Why we make heavy weather of saving, how to have it fixed

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Many people struggle to save not because they do not know what to do, but because they were never taught. PHOTO/ FILE

WHY PEOPLE STRUGGLE TO SAVE

- Most people spend first and only try to save what is left at the end of the month.
- Expenses consume income before savings can happen.
- Many people rely on willpower and discipline alone, which often fails over time.
- People set financial goals based on other people's lifestyles, especially on social media.
- Expectations often exceed income, creating financial pressure.
- Many buy things they do not actually need.
- Lack of budgeting and financial structure makes spending hard to control.

Saving: most people are bad at it. So how do we fix it? And how do you save efficiently without relying on willpower? Across the world, the pattern is familiar.

Salary comes in, money goes out. What is left, if anything, is what we call savings. But in reality, that "leftover" rarely exists. It is spent along the way or quickly absorbed at the end of the month.

We tell ourselves the same stories: "I'll save what remains," or "This month had too many expenses, I'll try again next month." But month after month, nothing changes.

If saving is not the problem, what is?

Perhaps how we approach it. Saving today is not just about discipline. It is about design. And that begins with understanding that there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to money. People have different incomes, responsibilities, beliefs, and pressures. What works for one person may not work for another, and that is fine.

Financial education is not about giving one answer, but principles you can apply to your own life. Because once your mindset about money changes, your behaviour begins to change. And that is where control starts. You gain control by changing three things: your mindset, your habits, and your relationship with money. That does not happen overnight. It happens one habit at a time.

It is also important to separate advice from guidance.

"Most people want quick investment tips: where to put money, what to buy, what will make them rich. But real financial advisors start with you: your goals, your income, your behaviour, and build from there," says Pumla Nabachwa, a certified financial literacy educator.

This is not a shortcut to wealth. It is a way to think better about money.

"Save as soon as you earn. Save first, spend after. Don't save after you have spent," Nabachwa notes.

It sounds simple. But it flips how most people live. Most people spend first and try to save what is left. That approach almost always fails. If saving depends on what remains, it will always come last, and often not at all.

"There is nothing like 'too little to save.' Anyone who earns money can save. The only person who cannot save is someone who has no money at all. Even small amounts matter. The real question is not how much you earn, it is how you manage it," Nabachwa notes.

That is where many people go wrong. The problem is not always low income, but the expectations that outpace it.

What does saving really mean?

To understand this, you have to start with goals. Every person should have three layers of financial goals. Short-term goals: things you need now, like food, transport, and bills. Medium-term goals: things you want to achieve in the next one to three years. And long-term goals, like retirement.

A financial goal is simply anything in your life that needs money. And this is where discipline begins. Too often, people set goals based on what they see around them, especially on social media.

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Someone earning, for instance, Shs500,000 is trying to match the lifestyle of someone earning five times that amount. That gap between income and expectation is where financial stress starts.

As Nabachwa puts it in practical terms: "Don't set goals in other people's money. Look at what you have and build from there."

Once you define your goals, the next question becomes unavoidable: Can your income support them? If it cannot, then there are only two options: reduce spending or increase income. In many cases, both. Cutting down is not easy. But it does not mean cutting what you need. It means cutting what you do not need.

That starts with a simple pause before spending. "Before you buy anything, ask yourself: do I need it? And if I don't need it, can I really afford it?"

To answer that properly, you need structure. And that is where budgeting comes in. A common starting point is simple: 50 percent for needs, 30 percent for wants, 20 percent for savings, investment, and debt.

It is not perfect. But it gives direction. And over time, as income grows, those numbers should shift towards more saving and investing. Because saving alone is not enough.

Where should one put their savings?

Saving today is not just about putting money aside. It is about where you put it: "in places where it can grow and not lose value." Money that sits idle loses value over time as prices rise. That is why saving must evolve into low-risk investing: options like treasury bills, bonds, or other structured products that preserve and grow value. But even before all that, the hardest part remains behavioural.

Many people struggle not because they do not know what to do, but because they were never taught. We were not raised in a culture of talking about money. No one told us to save, to plan, or to invest. So now we are trying to learn what we were never taught. That is why saving feels unnatural. It is not because it is difficult, but because it was never built into a habit. And habits, once formed, shape everything.

The shift, then, is to save first, not last. Not when there is money left. Not when things are easier. But immediately, when money comes in. Because once that habit is in place, everything else begins to follow. And that is where the real journey starts.

The real solution is having a system that works. Knowing what you're doing, why you're doing it, and having a structure that makes discipline automatic.

So how do we fix it?

Automation. Up to this point, the problem has been clear. People know they should save. They even intend to. But intention breaks somewhere between salary day and month-end.

So the question becomes: how do you remove that gap between intention and action? In simple terms, you pay yourself first. The moment your salary or income comes in, a fixed amount is automatically saved or invested, just like a gym subscription or a mobile money deduction. What remains is what you are free to spend.

That changes the sequence. Instead of saving what is left after spending, you spend what is left after saving. And that alone solves a big part of the problem. Because now, you can spend your last shilling at the end of the month without guilt. The saving has already happened.

The reality, though, is that most people do not fail because they lack discipline. They fail because the system they rely on requires too much discipline. This behavioural gap has started to shape how financial institutions themselves think about saving.

Take the case of Xeno Technologies. The firm initially built a platform to help people plan and invest. But once users signed up and set goals, a familiar pattern emerged. People started strong, then gradually fell off.

As its founder, Aeko Ongodia, explains: "As we rolled this out, we realised there were many people, not a few, who start off with high intent but somewhere along the way lose momentum. They make the first deposit, the second deposit, but the third comes much later than expected. The fourth and fifth don't come at all."

The reasons were not surprising. "They say, 'Oh, I forgot,' or 'Call me tomorrow' or 'I'm in a meeting right now.' So they actually want to do it, but they forget."

In other words, the problem was not knowledge. It was behaviour. And behaviour, as we have seen, is shaped by systems.

"That is when we realised that if there were a way to automate deposits, it would solve a major problem," Ongodia says.

But existing options were not designed for that. Card payments are too expensive for saving, with transaction costs of about four percent. Standing orders, the most common tool, are manual, rigid, and depend on the user to set up and maintain them.

As Ongodia puts it: "Technically, it works. Behaviourally, it doesn't."

What are the stumbling blocks?

If saving depends on you remembering every month, you will fail at some point. Not because you are careless, but because life gets in the way. Most people today rely on what are called push payments. You have to actively send the money from your bank or mobile wallet. Every time. That is effort. That is friction.

What is emerging instead are pull systems: where you give permission once, and the system automatically moves the money for you.

In this case, once that system was introduced, starting with mobile money, something interesting happened.

"We stopped hearing 'I forgot' or 'call me next week.' Once permission is given, the system simply pulls the money, weekly, monthly, or daily," Ongodia says.

Nothing about the people changed. The system did. And behaviour followed.

Of course, even that shift is not just about technology. It runs into regulation, infrastructure, and how financial systems are designed. Banks, for example, initially required physical signatures to authorise such transactions, slowing adoption.

This all tells us that saving works best when it is automatic, not optional. The difference is that in one system, you try to save; in the other, saving just happens. And over time, that is what separates people who plan from people who actually build money.

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