

Who is SmartStart Early Learning?

SmartStart is a *successful national network* of NGOs and partners that is realising quality, affordable early learning for all children aged three to five. We aim to reach 1 million children annually by 2030 — focused on the two-thirds of children from the 40% of households receiving least income. We are achieving this by *scaling a network of and building a platform for providers, achieving specific ecosystem transformations with governments and partners, and promoting early learning as a priority societal cause.*

SmartStart has extended quality access to, and demonstrated on-track early learning outcomes for, excluded children; established a trusted network serving 80,000+ children weekly (~10,000 practitioners supported by 14 partner organisations); constructed key parts of a platform for population-scale; and supported development of government's first national early learning strategy. This yields momentum among social investors as SmartStart scales in SA — and beyond.

Job title	Senior Learning & Experiments Manager
Nature of time commitment	Full-time
Modality & Location	Johannesburg (Hybrid)
Nature of contract	Indefinite
Duration & Timeframe	ASAP
Job grade (Paterson framework)	D-Lower
Remuneration	R 780k – R 1.02m pa negotiable depending on profile plus eligibility for 5-15% performance bonus determined annually
Manager	Head of Sense- Making, Data & Insights
Number of vacancies	One (1)
Application procedure	https://zurl.to/mpZh?source=CareerSite

Child Safeguarding Policy

Any and all applicants must adhere with the SmartStart Child Safeguarding Policy which has been developed in line with the International Standards for Child Safeguarding which provide a benchmark for organisations working with children.

In terms of this Policy, SmartStart will not employ anyone whose name is on the National Child Protection Register or who has been convicted of a criminal offence involving a child.

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Senior Learning & Experiments Manager

Job Specification

Purpose

The Senior Learning and Experiments Manager will play a critical role in strengthening SmartStart's capacity for learning, adaptive management, and programme improvement. This role will lead the design and implementation of developmental evaluations and rapid experiments to enhance programme effectiveness and responsiveness. The Senior Learning and Experiments Manager will synthesise insights to support leadership and staff in sense-making and decision-making and foster a culture of continuous learning and innovation across SmartStart and its network.

The Senior Learning and Experiments Manager is responsible for designing and facilitating reflective practices, learning loops, and adaptive management processes to drive programme improvements and strategic coherence. This role will enable SmartStart to become a more adaptive, data-informed organisation, co-creating the conditions for network-wide rapid learning and collective intelligence. The role is similar to a traditional Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) role, but places a distinct emphasis on designing and executing rapid/nimble experiments, developmental evaluations, and iterative learning loops.

Location in Hub Organisation

- Line Manager: **Head of Sense-Making, Data and Insights**
- Job grade (Paterson framework): **D Lower**
- Manages: N/A





Key Responsibilities

1. Designing and Leading Rapid Experiments & Nimble Evaluations

- Together with the SDI team head, drive the design and execution of developmental evaluations and nimble experiments to improve effectiveness and responsiveness.
- Develop and implement fit-for-purpose monitoring and evaluation frameworks that align with SmartStart's strategic goals and learning priorities.
- Establish and refine key performance indicators (KPIs) and feedback mechanisms to track programme progress and impact.
- Support teams to design and implement rapid-cycle learning and experimentation processes to test and adapt programme models.
- Ensure that evaluation findings and experimental insights are synthesised into actionable recommendations.

2. Strengthening Monitoring and Performance Measurement

- Together with the SDI team head, drive the development and management of monitoring frameworks and tools to track programme performance and network-wide impact.
- Enhance the use of data dashboards and performance reports to support real-time decision-making.
- Enable data collection, analysis, and interpretation across SmartStart's network.
- Build capacity across teams to engage with performance data, identify gaps, and take corrective action.
- Facilitate alignment between MERL frameworks and funder expectations, reporting needs, and organisational strategy.

3. Supporting Systems Thinking and Strategic Coherence

- Synthesise data and insights to support leadership in sense-making, decision-making, and action-taking.
- Enable teams to apply systems thinking approaches to understand complex programme dynamics and improve strategic alignment.
- Promote coherence and alignment between monitoring, evaluation, learning, and strategy, seeking to ensure that SmartStarts theory of change is embedded into how decisions are made.

4. Enhancing Data-Driven Decision-Making

- Collaborate with the Data, Sense-Making, and Insights Team to strengthen data governance, integrity, and accessibility.
- Support the development of data feedback loops that enable real-time learning and adaptation.
- Build team and partner capacity to engage with and interpret data for programme improvement and strategic decision-making.
- Ensure that MERL data is integrated into organisational decision-making and strategy development.

5. Supporting Network-Wide Adaptive Learning and Innovation:

- Co-create the conditions for network-wide rapid learning, iterative experimentation, and collective intelligence.
- Drive the use of insights from MERL activities to inform programme design, scaling decisions, and innovation.
- Develop feedback mechanisms to ensure that insights from experiments and evaluations are used to improve programme models.
- Foster a culture of disciplined innovation and structured experimentation across the network.
- Develop and implement mechanisms for capturing and sharing lessons learned across the organisation and network.





- Facilitate learning exchanges and peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing to build collective intelligence.

Cross-Cutting Responsibilities

- **Collaboration:** Work closely with the Innovation & Learning Portfolio, Programme Teams, and Development & Partnerships to align MERL activities with strategic priorities.
- **Capacity Building:** Develop and deliver training on MERL methodologies, adaptive management, and data interpretation.
- **Ethics and Integrity:** Ensure that MERL activities adhere to data governance, ethical standards, and regulatory requirements.
- **Change Management:** Support teams and partners in adopting MERL tools, frameworks, and practices.

Key Indicators of Success

TBD over time, broad areas would include -

- **Improved Evaluation and Learning:** Increased use of evaluation findings and rapid experiment results to inform decision-making, strategy and successful adoption of programme innovations.
- **Enhanced Organisational Learning:** Greater engagement in reflective practices, learning loops, and adaptive management.
- **Strategic Decision-Making:** Higher integration of data-driven insights into programme adaptation and strategic planning.
- **Stronger Network Learning:** Increased peer-to-peer learning, knowledge-sharing, and collective problem-solving across the network.

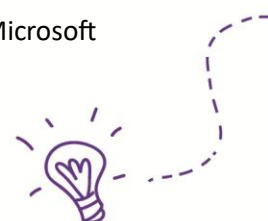
Key Person Specifications

Qualifications and Experience

- Minimum master's degree or equivalent in Monitoring & Evaluation, Social Sciences, Public Policy, or a related field.
- At least 5 years of experience in MERL, developmental evaluation, and/or adaptive management in complex organisational contexts.
- Experience conducting experiments/studies/evaluations (e.g. developmental evaluations, rapid-cycle experiments etc.)
- Excellent English writing skills, with a proven ability to synthesise complex data into actionable insights for strategic decision-making.
- Experience working with social impact organisations, programmes, or networks.
- Advantageous: Fluency in one or more African languages.

Specific Knowledge and Skills

- Expertise in developmental evaluation, adaptive management, and rapid-cycle learning.
- Strong analytical and synthesis skills, with the ability to generate insights from complex data.
- Knowledge of monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) frameworks and tools.
- Capacity to design and facilitate reflective practices, learning loops, and adaptive strategies.
- Familiarity with systems thinking and strategic coherence approaches.
- Strong stakeholder engagement and capacity-building skills.
- Advantageous: Proficiency with data analysis and visualisation tools (e.g., Power BI) and Microsoft Dynamics 365 and/or similar CRM software.





General Knowledge & Understanding and/or Skills & Abilities

Behaving & Learning

- Behaving trustworthily: being reliable, accepting, open, congruent (i.e.. integrity)
- Learning curiously, incl. learning how by doing differently
- Clear curiosity (asking questions, questioning assumptions, doing differently, trying things)
- Track record of learning
- Openness to & appetite for feedback
- **Familiarity with and curiosity about**
 - Societal scale
 - Systems doing-and-thinking
 - Design thinking & iterative designing
 - Driving to succeed
 - Commitment to SmartStart's purpose and social justice internationally
 - Advantageous: experience in, or familiarity with, early learning, ECD, education, public health, etc.

Relating & Adapting

- Building trusting relationships
- Playing role(s)-across-contexts adaptively
- Creating the conditions for and facilitating people's thinking diversely and doing good work together
- Co-building & communicating coherence unendingly
- Reprioritising continually
- Developing Self
- Acknowledging one's own relative strengths (& weaknesses)
- Seeing & navigating rhetoric vs reality
- Navigating ambiguity
- Coping with stress caused by the above





Developing Systems Doing-and-Thinking

Seeing, synthesising, sense-making and influencing

- the big picture / story, incl. emergent phenomena
- the relations between wholes & parts
- patterns across space and over time
- feedback loops (circular causation)
- boundaries and working across them appropriately

Sophisticated problem-solving, incl. distinguishing complicated from complex problems & contexts

- scan & synthesise disparate sources of information
- if complicated: sense-analyse-respond
- if complex: probe-sense-respond

