

FROM TEA LADY TO CEO, CECILIA NKWALI 'NEVER STOPS LEARNING'

Cecilia Nkwali, Chief Executive Officer at Kuzingca Business Protection Services, is a living testament to what can be achieved when you seize every opportunity, which she has been doing since the early days of her working life as a tea lady at Momentum Investment Management.

Not to be defeated by missing out on a traditional tertiary education, Nkwali started with teaching herself to speak English, and has built her career by learning continuously, including being a 'super user' of courses offered by the ASISA Academy.

Cape Town-based Nkwali, who comes from Ngqamakhwe, in the rural Eastern Cape, says when she was at school, "we were taught to memorise, not to understand". She had wanted to study further after completing her matric in 2005, but financial constraints meant she was not able to. She soon started working and looking for ways to get the education she so desired.

Her introduction to the financial services industry came when she started as a tea lady at Momentum Investment Management in 2009. While employed there, Nkwali had a breakthrough when she was given the opportunity to study for a diploma in office administration through Varsity College, which she did on a part-time basis, in 2012.

Another breakthrough came when she was promoted to the role of receptionist at Momentum in September 2013. "It had always been my dream to improve my status," says the 39-year-old mother of three. In that role, she expanded her expertise beyond managing the main switchboard and reception desk to loading personal claims and supplier invoices onto the payment system and making travel arrangements for colleagues.

In May 2016, Nkwali moved into a bookkeeping position at Aluwani Capital Partners. The next year she was promoted into a client liaison position, on the proviso that she complete two of the courses the ASISA Academy runs in association with the University of Cape Town: the UCT Collective Investment Schemes (CIS) Short Course and the UCT Investment Management Administration & Client Servicing (IMACS) Short Course.



Cecilia Nkwali, Chief Executive Officer at Kuzingca Business Protection Services.

These officially endorsed UCT Short Courses were developed in collaboration with industry professionals to upskill new and existing members of investment administration, retail and compliance teams at investment management firms and CIS Mancos, as well as their service providers.

Having had no investment experience before this, Nkwali struggled with her first course, the UCT IMACS course, which she attended in 2019, and failed the end-of-course assessment. She was not to be put off, though, and registered again in 2020. She passed on her second attempt. Also in 2020, she attended the Investment Sprints run by the ASISA Academy for Aluwani employees, as well as the UCT CIS Short Course, which she passed first time around.

Always hungry for more, in 2022, Nkwali completed the Investment Sprints Combo, a combination of all the ASISA Academy's 17 Investments Sprints. She says these courses have stood her in good stead throughout her career, within financial services and beyond.

In February 2024, after eight years at Aluwani, Nkwali resigned to look for her next career move. Her current employer, Kuzingca Business Protection Services, soon offered her the role of CEO but, she says, she "didn't have the confidence to accept it". Fortunately, they pursued her, and she joined as CEO in July 2024.

Even though she is now working in a different industry (security and investigations), Nkwali says she still draws on the skills she learned during her ASISA Academy courses. "I learned a lot about investment and financial management," she says, explaining that she uses her knowledge to assist the company in managing its investments.

Next up, the dynamo who has not stopped learning plans to complete a bridging course at Unisa that will allow her to start a degree. She also has big plans for her three children, aged 17, 12 and 6, who she is teaching to "be your own boss".

Nkwali's adaptability and determination are a great example to others who might feel defeated by missing out on opportunities earlier in life. Her advice to others is: "Dream big and believe in yourself. Write it down, read it, believe it."