THE LAUNCHWORKS

Opportunity *Report 2026*

Where structural change in South Africa is creating accessible opportunities for new small businesses

SECONDARY-DATA ANALYSIS

Economic data | Commercial evidence | Opportunity translation

Launchworks

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The most accessible opportunities often sit one step beyond the obvious growth market

> *South Africa does not lack business ideas. The harder problem is identifying where structural change is creating demand that a small entrant can realistically capture.*

Launchworks analysed economic, demographic and commercial evidence across the South African economy to identify where changing conditions are creating new requirements for services, specialist capability and asset support. The analysis does not attempt to predict which businesses will succeed. It identifies opportunity conditions that are sufficiently supported by third-party evidence to warrant investigation.

The central finding is a repeatable pattern: attractive small-business opportunities often emerge around growth that somebody else has already funded. Retailers invest in e-commerce. Households and companies invest in solar. Businesses adopt software and AI. Property owners accumulate increasingly complex assets. Families manage a growing older population. Each shift creates a second layer of demand.

FINDING	WHAT IT MEANS FOR AN ENTREPRENEUR
Borrowed Growth	Look for demand created by investment, behaviour or structural change already taking place elsewhere.
Second-order opportunity	Ask what a growing market now needs around it: operations, maintenance, compliance, data, coordination or specialist support.
The Specificity Effect	A broad capability becomes more valuable when attached to a narrow, newly important problem.
Minimum Viable Market	For a small business, the critical question is often how many customers are required, not how large the national market is.

Eight opportunity territories survive the current evidence test. They range from proven specialist markets such as e-commerce financial operations and solar lifecycle services to emerging need spaces such as ageing-in-place services and ageing-parent coordination. Their evidence states differ, and the report treats that difference explicitly.

Source: Launchworks analysis of Stats SA, SARS, World Wide Worx, Mastercard, SAPVIA, NERSA, South African Government sources and published commercial-market evidence.

METHOD

Secondary data can produce proprietary insight when the analysis connects evidence that normally sits apart

The report separates three levels of evidence. This is essential because a sourced statistic, a Launchworks calculation and an opportunity hypothesis are not the same thing.

EVIDENCE LEVEL	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
FACT	A sourced third-party observation.	Online retail is forecast at R159bn in 2026.
LAUNCHWORKS ANALYSIS	A calculation or conclusion derived by combining observations.	The R29bn added in 2026 is close to the size of the entire 2020 online market.
OPPORTUNITY HYPOTHESIS	An interpretation of what the evidence could mean for a new business.	Growing channel complexity may support specialist e-commerce financial operations.

Every opportunity is taken through the same five-step logic:

- **Structural change:** what is measurably changing?
- **Consequence:** what new complexity, installed asset or service need follows?
- **Paying customer:** who has a reason to spend money solving it?
- **Commercial evidence:** are providers, prices, substitutes or adjacent services visible?
- **Accessibility:** can an individual or small team plausibly enter, broadly below R500,000 of start-up capital?

The method is deliberately conservative. Growth alone is not treated as an opportunity. A social need is not treated as a market unless a plausible paying customer exists. The absence of competitors is not automatically treated as whitespace because it can equally indicate weak willingness to pay.

> *The objective is not to identify 'the best businesses to start'. It is to identify where the evidence suggests favourable conditions are forming.*

SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The business challenge is economic substance, not simply business formation

4.14m	1.47m	21.7%
COMPANIES ON THE CIT REGISTER, MAR 2025	COMPANIES EXPECTED TO SUBMIT CIT RETURNS	ASSESSED COMPANIES WITH POSITIVE TAXABLE INCOME, 2023

South Africa has a very large registered-company base, but registration is a weak proxy for economic activity. SARS reported 4.14 million companies on the corporate income tax register at March 2025, while about 1.47 million were expected to submit returns. Among companies assessed for the 2023 tax year, 21.7% reported positive taxable income, 54.0% reported zero taxable income and 24.3% reported an assessed loss.

The implication for opportunity analysis is important. Ease of entry is not enough. A useful opportunity must have a credible demand mechanism, a customer with a reason to pay, and economics that can support a meaningful enterprise.

> *Launchworks should therefore optimise for viable demand, not for the number of ideas that can be started cheaply.*

Source: SARS and National Treasury, 2025 Tax Statistics.

OPPORTUNITY LANDSCAPE

Five mechanisms explain how structural change becomes accessible small-business demand

MECHANISM	STRUCTURAL EXAMPLES	TYPICAL DOWNSTREAM OPPORTUNITY
1. Scale creates complexity	E-commerce, SME digitalisation	Operations, reconciliation, fulfilment, data, customer support
2. Investment creates an installed base	Solar, property technology	Maintenance, monitoring, inspection, lifecycle services
3. Technology unbundles capability	AI, digital tools	Implementation, specialist services, fractional expertise
4. Demography changes needs	Ageing population	Home adaptation, coordination, practical support
5. Geography changes the answer	Property, tourism, infrastructure	Localised services where regional demand diverges from the national picture

These mechanisms matter because they move the search away from sectors and towards consequences. The entrepreneur does not necessarily need to enter the market receiving the investment. They can serve the complexity, assets or unmet requirements created around it.

> *The strongest recurring pattern is 'Borrowed Growth': demand that is partly created by somebody else's investment or behaviour.*

SIGNAL 01 | E-COMMERCE

Online retail is becoming an operating system for commerce, creating demand beyond the storefront

R159bn
FORECAST SA ONLINE RETAIL TURNOVER, 2026

22.5%
FORECAST 2026 GROWTH

R29bn
ADDITIONAL TURNOVER IN 2026

South African online retail has moved well beyond its pandemic-era acceleration. World Wide Worx's 2026 research forecasts online turnover of R159 billion, up approximately 22.5% from around R130 billion in 2025. The additional R29 billion expected in a single year is close to the size of the entire South African online retail market in 2020.

The implication is not simply that more retailers should open online stores. A larger and more mature channel creates more orders, SKUs, payments, returns, advertising, fulfilment decisions, customer contacts and data. The operating burden rises with the channel.

WHAT GROWS	WHAT BECOMES MORE DIFFICULT	SERVICE LAYER CREATED
Orders and channels	Reconciliation and profitability visibility	E-commerce financial operations
SKUs and marketplaces	Listing quality and structured product data	Catalogue/data management
Paid marketplace activity	Advertising efficiency and conversion	Marketplace advertising / conversion optimisation
Customer interactions	Response speed and service consistency	Outsourced e-commerce customer operations

> *The opportunity is shifting from 'help me get online' to 'help me operate online better'.*

Source: World Wide Worx / Mastercard / Peach Payments / Ask Afrika, Online Retail in South Africa 2026; earlier Online Retail SA editions.

SIGNAL 02 | SME DIGITALISATION AND AI

As digital tools become infrastructure, implementation and domain expertise become more valuable than the tools themselves

80%
SURVEYED SA SMES ACCEPTING ONLINE PAYMENTS

55%
CITING SIMPLER PAYMENTS AS A GROWTH OPPORTUNITY

51%
CITING SECURE PAYMENT PROCESSING

Mastercard's 2026 SME research indicates that digital tools are becoming part of normal SME operations rather than optional add-ons. The same research found growing interest in AI and machine learning. The opportunity created by this shift is less about inventing another software product and more about helping businesses connect, implement and optimise the tools they already have.

AI sharpens this point. Generic propositions such as 'AI consulting for SMEs' are easy to copy and increasingly exposed to price compression. The stronger proposition combines AI capability with knowledge of a specific operating environment.

GENERIC CAPABILITY	SPECIFIC APPLICATION	WHY SPECIFICITY HELPS
AI implementation	AI workflow implementation for logistics firms	Provider understands quoting, allocation, POD, exceptions and invoicing.
Accounting	E-commerce financial operations	Provider understands marketplace fees, returns, inventory and channel economics.
Marketing	Marketplace advertising	Provider understands platform-specific search, retail media and seller economics.

> *The Specificity Effect: do not necessarily change your skill. Change where you apply it.*

Source: Mastercard SME Confidence Index, South Africa, June 2026; World Wide Worx, SA Generative AI Roadmap 2025.

SIGNAL 03 | DISTRIBUTED ENERGY

More than 10GW of installed solar has created a lifecycle economy after the installation boom

10.12GW
INSTALLED SOLAR PV CAPACITY

+19%
YEAR-ON-YEAR INSTALLED CAPACITY GROWTH

R33.39bn
ESTIMATED INVESTMENT IN 147 FACILITIES REGISTERED IN Q3 2025/26

South Africa's solar story is changing. Residential installation demand has normalised from the most intense load-shedding period, but the installed asset base continues to grow. SAPVIA reported more than 10.12GW of installed PV capacity, while NERSA registered 147 generation facilities representing 1,960MW and an estimated R33.39 billion of investment in Q3 2025/26 alone.

Once an asset exists, it creates a different set of needs. Panels need monitoring and cleaning; batteries and inverters age; faults need diagnosis; systems require optimisation, compliance and eventually replacement. This is a recurring service economy around capital already spent.

FIRST-WAVE MARKET	SECOND-WAVE REQUIREMENT	ACCESSIBLE BUSINESS LAYER
System installation	Performance over time	Monitoring and health checks
Battery/inverter purchase	Ageing and replacement	Lifecycle planning and diagnostics
Property electrification	Compliance and ownership transfer	Inspection and specialist due diligence
Commercial solar investment	Asset productivity	O&M and asset management

> *Installed-base opportunities are attractive because the entrepreneur does not need to finance the underlying asset or create the original demand.*

Source: SAPVIA Annual Report 2025/26 and 10GW milestone release; NERSA generation-facility registrations, Q3 2025/26.

SIGNAL 04 | PROPERTY

The property opportunity is increasingly about the existing stock rather than a simple new-construction story

-3.1%
2025 RESIDENTIAL PLANS

-11.6%
2025 NON-RESIDENTIAL PLANS

+5.8%
2025 ADDITIONS AND ALTERATIONS

The 2025 building-plan data does not support a simple construction-boom thesis. The value of residential and non-residential plans weakened, while additions and alterations grew. This shifts the opportunity lens towards the much larger stock of buildings already standing.

Existing property creates recurring requirements: inspection, maintenance, energy and water upgrades, security, renovation, contractor coordination and increasingly the management of embedded technology such as solar systems.

> *For a small entrant, servicing existing assets may offer a broader and more recurring market than participating in new construction.*

Source: Stats SA P5041.3, Selected building statistics of the private sector, 2025.

SIGNAL 05 | DEMOGRAPHY

A growing older population creates a service burden around independent living, not only a healthcare need

6.79m
SOUTH AFRICANS AGED 60+ IN 2026

10.7%
SHARE OF THE POPULATION AGED 60+

6.6m
PEOPLE AGED 60+ IN 2025, VS 3.6M IN 2002

Ageing is slower than a technology cycle but more durable. Stats SA estimates 6.79 million South Africans aged 60 or older in 2026, representing 10.7% of the population. The opportunity is not automatically institutional care. Many needs arise around remaining independent in an existing home.

This creates two related markets. The first is ageing-in-place property support: home-safety assessment, access changes, lighting, bathrooms, security, technology and maintenance. The second is practical coordination for adult children who cannot always be physically present.

The regulatory boundary matters. Home-based caregiving is regulated. A non-medical coordination proposition would need to remain clearly outside personal and medical care, with appropriate referrals where regulated services are required.

> *The paying customer may often be the adult child, while the beneficiary is the parent. That changes how the market should be defined.*

Source: Stats SA Mid-year Population Estimates 2026; Stats SA Healthy Ageing in South Africa 2024; South African Government caregiver registration requirements.

SIGNAL 06 | SKILLS AND BUSINESS SERVICES

Weak employment growth makes externally sellable expertise strategically important, but the outsourcing thesis must remain cautious

-121k
FORMAL NON-AGRICULTURAL JOBS, MAR 2025 TO MAR 2026

+7k
BUSINESS-SERVICES JOBS IN Q1 2026

33.6%
OFFICIAL UNEMPLOYMENT RATE, Q2 2026

The labour market is weak, but some business-service capabilities continue to show demand. This does not prove that firms are replacing employees with freelancers or outsourced providers. The evidence supports a narrower question: which capabilities traditionally bought through employment can also be packaged and sold as defined external outcomes?

Finance, data and BI, marketing, process automation, HR and recruitment, compliance, procurement and project management are all candidates. The commercial test is whether the capability can be separated from the organisation, bought as an outcome, delivered across several clients and repeated at sufficient value.

> *Industry experience can be start-up capital when it is converted from a job description into a defined customer outcome.*

Source: Stats SA Quarterly Employment Statistics, March 2026; Stats SA QLFS Q2 2026.

LAUNCHWORKS FRAMEWORK

Borrowed Growth reframes business ideation from 'which market should I enter?' to 'whose growth can I serve?'

A new business becomes more attractive when part of its demand is created by investment, behaviour or structural change already taking place elsewhere. The entrepreneur is not required to create the entire market from zero.

STRUCTURAL INVESTMENT/CHANGE	PRIMARY BENEFICIARY	SECOND-ORDER NEED	POTENTIAL SMALL-BUSINESS LAYER
R159bn online retail market	Retailers and marketplaces	Operate complex digital channels	Finance, catalogue, advertising, customer operations
>10GW installed solar	Asset owners	Keep assets productive and compliant	Monitoring, diagnostics, maintenance, inspection
Growing older population	Older households and families	Maintain independence and coordinate support	Home adaptation and family coordination
AI/software adoption	SMEs	Apply tools to real workflows	Vertical implementation and optimisation

> *The service layer around growth can be more accessible than the growth market itself because somebody else has already funded the expensive part.*

OPPORTUNITY UNIVERSE

Eight territories survive the evidence screen, but they represent different evidence states

OPPORTUNITY TERRITORY	EVIDENCE STATE	CORE CUSTOMER	PRIMARY MECHANISM
E-commerce financial operations	Proven + specialisation	Established online sellers	Scale creates complexity
Marketplace/e-commerce operations	Proven	Brands and marketplace sellers	Scale creates complexity
Vertical AI implementation	Emerging application	SMEs in a defined industry	Technology unbundles capability
Solar lifecycle services	Proven + specialisation	Solar asset owners	Installed base
Solar/property inspection	Emerging intersection	Property buyers/owners	Installed base + property
Existing-property management	Proven + niche	Remote owners, landlords, older owners	Existing asset stock
Ageing-in-place property services	Emerging	Older households/adult children	Demography + property
Ageing-parent coordination	Potential category	Adult children	Demography + coordination

Evidence state is not a recommendation or ranking. 'Proven' means there is visible commercial behaviour validating willingness to pay. 'Emerging' means the structural demand signal is credible but the category is less established. 'Potential category' carries the greatest uncertainty.

E-commerce financial operations

Turn marketplace complexity into management information.

Established marketplace and multi-channel sellers increasingly need visibility across platform fees, returns, advertising, inventory, payment gateways, VAT and cash flow. Low-cost software can automate transaction processing, but interpretation and management information remain higher-value.

Business model — Monthly retainer covering reconciliation, true SKU/channel profitability, cash-flow and management reporting.

Launchworks assessment — A strong specialist B2B territory. The defensible proposition sits above generic bookkeeping.

Demand: strong | Capital: low | Recurring revenue: high | Borrowed demand: high

Marketplace and e-commerce operations

Operate the channel for businesses that already have products and demand.

Existing agencies validate willingness to pay for listing, catalogue, advertising, pricing, fulfilment and customer-service support. The broad market is increasingly competitive, so specialisation by platform, category or operational problem matters.

Business model — Retainer-based channel management or a narrow specialist module.

Launchworks assessment — A validated market rather than whitespace. Attractive only with meaningful specialisation.

Demand: strong | Competition: high | Recurring revenue: high | Evidence: proven

Vertical AI implementation

Sell industry knowledge enhanced by AI, not generic AI consulting.

Generic AI implementation is rapidly commoditising. Domain expertise creates differentiation because the provider understands the workflows, exceptions, language and economics of a particular sector.

Business model — Paid diagnostic, implementation project and ongoing optimisation/support retainer.

Launchworks assessment — Most compelling for experienced professionals who can combine sector knowledge with practical AI implementation.

Capital: very low | Skill barrier: high | Generic competition: high | Vertical gap: emerging

Solar lifecycle services

Protect and optimise energy assets customers have already bought.

A >10GW installed base creates years of monitoring, fault, battery, inverter, compliance and maintenance needs. Commodity panel cleaning is easy to copy; technical credibility and recurring asset management are more defensible.

Business model — Health checks, remote monitoring, preventative maintenance subscriptions and regulated work through qualified practitioners.

Launchworks assessment — A textbook installed-base opportunity, particularly above the commodity end of the market.

Demand: strong | Installed base: large | Recurring revenue: high | Regulation: material

Solar/property inspection

Add energy-asset due diligence to the property transaction.

Solar-equipped homes contain high-value equipment with condition, compliance and remaining-life questions. This creates an additional due-diligence layer as solar becomes part of the property stock.

Business model — Paid pre-purchase inspection or a specialist module within an existing home/electrical inspection business.

Launchworks assessment — Potentially too narrow as a standalone company, but compelling as an adjacent specialist service.

Demand: emerging | Capital: medium | Skill barrier: high | Intersection: strong

Existing-property management

Move owners from reactive repair to managed maintenance.

Subscription maintenance and property-oversight services already exist, validating the model. The broad category is crowded, but specific customers such as remote owners, landlords, older homeowners and solar-equipped homes have clearer needs.

Business model — Monthly subscription for inspection, contractor coordination and planned maintenance.

Launchworks assessment — The opportunity strengthens when the customer segment is defined before the service menu.

Demand: proven | Competition: medium | Recurring revenue: high | Niche required

Ageing-in-place property services

Help older South Africans remain safely in the homes they already know.

A growing older population creates requirements for home-safety assessment, bathroom and access changes, lighting, security, technology and maintenance coordination.

Business model — Paid home assessment, project coordination and a preferred contractor network.

Launchworks assessment — A structurally supported emerging market, stronger as assessment and coordination than generic handyman work.

Structural demand: high | Commercial validation: emerging | Capital: low | Competition: fragmented

Ageing-parent coordination

Act as a trusted local proxy when adult children cannot always be there.

The proposition sits between independent living and regulated caregiving: practical check-ins, contractor coordination, technology help, transport arrangements, admin support and family reporting.

Business model — Monthly membership/concierge with a clearly non-medical scope and referral partners.

Launchworks assessment — The most distinctive whitespace in the scan, but also the territory requiring the greatest caution because willingness to pay is not yet strongly validated.

Need: plausible | Category: emerging | Capital: low | Validation: limited

COMMERCIAL LENS

For a small business, the useful market-size question is often 'how many customers do I need?'

Large national market values can be misleading. A specialist B2B service may require only a handful of retained clients to become meaningful, while a low-ticket household service may require hundreds of customers in a constrained local catchment.

ILLUSTRATIVE BUSINESS MODEL	ASSUMED AVERAGE REVENUE	CUSTOMERS/JOBS TO R1M ANNUAL REVENUE
E-commerce financial operations	R5,000 / month	17 retained clients
Vertical AI retainer	R8,500 / month	10 retained clients*
Ageing-parent concierge	R2,500 / month	34 families
Solar maintenance	R400 / month	209 households
Property inspection	R4,000 / job	250 jobs / year
Solar-property inspection	R3,500 / job	286 jobs / year

*Pure retainer scenario. A project-plus-retainer model would require fewer retained clients.

These are illustrative unit-economics scenarios, not observed market prices or revenue forecasts. Their purpose is to translate an opportunity into a practical acquisition question.

> *Minimum Viable Market = required customers ÷ realistically addressable customer pool.*

This measure can be more useful than total addressable market for an owner-operated business. It forces the entrepreneur to ask whether the necessary customer count is realistic within the geography, channel and sales model they can actually reach.

ASSESSMENT MODEL

Evidence profiles are more credible than a league table with false precision

DIMENSION	QUESTION
Demand evidence	Is the need observable in third-party or commercial evidence?
Structural momentum	Is the underlying driver durable rather than a short-term spike?
Accessibility	Can an individual or small team plausibly enter?
Customer clarity	Who pays, and what triggers the purchase?
Revenue quality	Can revenue repeat or recur at sufficient value?
Competitive space	Does competition validate willingness to pay without fully commoditising the service?
Borrowed demand	How much demand is already being created elsewhere in the economy?

IMPLICATIONS

Five principles emerge for people looking for a business idea in South Africa

1. Follow the spend, then look one step downstream.

The obvious growth market attracts capital and competition. The service requirements created around that growth can be more accessible.

2. Prefer problems created by assets or systems already in place.

Installed bases such as solar can generate recurring maintenance, monitoring and inspection demand for years.

3. Specialise before you diversify.

A broad capability becomes more defensible when it solves a narrow problem linked to a structural shift.

4. Separate technology from the customer problem.

AI, software and payments are tools. The business is the operational outcome they enable.

5. Think in customers, not billions.

A viable specialist service may need 17 clients, not 1% of a national market.

> *The strongest signal is not a sector. It is a way of looking for demand.*

CONCLUSION

Economic change creates opportunities around the winners, not only inside the markets that are growing

South Africa's structural shifts are creating new complexity, new installed assets, new service requirements and new coordination burdens. Those effects are commercially important because they can be served by businesses that are smaller, more specialised and less capital-intensive than the industries creating the change.

The report's central proposition is therefore not that entrepreneurs should chase whichever sector is growing fastest. It is that they should examine what the growth now makes necessary.

Whose growth can your business borrow?

> *That question turns macroeconomic change into a practical search for customers, problems and service layers that a small entrant can realistically address.*

APPENDIX

Core sources and research notes

- Statistics South Africa. Mid-year Population Estimates 2026; Quarterly Labour Force Survey Q2 2026; Quarterly Employment Statistics March 2026; Selected Building Statistics of the Private Sector 2025 and 2026; Healthy Ageing in South Africa 2024.
- South African Revenue Service & National Treasury. 2025 Tax Statistics.
- World Wide Worx / Mastercard / Peach Payments / Ask Afrika. Online Retail in South Africa 2026 and earlier annual editions.
- Mastercard. SME Confidence Index, South Africa, June 2026.
- World Wide Worx. South African Generative AI Roadmap 2025.
- SAPVIA. Annual Report 2025/26 and 10GW solar PV milestone material.
- NERSA. Registration of generation facilities, Q3 2025/26.
- South African Government / Department of Social Development. Older Persons Act-related services and caregiver registration requirements.
- Commercial-market evidence. Published South African service offerings and pricing were used to validate that customers buy certain services and to understand category structure. They were not used to estimate total market size.

Method note

All opportunity conclusions are Launchworks analysis of third-party evidence. They are opportunity hypotheses worth investigating, not guarantees of demand, profitability or commercial success. Where survey data is cited, findings apply to the surveyed sample and should not automatically be treated as representative of all South African SMEs or households.