working with Unicef WASH to install others (95 installed in Cape Town, 20 in Gauteng, eight in Eastern Cape, and busy rolling out to other provinces in partnership with Unicef WASH and EnviroSan). For JoJo, this is about partnerships and collaboration during a time of need.

■ ***How has the lockdown affected your staff? / What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.***

Naidoo: JoJo has retained much of its culture from starting out as a family business. Despite our challenges and fears, the crisis has made us stronger. We had a job to complete, so unilateral responsibilities fell away. We re-branded ourselves the Disaster Management Team.

At the outset we had to clearly define the new Covid-19 rules for working at your normal place of work, working from home and not working. In addition, we had to advise that staff would be expected to be able to accommodate moving between each status at short notice.

In week one we had managers across the eight factories document their individual stories and experiences which was compiled in our marketing department and later shared with the entire organisation. It boosted morale and validated our sense of togetherness.

We have weekly wellness check-ins with all staff and try as far as possible to leverage off the different skill sets within our teams to assist one another through this journey. For example, many employees initially felt quite isolated, not being accustomed to working from home. We implemented a mentorship programme with the assistance of our sales consultants who are more accustomed to this way of working. They check in on staff members and provide tips and techniques on how to better manage the new working environment.

Parents have felt the pressures of working from home, balancing their own work, school work and household chores. We have started up an initiative where staff members, who are not core at this time, provide a 30-minute reading session to fellow employee's children that may require some downtime. Parents then have this period to use for themselves while their children are read to over Zoom. This is rotated if a parent needs more time.

As a manufacturing company, we have always applied good health & safety practices. The virus has presented the challenge of mask wearing which is not necessarily a South African tradition or JoJo practice for that matter, especially for the entire day. We have weekly meetings with safety teams and maintain strict rules to control access to our plants and also maintain strict hygiene protocols with awareness, procedures and control mechanisms.



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■ ***How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned?***

Naidoo: We are very accustomed to hugging one another when we see each other, thus social distancing is a challenge. We have established little games at the office to ensure people are maintaining social distance protocols by marking the floors for safe and non-safe zones. We have a small penalty of R5 if someone is caught not adhering to the rules. The kitty

that we are building will go into a feeding scheme of that branch's choice. We have also tried to keep some stability in maintaining some form of tradition by still celebrating birthdays and graduations with the entire team, half on site and the other half over Zoom.

■ *How have you had to change the way you operate?*

Naidoo: New health & safety procedures like temperature checking and heightened sanitisation practices which forced us to create an ultra-awareness around our operational environment and how we interact with one another.

The video and teleconferencing capability has been significantly enhanced at JoJo and the new tools such as Zoom and MS Meetings have been a real enabler. It has actually enhanced our collaboration and engagements with larger and broader team meetings, especially when we need to communicate important lockdown decisions.

■ *Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?*

Naidoo: Work from home and the remote meeting capability has been a real eye-opener. There is no doubt that JoJo and the business world will take advantage of these new developments. We predict significantly less local business travel and an increase in people working from home – maybe not every day but certainly when presence in the corporate office is not required.



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■ *Your key message to those in the sector?*

Naidoo: Be sensitive to and aware of the Covid-19 threat. Manage the risk appropriately. Stay positive, look for solutions, lobby constructively and look for ways to get not only our sector, but the entire economy back to work – the sooner the better.

■ *What do you predict the next six months will be like?*

Naidoo: Hopefully, we will get the economy running at reasonable capacity by the end of May. Higher risk sectors will take longer to recover. But recover we must, we have no choice – humankind have to live their lives in the presence of pathogens.

The damage to the entire world and South African economy will be significant, the degree is dependent on how quickly we exit lockdown. Closer to home, although a JoJo tank is more of a necessity than a luxury, the reality is that the disposable income of South African consumers will drop materially and that will influence their ability to buy a tank when needed. In short, very tough for the next two months with a slow improvement thereafter.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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