

“Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” These iconic words from former U.S. President John F. Kennedy deeply resonated with Alice Nkulikiyinka. After years of studying and working across Europe, the U.S, and Asia, the call to contribute to her homeland grew stronger.

After completing two Master’s degrees—one in Computer Science from Worms University and an additional Master’s degree in Information Management from the University of Konstanz in Germany, where she was the only Black woman in her program—Nkulikiyinka secured a prestigious position in Switzerland. Her career progressed rapidly from there.

“As software engineers, we developed IT solutions for banks. “I was able to successfully bridge the gap between technical teams and client needs,” she recalls of her first job.

This unique skill—translating complex technical language into business solutions—earned her fast promotions and opportunities to work globally. For nearly 15 years, she worked in the banking sector holding managerial roles in top Swiss firms like Telekurs (SIX Group) and Avaloq, operating in Europe, the U.S., and Asia.

But her journey wasn’t without challenges. Breaking through as a Black woman in the male-dominated field of software engineering in Europe—at a time when racism was rampant—demanded resilience and determination.



After more than two decades abroad, Nkulikiyinka felt a deep longing for home. But more than nostalgia, it was the question of what she could do for Rwanda, her motherland that was emerging from the devastating 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

The answer to her yearning started to take shape when she met Jürg Opprecht, a Swiss entrepreneur and philanthropist who founded the Business Professionals Network (BPN), a non-profit focused on private sector development in emerging economies. She learned that BPN was helping entrepreneurs in developing countries by providing training, coaching, access to finance, and related support to dynamic small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Inspired, Nkulikiyinka saw a role for BPN in Rwanda’s development. But convincing the organization to take interest in the country wasn’t easy. Previous attempts to

work in Africa had left BPN hesitant.

Still, she persisted—seizing every opportunity to advocate for Rwanda, even enlisting the support of the late Rwandan Ambassador to Switzerland Ms Sebudandi. Eventually, BPN agreed to visit Rwanda, on the condition that she accompany them.



The benchmarking trip impressed BPN officials and made the decision to establish operations in Rwanda.

“It was a dream come true—to bring such an impactful organization to support the development of my country’s private sector,” she says.

When the opportunity came to lead BPN Rwanda, she always thought of providing support at a distance but her spouse encouraged her to be the one to take the role. Yet, she was at a turning point in her career, thriving professionally with a recent promotion and a high-paying job.

“This was one of the key decisions of my life—choosing between the comfort of a flourishing international career and the opportunity to come back home and contribute meaningfully,” she explains.

After thoughtful discussions with her family, they decided to visit Rwanda and assess the possibilities.

Eventually, they made the bold decision to move to Africa and commit to building a new chapter in Rwanda.

A mother of two, Nkulikiyinka reflects that it was her husband’s unwavering support—himself a university professor deeply passionate about social causes—that gave her the courage to take the leap.



BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS NETWORK: EMPOWERING RWANDA’S ENTREPRENEURS

In 2008 and 2010, BPN officials had visited Rwanda and were impressed by the country’s stability and potential. Soon after, Rwanda became one of five countries

where BPN operates—alongside Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Nicaragua. Alice Nkulikiyinka officially became Country Director of BPN Rwanda when it launched in October 2011. With her global experience and strong belief in Rwanda's future, she was well-positioned to drive its mission forward.

Since then, BPN has become a vital force in Rwanda's private sector, aiming to select and support at least 60 promising businesses each year. Their focus is on entrepreneurs who are committed to growth—those ready to invest in their businesses and themselves.

“Our approach is to equip entrepreneurs with business principles that support both personal and professional growth,” says Nkulikiyinka.

At first, BPN supported small enterprises with basic training and access to finance. However, many entrepreneurs focused solely on funding and neglected the responsibility of repayment or strategic growth. This led BPN to revise its approach.

“We realized that supporting businesses with a dependency mindset wasn't sustainable. Our focus shifted to high-potential entrepreneurs who were serious about growing their companies,” she explains. Today, BPN supports entrepreneurs and their teams in developing stronger products, services, and market leadership. The organization's success is built on four key pillars: Coaching, the Business Academy, Access to Finance, and support through the Business Owners' Association.

Over a 2-year period, selected entrepreneurs are guided through a process of both qualitative and quantitative growth, receiving executive coaching from experienced Swiss and Rwandan professionals.

“More than anything, we coach entrepreneurs to avoid common mistakes that hinder growth. Identifying and correcting these missteps is crucial,” Nkulikiyinka adds.

Her knowledge and experience has been tapped by different organisations for consultation and advisory roles. Today, Nkulikiyinka is a board member of Rwanda Development Board (RDB) as well as on the board of I&M Bank Rwanda.

IMPACT AND RECOGNITION

In May 2022, during BPN Rwanda's 10th anniversary celebrations, President Paul

Kagame met with the organization's officials. His message was clear: "The results speak for themselves"—a strong endorsement of BPN's impact over the past decade walking the talk.



Despite initial challenges, BPN Rwanda has played a pivotal role in transforming the entrepreneurial landscape. Jobs have been created, inspired a shift in mindset, and supported the tangible growth of local companies. This has led to scaling-up operations by opening a new branch in Northern Rwanda.

Recently, the organisation signed a significant partnership agreement with the Mastercard Foundation, growing its budget fivefold to expand its impact and support even more entrepreneurs.

Nkulikiyinka's story is one of courage, conviction, and unwavering belief in the power of giving back. And through BPN, she continues to ignite that same spirit in Rwanda's next generation of entrepreneurs.