

Empower Her

Helen Basuuta Nangonzi once planned a quiet academic path, but a chance encounter during fieldwork opened the door to banking. Today, after more than a decade across leading financial institutions and regional roles, she reflects on a career shaped by learning on the job, mentorship, resilience, and the discipline of simply committing to the work, writes **Gloria Irankunda**.

When Helen Basuuta Nangonzi speaks about her journey, you quickly notice her openness, curiosity, and a mind that is always learning, yet grounded in quiet discipline.

It explains how she stepped into the world of work immediately after university, and into a career she had never imagined for herself.

"I always thought I would be a lecturer. The plan was to do well in school, get a first-class degree, and get retained as an assistant lecturer," she recalls.

She excelled academically, graduating among the top of her class with a degree in Social Sciences from Makerere University. But life, as she has since learnt, rarely follows a neat script.

While doing fieldwork for her dissertation at an organisation supporting women living with HIV, she met a professional from Standard Chartered Bank. They had an interaction, the kind that could easily be forgotten. He handed her his card and told her to call when she finished school.

She did, and that one call set off a chain of events that would shape her career. She was guided to go through the standard application process, applying for a direct sales role. Though it was far removed from anything she had studied, her background in sociology had taught her how to understand people.

"I had no background in banking, but social sciences allow you to work almost anywhere," she says.

Stepping into the unknown

When Nangonzi joined Standard Chartered Bank, the recruitment process included psychometric tests followed by several interviews. In one of them, the then consumer banking director reviewed her CV, which at the time only reflected academic qualifications, and told her she had done well at school but was wasting his time with the role she had applied for.

"During the interview, he barely asked me any questions and spent much of the time on phone calls, and I left feeling I had not made it," she recalls.

However, Nangonzi was called back and taken through about seven interviews with different people, without clarity on the exact role.

"In the end, I was offered a position as a product development officer, a mid-

How Nangonzi shaped a career she never planned

dle management role, despite having no experience," she explains.

It was, she reflects, a chance taken on potential rather than experience.

"This meant I entered management without really knowing what to do. You sit in rooms and feel like you do not belong," she says.

This compelled her to work harder, learn faster, ask questions and listen more than is usual at entry level.

Progressive career

Her 14-year journey at Standard Chartered Bank was defined by constant movement, with new roles every two to three years, spanning product management, serving as executive assistant to the CEO, leading marketing, working in customer experience and human resources, and taking on regional responsibilities in Nairobi, Kenya.

Nangonzi shares that behind the promotions and new roles was support from people around her.

"Some mentors stepped in without being asked, some leaders pushed me forward while colleagues trusted me with more responsibility before I felt ready, and I was humble enough to accept it," she explains.

That humility, she believes, is part of what sustains growth. The same mindset also shaped her into what she calls a "generalist", someone who understands the business beyond a single function, strengthening her leadership.

"When I sit in a boardroom now, I do not see isolated departments. I see how everything connects," she shares.

Away from home

Her move to Nairobi in 2017 as the head of corporate affairs, brand and marketing for Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania marked another shift, as she was younger than most people in the room. She acknowledges that on some days, self-doubt crept in.

"You sit there and think, I am not supposed to be here. Everyone else looks more accomplished," she says.

This feeling, often described as imposter syndrome, is something many professionals quietly carry. Nangonzi shares that it never fully disappears, but she has learnt to manage it.

"Preparation became my tool, so I worked longer hours, studied more, identified my gaps, and closed them deliberately through profession-

BACKGROUND

Education career

• 2000s: Graduates from Makerere University with a degree in Social Sciences.

• Early career: Joins Standard Chartered Bank in a product development role.

• 2010s: Rotates across roles: marketing, HR, customer experience, executive office.

• 2017: Moves to Nairobi as head of corporate affairs (regional role).

• Post-2020: Joins Absa Bank as marketing and customer experience director.

Skills that shaped her career

• People understanding (from social sciences background).

• Communication and listening.

• Adaptability across roles.

• Strategic thinking.

• Leadership and mentorship.

al courses and continuous learning," she explains.

Joining Absa

After more than a decade with Standard Chartered Bank, life shifted again. Nangonzi became a mother, and with that came a decision to return home.

Shortly after, she joined Absa Bank as marketing and customer experience director, at a time when the institution was rebranding from Barclays to Absa and rebuilding its identity in the market.

Opportunity

"This meant an opportunity to contribute to building something from the ground up. Watching the brand take shape and grow into a name many Ugandans now recognise has been one of the most fulfilling parts of my journey," Nangonzi explains.

In her role, Nangonzi listens to customers, often at their most frustrated moment, with complaints that have escalated and problems that have not been solved.

"My job is to listen and, in those moments, the work is not about systems or policies, but restoring trust. I also listen to my team, their ideas, challenges, and plans, and my role is to support them to do what they do best," she says.

Nangonzi points to the bank's growth, from its improved market position to a stronger brand presence. But when asked about her greatest achievement, she talks about people.

"I have seen my team grow, and that is what I am most proud of: the promo-

Justification.

I have seen my team grow, and that is what I am most proud of: the promotions, the recognition, the personal development, and even the improved incomes that change

lives at home. For me, success is measured in these quieter, human outcomes,"

– Helen Basuuta Nangonzi

tions, the recognition, the personal development, and even the improved incomes that change lives at home. For me, success is measured in these quieter, human outcomes," she shares.

Personal reputation

Along the way, Nangonzi has learnt the importance of character.

"You have to be known for something. Consistency, hard work, and integrity are the kinds of traits that travel ahead of you and are spoken in rooms you are not in," she explains.

Many opportunities, she notes, come from what others say about you when your name comes up. And when those opportunities come, she believes in paying it forward.

"There is no achievement in being the only one if you are not helping others get there," she mentions.

That belief shapes how she leads and how she defines success. For her, success is not a title; it is doing every role well, whether at work or at home.

"If I can stand and say I helped someone grow, that is enough," she says.

As for legacy, she states: "I want to be remembered as a good colleague, present mother and supportive wife."

Career and family

Nangonzi reflects on timing and its different realities for career women. In the early stages of her career, work often took priority as promotions came quickly, alongside the consideration that starting a family could influence the pace of progression.

"You tell yourself, I have just been promoted, I cannot disrupt my trajectory," she says.

But Nangonzi recommends making room for family if one wants it. At home, Nangonzi credits her husband and her wider support system for making it possible to manage both roles.

At work, she is intentional with her time. She reports to work early in the morning and leaves a bit early to be present at home.

When it comes to legacy, her aspirations are simple: to be remembered as a good colleague, a present mother and a supportive wife.

Helen Basuuta Nangonzi.
PHOTO/GLORIA IRANKUNDA

