

# The Business Life/Talking heads



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## Buying the farm lock, stock and cattle

The Future Farmers Foundation is helping to equip young black South Africans for careers in commercial farming, writes Penny Haw

**A**T JUST 25 years old, Mzwandile Duma manages a KwaZulu-Natal midlands dairy that milks about 1,000 cows twice a day and oversees a team of workers that includes people more than twice his age with such competence and confidence that it is hard to believe he didn't always want to be a farmer. In fact, in awe of a lawyer he met while at primary school, Duma long fantasised about practising law.

"My father, however, had other plans for me," he says. "He is a self-taught farmer with a herd of beef cattle near Underberg (in the foothills of the southern Drakensberg) and was determined I should get an education in agriculture and become a farmer."

Accordingly, his father enrolled him at Zakhe Agricultural College, which is an independent agricultural boarding school not far from Pietermaritzburg for black scholars in grades eight to 12. Based on the conviction that if the government's plan to have 30% of our agricultural land in the hands of black farmers by 2015 is to be sustainable, SA needs to develop black farmers equipped to operate commercial operations and not subsistence farms, the school was established by Richard Dladla in 2002 to provide youngsters with practical farming skills. In addition to following a standard academic high school curriculum, the college operates as a fully fledged farm, which is run by the scholars.

Duma wasn't always convinced it was the right place for him: "I found it difficult at first. It was a small boys' school (the initial intake at Zakhe, when Duma arrived, was 25; today there are up to 150 students) and I'd come from a large, co-ed primary school. Being away from home was an adjustment, and the early mornings and late afternoons in the dairy or elsewhere on the farm, with normal lessons taking place in between, were tiring."

It didn't take long, though, to settle down and, after about 18 months at the college, Duma realised that a future as a farmer could be an interesting and lucrative prospect.

"It got easier and more enjoyable as I took on more responsibilities and became more engaged in activities on the farm and really applied myself to learning agriculture."

Duma's commitment to farming and his natural skills as a leader didn't go unnoticed — he had become a top student and a prefect. After he matriculated in 2006, he was taken on as one of the first participants in the Future



MILKING IT: Mzwandile Duma at home among the cows in Ixopo, where he manages a farm that milks about 1,000 cows a day. Picture: PENNY HAW

Farmers Foundation programme, which had just been established by Curry's Post dairy farmer Judy Stuart.

Stuart, who had worked with Dladla and Zakhe when she'd lent heifers to scholars (including Duma) to show at the annual youth show for livestock in Pietermaritzburg, established the Future Farmers Foundation to provide youngsters keen on farming, but without the resources for further study, with the opportunity of a then informal earn-as-you-learn apprenticeship — including a year abroad — to equip them with the know-how and skills to run large commercial operations effectively.

"Apprenticeships have been proven to be effective training mechanisms over many centuries," says Stuart, who was a finalist in last year's Shoprite-Checkers Women of the Year competition. "It's not necessary for everyone to go to university or some other tertiary college. The most valuable experience I had as an aspiring dairy farmer was the opportunity to work overseas. The experience changed me, and taught me not

only how to farm but also the kind of work ethic and dedication necessary to be a successful farmer. I wanted to offer that kind of experience to young farmers."

**On farms in the US — fewer people do more work during 16-hour days than you ever see in this country**

Duma's Future Farmers apprenticeship included a year on a dairy farm in the Mooi River area, followed by another on North Florida Holsteins, in Florida in the US. The US operation is home to 10,000 Holsteins, including 4,500 milking cows. It employs more than 100 people.

"Not only was the farm unlike anything I had ever imagined, but I'd never been out of SA or on a plane until I left for Florida," says Duma. "It was an incredible experience and I learnt so much in just a year. Not only did I see how hard

people work on farms in the US — fewer people do more work during 16-hour days than you ever see in this country — but I also experienced working with people from all over the world, including Mexicans, Chinese and Italians. I even learnt some Spanish. I also saw that in the US, many highly educated people are farmhands. It made me realise being highly educated does not guarantee success: you have to work really hard."

Duma's initial role at North Florida Holsteins involved taking care of the calves and before long he was made assistant supervisor of the department.

Sponsors Saville Foundation and the Underberg Farmers Association pay the cost for the overseas travel of Future Farmers. This, however, is repaid by the budding farmers during their year abroad, which allows another student to be sent overseas the next year.

"The programme is not a handout," says Stuart. "Neither is it my intention to patronise. It's important that they're committed to the programme and to its future. The young men who are out there now are

pathfinders. They have to prove to the industry how good they are. I believe that Future Farmers will play a huge role in the future of farming in SA."

Having completed his internship in Florida, Duma travelled briefly to New York to

## The next lady for a shave, please

**A** DEAR Editor letter in Business Day (Time for a messiah? February 1) reminded the member (of the Upper Jukskei Flyfishing Collective) of the time the chairman shaved off his beard.

It was a nadir in the annals of the collective. There was gnashing of teeth and so on. The fishing almost stopped. At the flick of a disposable razor, the collective was decapitated and in place of its head sprouted a fallow grub, a smooth, animated pustule from which erupted a miasma of Aqua Velva.

The member adjusted, but he noticed the blight had spread to the broader collective. Without prophecy, the mesmerism of Rasputin the hirsute, the caprices of Jan Smuts and Thabo Mbeki, the personal hygiene of the Patriarch of Trier have been replaced by uxoriously smooth faces.

What happened? Have the women finally taken over? Does androgyny get you more sex? Will door-to-door sales of vacuum cleaners rise with the increase of alopecia of the male countenance?

Yes. What happened was that the idea of the messianic leader, the charismatic, heroic and manly champion, has been quietly scraped off and the result — perfumed, powder-puffed and dished up as the new face of power. What we now have is management, not leadership, in boardrooms and the Union Buildings and gone is the Sisyphian scuffle for the summit. Is that Mamphele Ramphele piling in?

If it is all very confusing it is because we don't know what we want. But one thing is certain, if we want leaders, they must have beards. And their cultivators must be leonine, loud and pugilistic psychopaths with enough testosterone to addle their brains. Women need not



NEELS BLOM  
On the water

apply (unless you are a bearded lady. (We can work with that.)

The member has this on good authority. Take the late Eugene TerreBlanche, whose ideas were antediluvian, yet he commanded a following of sorts, some of whom were women. Now imagine him without his beard and paunch and put him in a pair of navy slacks and a pink-striped button-down shirt worn over his pants. Then take away his bakkie and put him in a soft-top Fiat 500. The member's feelings exactly.

Historically, the beard was so important to leadership that, in 1852, the German poet Gottfried Kinkel reported that Karl Marx had "refrained for the time being from all political activity and withdrew into the seclusion of his home in order to grow a beard, without which no prophet can succeed". And in 1840, the pogonophilic Friedrich Engels toasted the hirsute: "Philistines shirk the burden of bristle/By shaving their faces as clean as a whistle./We are not Philistines, so we/Can let our mustachios flourish free."

Is that what we want? The member thinks he might grow to prefer the reborn if unattractive chairman of the collective, who has turned into an efficient, budget-conscious, honest (we can see his face) servant who doesn't pick fights and is acutely aware that any lady can foam up and shave and kick him out of office.

## End of the line for the old landline

**O**N LINKEDIN is a picture of David Cameron in shirtsleeves at his desk in 10 Downing Street making a call to President Barack Obama to congratulate him on his second term. It is part of a series of images of important people at work — there is Richard Branson loafing around in swimming trunks on a tropical beach, and there is self-help guru Deepak Chopra, cross-legged and eyes closed, meditating in front of what appears to be a large stone egg.

The latter two images are slightly odd, but not nearly as odd as the first one. There is something arrestingly anachronistic about the sight of the prime minister at work, though at first I couldn't figure out quite what it was. It is not the panelled walls or the antique side table. It isn't his cufflinks or the formal navy tie. All are traditional and staid, but not exactly out of place in 2013.

And then I got it: it is the coiled length of grey, plastic-covered wire running from the thing at his ear to an object on his desk. The prime minister is doing what almost no-one does any more: talk on a landline. Until about a decade ago, the office phone was the symbol of white-collar work. It was the most important thing on any desk: every photograph of every man in power would invariably show him speaking urgently into one. But now these clumping



LUCY KELLAWAY  
On Work

phones sit largely silent. Only the prime minister has an excuse for continuing to use this outdated piece of kit. If he wants to have a top-secret conversation with Obama, an underground copper cable is a better bet than a microwave. Anyone within range and with a couple of hundred dollars of spyware would be able to hear him saying into a mobile: "Congratulations, Mr President."

For the rest of us, the landline has little remaining purpose. Last week, I visited the BBC's main newsroom, where dozens of people were hard at work. The number of people I spotted on the office phone: just one. My own large, grey Cisco telephone sits quietly on my desk and when it occasionally decides to ring I don't usually answer. The idea of picking up when I don't know who it is at the other end fills me with mild dread. A red light indicates I have messages, but I haven't listened to them for at least a year.

Just now I decided to see

**The idea of picking up when I don't know who it is at the other end fills me with mild dread**

what I've been missing. It took a while, as I couldn't remember my password, and then I found that more than 100 messages were waiting patiently to be heard — so many that the mailbox had declared itself full and was refusing to record any more.

The first voicemail went like this: "Hi Lucy, this is Marcia. Just following up on an e-mail I sent...". I pressed delete. The second: "Hello Lucy. Just a quick call — I'm xx from yy, and we just wanted to update our contact details...".

And on it went. All either useless or duplicates of information I got by e-mail or text.

By not answering the phone for a year I have lost nothing, and gained much in terms of efficiency and control. It has allowed me to talk only to the people I want to talk to, at a time that suits me.

It sounds rather good. And yet I can't help feeling sad for all the conversations that didn't happen, and sad, too, for the switchboard that didn't facilitate them. The Financial Times employs a third of the people to

direct phone traffic it did a decade ago. No-one asks now to be put through to a colleague in the same building, as they e-mail instead. And external calls are dwindling: the average number received on our main number between 6pm and 10pm — barely 50.

A similar thing has happened at home, where the landline is even quieter. This has been good as you don't waste time answering each other's calls. No longer do jilted boyfriends wanting to talk to Sylvia have to get past Sylvia's mother; they now cut out the middleman. Boyfriends may prefer the new arrangement, but it's worse for the family, as no-one knows what anyone else is up to.

With the company phone, the same applies. The death of the landline may be better for us individually, but it is worse for the bonds between us.

The saddest thing is what the decline has done to the atmosphere in offices.

There are no noisy phones giving their galvanising rings, creating buzz and urgency. Sadder still, I no longer hear my colleagues arguing with their spouses and builders: most dirty linen is now washed away from desks.

Once upon a time I found these fractious calls annoying. But now the door into the private lives of my workmates has closed, I wish I could open it again. © 2012 The Financial Times Limited

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