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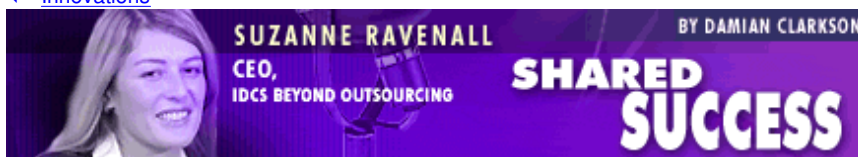
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Outsourcing company IDCS Beyond Outsourcing CEO Suzanne Ravenall, one of five finalists for the Businesswoman of the Year Award, believes women face more challenges in balancing their personal and professional lives than men. Sponsored by Nedbank, the annual award recognises excellence among SA's businesswomen.

Ravenall says her nomination came as somewhat of a surprise. "I was working at my desk when I received the phone call notifying me that I had been nominated, and it was an awesome feeling. Just to be mentioned in the company of the other finalists, who are all amazing women, is really something."

However, Ravenall hastens to add that she sees her nomination more as an achievement for her company, rather than a personal accolade. "It's a real honour for the company. That's the way I look at it. I don't think that any CEO can sit back and say 'these are my achievements'. The achievements are collectively achieved by the organisation itself.

"Yes, it has been bloody hard work, yes it has been my butt on the line, but it is a group of people that have been delivering these initiatives. It is definitely not about me - it's about the company."

Overcoming the odds

"As a woman in the marketplace, I think you have to work four times harder."

- ▶ Suzanne Ravenall, CEO, IDCS Beyond Outsourcing

Having started IDCS Beyond Outsourcing in 1997, Ravenall says small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in SA face an uphill battle from the word go, although this is now starting to change for the better.

"It is difficult to build a business in any environment. For starters, getting a loan is a very real problem. The banks see you as a huge risk, so how are you supposed to get your business off the ground?"

"There are a lot more business initiatives around today, but SMEs don't always know about the facilities that are available to them.

"Then you also need to compete with tier-one companies. It's really about how do you build the business, and ensure that everything you do is in line with international best practices. And I don't think all companies give enough focus to this."

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Ravenall started her company with an existing client, something she believes gave her an advantage. "That is something that I would recommend to any business if possible: start with that one really strong client.

"Another essential thing for any person to start a business is to get a vision in place: be able to sit in the future and look backwards, rather than sitting in the present and looking forwards. Get that solid vision together and work towards it vigorously."

On the topic of women in the work environment, Ravenall believes there is still a need for significant change, but recognises that things are moving in the right direction. "There have been massive changes in the last 12 years.

"There are so many more powerful and competent women in the market. Just look at the amount of women in Parliament now. SA is really trying to do a lot. But there is still a lot of work to be done. Women are still being paid less, and are overlooked for certain powerful positions.

"As a woman in the marketplace, I think you have to work four times harder."

Time management

"In the beginning, I think you have to dedicate your life to the business, but later you must find a balance."

- ▶ Suzanne Ravenall, CEO, IDCS Beyond Outsourcing

However, Ravenall acknowledges that overcoming challenges, and finding a balance between work and home, also plays a key role in any business venture. "I think that adversity hits all of us everyday. If you see life with the view that everything just is what it is, then you won't see adversity. You will always just meet every challenge and take it for what it's worth: neither good nor bad.

"We need to be able to overcome these problems, and never ever give in. These are the trademarks that I think have brought me here.

"We must create time and achieve balance, that is another key aspect. I am probably a bit selfish in some regards. There are some things I am just not willing to compromise on. I think some people are guilty of losing the plot a little.

"In the beginning, I think you have to dedicate your life to the business, but later you must find a balance. Everyone will have a lot more time if you plan things better. Finding time is always a struggle, so I try and anal-retentively plan my time."

The winner of the Businesswoman of the Year award will be announced on 25 August.

The other finalists are:

- * Ingrid Diesel, resort GM and CEO, Fancourt Hotel & Country Club Estate
- * Sindi Mabaso, CFO, Transnet
- * Futhi Mtoba, deputy chairman, Deloitte
- * Ann Nurock, CEO, Grey Worldwide South Africa



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