

The woman behind PayU South Africa



By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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Karen Nadasen is regularly described as one of South Africa's most inspiring women in tech, nominated for IT Personality of the Year 2017, and listed among 100 Most Influential Young South Africans 2017.



Karen Nadasen, CEO of PayU South Africa

Despite SA's negative economic and political factors and PayU SA itself consistently losing market share, under Nadasen's leadership over the last two years, PayU has grown its total e-commerce processing volume by 225%. Revenue has gone up 136%, whilst costs have reduced significantly during her tenure. All this whilst balancing personal life – Nadasen started her tenure as CEO having just come back from maternity leave after four months.

Outside PayU, Nadasen's industry experience, mostly abroad, ranges from FTSE 100 companies, large multi-nationals, to small-scale startups. Industry sectors include technology, petroleum, retail, medical and financial services.

How it all started

Following a computer science degree at the University of Rhodes, her career started off as a Java developer in a small development house in Cape Town many years ago.

She continued her studies at the University of Cape Town in Information Systems and Object-Oriented Programming and Design which led her to assist Shoprite, as a business analyst, with their move to .Net, before being chosen by Microsoft to work on global projects abroad.

Developing a reputation for taking on complex projects requiring rigour and tenacity to deliver, Nadasen decided it was time to move back to beautiful Cape Town where she started at PayU.

The driving force behind PayU SA

As the CEO of PayU South Africa, she drives the strategy of PayU on a local level whilst liaising with EMEA and global counterparts to align on vision, targets and goals. Under her leadership, PayU South Africa significantly increased their market share after being in decline for several years prior.

In the first year alone, card processing doubled, having signed major global players, resulting in a complete transformation of the business.

Other achievements include centralisation of operational functions such as customer support, operational and financial risk functions and integration, to optimise the business further.

This [Women's Month](#), we explore what it's like to be in Nadasen shoes.

🍷 *Could you describe a typical day in your job?*

I am usually up just after 5am. I read/review the news/twitter feeds etc. I then check my internal social feeds and then emails to attend anything urgent that I might have missed overnight or urgent emails that need attending to (PayU is a global company and we also have merchants in other timezones).

I have some time to myself in the morning and then it's the school drop-off, listening to, most probably, 'The Gigglebellies'.

Then it's off to work, which takes me about 45 minutes to an hour. During that time, I try to have at least one work call to make the most of the time.

Monday mornings start with a company "stand-up". Everyone gathers around in our brainstorm room and we talk about key items of focus for the week and any impediments – this is a 15-30 minute "stand-up" which we try to keep as short as possible and ensure everyone is on the same page. As we are still semi-small (in numbers) this is possible and very effective.

Mondays are mostly very busy and mostly dedicated to sales and commercial. At the beginning of every month, we do an in-depth review discussion on process, budgets versus targets, and strategy etc.

Then it's the usual mix of meetings with various departments, reviews, merchant and partner meetings – every day is different.

On Thursday we have an operational meeting where the heads of all areas of business present health and progress of their area.



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Leigh Andrews 28 Aug 2018



▣ **What did you want to be when you grew up?**

Well, I worked towards becoming a doctor from a young age, starting social work from age 13, spending weekends at the hospice from age 15. I'm not sure if it was my passion or subliminal messages from my very traditional Indian parents! When I gave up my position to study medicine at Pretoria University and decided to take up a computer science degree further away at Rhodes, this came as a shock to my parents, but I am sure they are quite happy now.

▣ **How did you get into the tech space?**

Interest in computer science. I had a computer from a young age and wanted to learn more about programming. I've always been very curious and analytical, so I started playing around and, when it was offered at my new school, I took it up.

▣ **What was the best advice anyone ever gave you?**

"Be a nice person and smile" sounds ridiculous, I know, but it's the toughest thing to do when you are trying to progress towards a goal and can be as relentless as I am. I can really push people. Not only in my work life, also in my personal life amongst friends and with my family.

I'm not the person that will sit down and cry with you or hold your hand and tell you it will be fine. My brain immediately kicks into how do we solve this which I've found doesn't always work coming from a woman. In leading a company and leading people, it's important to let them know that you really do care and you are not this robot dishing out orders. It really is a delicate balance.



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▣ **What advice do you have for the future generation of women wanting to get into the tech space?**

Everything involves tech these days, regardless of the field you are in. If you want to be included (in the future, or in the 4th industrial revolution) then get into tech. Most of the time, the only thing really standing in your way will be yourself. You can be your biggest friend or your biggest enemy.

There are many people and environments that will not be the way you want it to be. There are also many that will be. Don't compromise. Know who you are. Focus on the things and the people that will get you where you want to be – the positive. The rest is just noise – speedbumps on the way.

I've only ever had male managers and I've very seldom seen more than one female in a team. Minority has never been something that has phased me much. I've thought if that doesn't matter to me, it won't matter to anyone else. Often I am more right than wrong. Imposing limitations stifle everything about you and holds you back.

▣ **Who or what is your biggest motivation?**

I am very goal focused. I want PayU SA to have the largest market share, to offer the best products and service, and be undeniably the best at this in our field. That's my motivation. I can't stand being anything other than number one. If the market grows at 10%, I want to grow at 100% and will find a way and means to get there.

▣ **Are South African women getting enough of a chance to shine in the tech industry?**

“ The landscape is changing and one does see a lot more about women in the media than a few years back. When I started in IT I was almost always just a party of one with 10-15 men in my team. My computer science class at uni had about five women. Today, my management team at PayU is 80% women and we have a good mix. There still isn't enough women in the tech field so, just by numbers, it would be easier for men to shine because there are a lot more of them that take up the field as their choice of study ”

■ **As a female business leader, what's the least and most exciting aspect of your workday?**

There are many subsystems we connect to and we are very eager to be the best. There are some things that are out of our control and this is something very difficult to deal with and explain to merchants. Having that element of something that is not in your control.

The most exciting thing is having happy merchants with a thriving business and knowing that we are part of that plan and growth. Also seeing smaller businesses grow over time and having a hand in assisting them along the way. It's the contribution we make every day to e-commerce growth.

■ **Women are considered to be natural problem solvers. Why do you think this is perfect for the tech industry?**

In pretty much all my time in the tech industry I have had to come up with solutions, fix problems and address opportunities. This is the nature of the industry. Finding the best way to resolve, improve/enhance, create.



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Nicci Botha 27 Aug 2018



■ **Could you list a few, if any, specific challenges females face in this industry?**

My personal challenge has been, whilst in a meeting, someone from the tech department says, “Karen this is very technical, you don't have to worry about this part?!”. It offended me, especially because the person he was describing the information to was a non-technical male. At a later stage, he had to take instruction from me on very technical process flows, and we are good friends now, but I think this just illustrates the assumption made by a stranger that a woman is incapable of comprehending anything technical. To me, this just reflects ignorance and I think having more women in the tech field would help to change this. Slowly but surely!

■ **What is your advice for overcoming these challenges?**

Focus on the positive and know who you are and be confident about your abilities. Make your contribution, gain respect. Work a little harder if that's what you have to do. Have your say, use your voice.

■ **What trends do you predict in tech in the coming years?**

This really is a very eventful and exciting time in tech. There are already so many things happening.

Whilst the touchpoints of AI are immense, emotional screening is possibly the scariest for me. This is already happening in Chinese schools where they know if you are happy, sad, non-attentive etc. It's a deep level of privacy being taken away. Social scoring has already started and most people are not even aware of it.

I was once told by a driver of a well-known e-taxi app that, if he gets a request from a person with a rating lower than 3.5, he won't pick them up. As I am a frequent user, I'm now forced to work on my rating. If you have ever watched the Black Mirror episode called 'Nosedive', this will give you an idea of how it could impact our lives. I see enormous possibilities here.

Companies becoming relevant and having to reinvent themselves – you never know who will be your biggest competition tomorrow.

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