

The Open Chair revived to create more senior seats for women in the industry

Recently some of the industry's most senior women leaders met in Parktown North and re-launched The Open Chair, a community for young women in the industry to have face time with senior industry leaders through a mentoring programme.

 By [Danette Breitenbach](#) 11 Jun 2024



Source: © ubuy [ubuy](#). The Open Chair is a community for young women in the industry through a mentoring programme

While Open Chair is not a new community, after Covid-19 the community went dormant. The goal of the re-launch is to re-introduce the Open Chair and gain support and sponsorship for the first mentoring session set for the end of next month.

The Open Chair is being led by a committee made up of Suhana Gordhan – freelance creative, Fran Luck chief creative officer, VML, Melina McDonald - executive producer and owner of Darling Films, Ngkabiseni Motau – founding partner and chief creative officer Think Creative, Lorraine Smit - executive producer Darling Films, and Roanna Williams - CCO and co-founder Boundless.

“Ultimately Open Chair aims to keep women in the industry and hold them up and that they take up more seats, but not the plastics seats, the nice seats, the plush ones,” says Williams.

“It is not that there are not enough women in the industry, it's that they are not staying and if they are, they are not getting those senior roles,” explains Gordhan.

Motau agrees. “The industry needs women to stay and right now there is no concerted effort to do so; sometimes it feels like there is an effort for them not to stay.”



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Code of Conduct

At the event, the Open Chair launched a Code of Conduct that addresses issues women experience in the industry but that are not spoken of.

The industry has a reputation in general for not treating people well. “The industry is difficult, it overworks people and then there is bad, as well as inappropriate behaviour,” says Gordhan.

The last two especially prevent women from staying in the industry. “This bad/inappropriate behaviour lead to women eventually not knowing what to do and to doubt themselves and so they simply exit the industry.’

Gordhan quotes the example of a young Black woman copywriter who has chosen not to enter the industry because she is scared of this bad/inappropriate behaviour.

“The Code is there to help women be able to have a voice and know there is a support structure for them, if there is sexism, sexual assault or abuse, then they can fall back on this Code and the Open Chair,” says Williams.



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Mentoring programme

The vision of the Open Chair is a mentorship programme for younger women to help them rise into the chairs of top management.

“The mentoring event is in the form of a speed dating session where mentees spend 15 minutes with each mentor,” explains McDonald, who has been a mentor for the Programme previously.

Community is vital

Luckin says she loves the Open Chair because she believes community is vital in the creative industry.

“We need to be conscious as a collective that we are a community to each other and that this is a safe place for us.”

She also says the industry can be lonely when you first enter it. “There was more mentoring when we were coming up because there was more time. Today agencies are under so much pressure, softer issues suc

as mentoring often fall by the wayside.”



MARKETING

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Opening more chairs

Koo Govender, chief executive officer of Publicis and a pro-woman advocate, says as a senior executive in the industry this is an important initiative.

“My legacy is to open more chairs for women. I want to be part of this initiative, to open more chairs and see more seats taken up by women, in particular, senior positions.

“But I also encourage women to be brave and courageous, to never be afraid of your mistakes, and learn from them. It is important as women we create a sisterhood that encourages and is there for one another.”

Dale Hefer, CEO of the IMC (Integrated Marketing Council) says she attended the launch after what feels like a lifetime in the industry. “There is a subconscious bias against women, and it is good to see an initiative like Open Chair bring this to the fore, on all its levels so we can openly talk about these issues.”



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The art of the possible

Also at the event was Khensani Nobanda, group executive of marketing and corporate affairs, Nedbank. She says Open Chair is aligned with her purpose. “My purpose is how do I give young Black girls the opportunity to see what the art of the possible looks like.

“The art of the possible means I have opportunities, in a safe environment where I can make a real impact

She adds that she says young Black girls because of her own story. “If you think about where I come from I was born in a small country Eswatini, in a small rural village. My story should not be this. I should not be sitting on the exco of any bank, but some people raised their hands and said they could see my potential and they helped me and protected me.”

She says, “I have not had to go through something awful but there are people who have, so I ask myself what role do I play with the privilege that I have in the job that I have to be able to ensure that when we say never again, when I say not for me, it means not for them as well.

“For me, this is close to my heart, close to my purpose and I want to be involved in any way I can.”

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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