

From the Cape Flats to heading up sub-Saharan work for a US multinational

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How Thuthuka changed Sharné Damons' life.



‘From the start of my journey until now, I have acquired some key skills, including the technical skills taught at university, and practical skills through my articles and subsequent work experience. As an auditor, I have learnt from many companies and training materials the controls that need to be in place to ensure a strong control environment. I have also had the opportunity to lead teams: this prepared me to develop strategies and mobilise team members to execute those strategies.’

These are some of the thoughts of Sharné Damons (33), an associate general accountant [AGA(SA)] who is currently the finance lead at the South African and sub-Saharan Africa subsidiary of Organon, a multinational women’s health company headquartered in New Jersey (US). Her responsibilities include the accounting, tax and controls, and financial planning for the South Africa and sub-Saharan regions. For the past two years, she has been recognised as top talent at the company. She says proudly: ‘We impact people’s lives for the better – our pharmaceuticals relieve people’s pain and we give people the ability better to manage their medical conditions.’

She continues: ‘The technical accounting skills are obviously important to ensure that the organisation’s financial information is recorded accurately and free of material misstatement. But importantly, you work with many people from different backgrounds and varied experience levels, and you learn how to adapt your leadership style to get the best out of people.’

Hers is an inspirational story that started thanks to the help of the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants’ (SAICA’s) Thuthuka Bursary.

Thuthuka changed the entire trajectory of my life

Sharné grew up in Bishop Lavis, on the Cape Flats in Cape Town. ‘Our family of six stayed in a one-room Wendy house at the back of my grandmother’s back yard for a number of years until we moved into a two-bedroom extension to my gran’s house. Later, my parents built a bigger family home. I attended schools in Bishop Lavis and Kuils River, and matriculated at

De Kuilen High School.'

She credits her parents for her values: 'My father taught me never to give up: despite losing his full-time job when I was in my teens, he explored other opportunities and found a way to provide for his family. My mother taught me the importance of family and having a good support system. She also exemplified perseverance: she got up every day to work for the same employer for over 30 years.'

Sharné says her parents stressed the importance of a higher education to her and her siblings – they pointed out it would provide financial stability and improve life dramatically. Yet, while growing up in a disadvantaged environment, there were no real practical examples of careers that she wanted to follow. 'The only degrees that I saw on a wall was at the doctor's office and I immediately decided to become a doctor, as that was the only practical example of a career that a higher education could provide.'

Getting to university was not easy because her parents only had a very small tuition policy that would have only covered only one year of fees at Stellenbosch University (SU). 'Then I was contacted by SAICA's Thuthuka programme, and decided to apply to SU. I was blessed to have been identified as a possible candidate to be part of the programme and was one of their first intakes at SU.'

She singles out the Thuthuka Bursary programme as the most memorable of her experiences at university. 'They took away the biggest obstacle that I had and opened my eyes to greater possibilities in life!'

Some things stood out: 'Starting on day one with like-minded individuals automatically creates a strong support system away from home. Particularly exceptional were the investments in the success of our university career through mentoring and tutoring, and the investment in our future by getting us involved in vacation jobs and finding companies where we could do our articles. There was also an investment in our development as people by providing opportunities for community service, such as working as facilitators at Thuthuka's Development Learner Camps and charities.'

Sharné continues: 'By providing financial support, Thuthuka changed the entire trajectory of my life. I would possibly have not have completed my studies – or could have been in the position where so many people find themselves, with significant student loans that would have taken many years to repay. I would possibly not have had the opportunity to go to Johannesburg and abroad. Thuthuka also influenced the views of my family members and friends: they now see the possibilities to rise above your circumstances when you have goals.'

Since completing her studies at SU, she has had a dream career: she moved to Johannesburg with a three-year articles contract at Mazars in Johannesburg. 'I also audited the National Lottery and appeared on TV quite regularly as the independent auditor verifying the lottery numbers.'

Then in 2014/2015, 'Ernst & Young's (EY's) international office recruited from South Africa as the CA(SA) and AGA(SA) designations are so highly regarded. I was successful and moved the Netherlands and resided there for four years. I worked at EY in Amsterdam as an audit senior for 18 months, and audited some large multinational companies such as RELX, Tommy Hilfiger and Philips, as well as some small Dutch entities. I then joined MSD, multinational pharma company headquartered in New Jersey (in the US), as an internal audit specialist. After a year, I was promoted to internal audit senior specialist. That meant I travelled 60% of the time, and visited at least 30 countries and 40 cities in Europe, the US and the Latin American region. When I was promoted to an associate director, I moved back to Johannesburg. Then MSD spun off the established brands and women's health portfolios of the business into Organon and I was appointed as the finance lead. I also became a statutory director of the local South African entity this year.'

Non-technical skills – the secret to setting yourself apart

As an accountant and auditor, many believe that being good at numbers is the most important skill you can have. But Sharné stresses that communication skills, delegation, time management and effective leadership as vital. It is something she believes aspiring finance professionals need to work on if they want to set themselves apart in business.

'Communication skills are very important, as you need to communicate financial information to non-finance colleagues in a manner that they can easily understand. In a leadership position, you delegate and provide guidance to others to perform tasks. Hence, it is imperative to be able to articulate your expectations and being able to assist people in executing the work. I also do many presentations, so it is important to be able to communicate key messages in a manner that the audience would understand, while one should also have the ability to listen to people and respond to their needs.'

She continues: 'Effective delegation means less execution of actual work and more guidance – thus it is important to trust people to do the work. Then there is time management: there are many expectations and deadlines relating to finance, and this requires a good system to ensure that expectations are met in allocated times. Finally, leadership means understanding that the buck stops with me, and I need to mobilise teams to execute strategies to get to the vision and mission.'

In developing non-technical skills, it is 'important to regularly ask people for feedback to identify your blind spots and putting development plans in place. In this way, one can constantly improve.'

As a young professional, Sharné's journey has been an exciting one. In terms of her immediate plans, she says that she would like to 'advance to the senior regional leadership team within the pharma industry and thereafter serve on the global leadership team. Both roles will lead to a move overseas: potentially Europe and the US. I have completed a few short leadership courses, but am planning on studying towards an MBA soon.'

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