

Making a difference in her community

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If you care about your community, working in the public sector can give you a deep sense of satisfaction. This was the experience for Annalene Marais.



{image}Many government jobs are focused on improving the lives of people who need help. Taking on a role in the public sector means you will get to use your talents to shape the future of your city and country. When public services are done right, they can make a real impact on individuals and communities.

Public sector roles are well suited for people like Annalene Marais CA(SA), who are motivated to make positive changes to benefit those around them.

“My dream was to study music or languages, but my father insisted I’d be better off earning a professional qualification,” Marais recalls. “We made a deal: I agreed to study accounting and he committed to paying for my music lessons throughout my studies.”

She did not know it then, but this combination of critical and creative thinking skills opened a whole new world for her. “I realised I could make an impact because accounting is not just about the numbers, but it’s how you interpret them to tell a story. That is when things get interesting, and you can start making decisions based on what you deduce.”

Originally from Upington, Marais studied at the University of the Free State and completed her articles at PwC in Bloemfontein, passing her board exams in 2008. She met her husband, and then her strong desire to give back to the community in which she grew up saw them both return to Kimberley the Northern Cape.

“After my first audit as a secondee to the office of the Auditor General, I realised that I had a passion for local government. I felt a sense of urgency to assist in addressing key issues identified during the audit. But then I became frustrated that the issues we were reporting annually were never resolved. I realised that the problem was process implementation – without that, you can never achieve a clean audit.”

She grabbed the opportunity to become a financial manager at Sol Plaatje Local Municipality (SPLM) in 2015. There, she had the ability to introduce processes and strategies that resulted in a turnaround in the audit outcomes for the municipality.

She was appointed project manager for the implementation mSCOA (municipal Standard Chart of Accounts), for which the municipality was a pilot site. This exciting project introduced a new way of thinking and reporting for municipalities countrywide. Marais led a multi-disciplinary team to successful mSCOA implementation in July 2015.

“My article on the project, ‘Sol Plaatje municipality’s mSCOA journey’, was published in the magazine of the Chartered Institute of Government Finance Audit and Risk Officers (CIGFARO) the following year,” she says. “Feedback from National Treasury was consistently positive, and SPLM was seen as one of the leading municipalities in mSCOA implementation.”

The introduction of mSCOA brought an increased emphasis on integrated reporting. Marais applied the principles of the mSCOA project to assist the municipality to address misalignment between its budget, annual financial statements, and other strategic documents. This has supported seamless alignment across the accountability cycle of the municipality.

“Being appointed as the acting Integrated Development Planning manager during this time enabled me to change the processes informing performance information reporting; this resulted in a turnaround of the municipality’s audit outcomes for reporting on predetermined objectives. More importantly, it gave me an opportunity to influence the strategic focus of the municipality and to bring together the financial reporting and strategic planning processes to support the growth and development of the city.”

During Marais’ tenure, the municipality received an award for most improved audit outcomes in the 2014/15 financial year, and for the next two financial years the municipality received an unqualified opinion in the areas of financial statements and predetermined objectives, with a significant reduction in compliance findings.

Marais represented the municipality on the Public Sector Accounting Forum (PSAF) and received a nomination to serve on the Accounting Standards Board. She is a member of the SAICA Central Region Council and Chairperson of the SAICA Kimberley District committee. She is also a board member of CIGFARO and Chairperson of their Audit Committee. In 2016, she received the top student award from the University of the Witwatersrand for the Advanced Municipal Financial and Supply Chain Management Programme (MFMP).

Her next step was to move into higher education, despite much scepticism from those around her, taking on the role of Chief Financial Officer at Sol Plaatje University. “I am in exactly the right place – where I can live out my passion for people and my passion for making a difference.”

Marais says that waking up in the morning knowing that she is making a positive impact on her workplace and in her community keeps her going. “I love the fact that I work in a dynamic, ever-changing, and ever-challenging environment. The complex nature of higher education lends itself to many opportunities and I am happy to take advantage of that. It requires a daily skilful balance of communication, interpersonal and technical skills.”

She firmly believes that more CAs(SA) must be encouraged to work in the public sector. “This is simply because government needs us, and when government works well, people’s lives change for the better.”

Public sector challenges are well known to most South Africans. Key problem areas that have emerged include service delivery difficulties, poor management of finances, high levels of unemployment, nepotism, and corruption. Marais says the challenges that the public sector faces can only be dealt with through hard work, commitment, strong leadership, and discipline.

“These are the attributes associated with the CA(SA) profession. And therefore, I believe that we can play an important role in changing the situation if more of us become involved and make our voices heard. It requires you to be tough and not to bow down, but the rewards become visible in your community. When government works properly, the people who need it most will benefit.”

There is the real opportunity, she says, to improve financial management and value for money in the delivery of services to organisations which play a crucial role in our society.

Ask her what motivates her, and she says: “We live in an era where the usual rules no longer apply – an era that needs creativity and innovation, but that is unpredictable at its very core. Very often, though, it is exactly these elements of unpredictability and imperfection that inspire exceptional achievement.”

Marais says she loves people, and she loves her profession. “I am a ‘glass half-full’ type of person who chooses to see the positive side of any situation. I am also quite stubborn; once I set my mind to something, it is exceedingly difficult to convince me otherwise. I do believe that this has helped me to find solutions to many seemingly unresolvable problems I have come across in my life.”

Her vision? “To positively impact the lives of people in my community through the work that I do – to leave a legacy that will live far beyond my career at the municipality and university.”

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