

Lerato Songelwa loves the excitement and dynamics of PR



By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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Lerato Songelwa is the deputy managing director of Hill+Knowlton Strategies South Africa. She is a solution-orientated and versatile professional with 15 years of experience in providing strategic communications and public relations advice and counsel to senior executives in public and private sector organisations.



Lerato Songelwa, deputy managing director at Hill+Knowlton Strategies South Africa

Throughout her career, Songelwa has gained considerable experience in consumer and brand PR having worked with clients such as Procter & Gamble, Gold Reef City, BlackBerry (RIM SA), Nashua Mobile, and Pepsico/Simba, to name a few.

This [Women's Month](#), Songelwa talks about her journey into the PR industry and the gender pay gap in the industry..

■ ***Can you tell us a bit about yourself?***

I am the deputy managing director for Hill+Knowlton Strategies South Africa. I'm known as a highly ambitious and performance-driven professional with 15 years of experience in providing strategic communications and public relations advice and counsel to senior executives in public and private sector organisations.

I enjoy connecting with people and working with them closely to come up with a solution that works for everyone - whether that be the media or clients. I love working in an ever-evolving industry which brings so much excitement and dynamics.

■ ***You're the deputy managing director at Hill+Knowlton Strategies South Africa. Tell us more about your role here***

The main purpose of my role is to direct and control the company's operations and to give strategic guidance and direction to staff members to ensure that the company achieves its mission and objectives.

Part of my job requires hiring, supervising, reviewing and motivating staff. Over and above this, I play an important role in the company's culture, its image and branding by maintaining strong corporate ethics personally, professionally and throughout the organization.

■ ***Can you briefly share your journey of how you entered into the public relations industry?***

After acquiring a Public Relations Management qualification in varsity, I knew without a doubt that my interest was in working with multiple brands and getting a high-level view of several different industries.

With this in mind, I established that working at an agency was going to be my best bet and the first step was to secure an internship opportunity that will help build my skill set to be able to work my way up. But it was not until I landed my first agency job that I really began to explore and understand the ins and outs of the PR world.

“ I became fascinated with the people, the work, the culture and how agencies operate - and how they differentiate themselves from their competitors. ”

■ ***Have you faced any challenges in the industry? If so, how did you overcome them?***

The recent Covid-19 pandemic brings new challenges for many businesses, including ours. The growth and success of our business is largely dependent on the growth and success of our clients and there is no doubt that many companies are cutting down on budgets, thereby leading to significantly reduced financing of public relations activities.

So much is uncertain now and companies are reluctant to spend the little revenue they have on improving their media profile. Ironically, now is the time for them to raise their profile by adopting new channels of communication.

At H+K, we believe in continually evolving our service offering, which is why we say that we are 'always in beta'. With this in mind, we have been learning and developing new products and offerings that will be effective in helping our clients achieve their business objectives.

■ ***The PR industry is made up of a high percentage of women. In your opinion, why do you think this is?***

I personally don't think there's a science to this more than just the fact that the PR profession is more attractive to women – it feels like a natural fit for us because of the skills required in the field.

In fact, historically PR was an industry that is inclusive of women at every level - except for the very top. But over the years the industry has achieved progress on gender equality that empowers and moves more women into leadership positions.

■ ***Can you comment on the gender pay gap in PR and Communications?***

Gender equality in the workplace remains a work in progress for most industries and unfortunately, the PR industry is no stranger to this status quo. Much as we have made improvements in certain areas, it is clear that there are still significant strides to be made where the gender pay gap is concerned.

As an action, we need to encourage the use of industry salary benchmark data and recruiter data as a great starting point for companies, enabling them to see where they sit in terms of competitive pay. But one's salary should definitely not be

based on their gender – it's an oppressive mindset more than anything.

■ ***What more would you like to see happen in this industry?***

We need to open more opportunities for Black women leadership in the industry where the metric is not for purposes of BEE but because they have worked hard and are deserving of such prospects.

■ ***What advice do you have to share with the future generation of females entering the PR industry?***

Be prepared to put in the work for the achievement of your career goals. Assess what you aspire to achieve in your career, and devote yourself to this path 110%.

■ ***As we celebrate Women's Month in South Africa. Do you have any words of encouragement for all the women out there?***

"Every woman's success should be an inspiration to another. We're strongest when we cheer each other on." – Serena Williams

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