

My Brilliant Career

Taking 'parlez-vous' route to reach top

What drew you to the world of insurance?

I joined the world of insurance by way of reinsurance when I returned to South Africa in 1996 from the Seychelles, where I had spent two years teaching at the International School. I decided that I wanted a job where I could use my French. When such a job came up for a French executive personal assistant, it was with Munich Re of Africa in Johannesburg. The head of the facultative department was a brilliant teacher and taught me in record time about reinsurance, which led me to progress very fast in the organisation. I was eventually seconded to the parent company in Munich, Germany, for 21 months, which gave me international exposure. Having received such excellent training and development, I wanted to make a difference locally in the short-term insurance industry, which led to me joining Santam in November 2007.

What qualifications do you have and how do they help you to do your job?

I grew up in the Seychelles, where I did my O-levels, went to India to do my A-levels, then to University College London and finally the University of Cape Town, where I obtained an MA (French) in 1994. Once I started working at Munich Re, which is a learning organisation, I decided to obtain some qualifications in finance and spent four years obtaining the qualification for a chartered secretary, which is one of the best ways to develop an all-round

Shehnaz Somers, head of commercial underwriting at Santam, tells **Margaret Harris** that she joined the world of insurance because she wanted a job in which she could use her knowledge of French

understanding of business management. I also obtained a diploma in executive leadership from the UCT Business School in 2004. The eclectic educational background I bring to my job is a unique blend of literary criticism, the financial analysis of figures and corporate governance, which ensures a deeper insight and logic to drive performance.

What would you do if you could not do this job?

My broad educational and linguistic background offers me many opportunities, so I can think of a number of jobs I could do. However, at this stage of my life, if I could not do short-term insurance, I would probably become a full-time forex trader. Some months ago, I did a two-day course in forex trading. After that, I opened a trading account and have been trading in forex in my spare time. Forex trading is much like short-term insurance — the market cycles up and down. One needs to take into account risk-reward principles and analysis then act on logic, not emotions.

What did you want to be when you were a child?

I wanted to be a teacher because I wanted to make a difference in the

world and I considered teaching to be a vocation. I ended up becoming a teacher, albeit for only a few years, and I loved it. Teaching is not just about book learning, but also about teaching young adults to think logically and to challenge conventional thinking and, most importantly, to create in them a desire to excel.

What makes your job difficult?

Balancing many factors and being able to influence and convince people with less understanding and knowledge about the possible effect of their decisions make my job very difficult. In short-term insurance, balancing profit and growth with consistent underwriting discipline is a major challenge because, often, decisions are based on emotions.

What would you change about your job if you could?

If there was something I could change, I probably would have done it already because of my sense of urgency.

What is the best career advice you have ever received?

An ex-CEO said to me: "You will be fine, I know that you can do it." After that, I felt obliged to live up to his expectation.



WALKING THE TALK: A knowledge of French led Shehnaz Somers to the world of insurance. She is now head of commercial underwriting at Santam
Picture: SHELLEY CHRISTIANS

How to . . . Handle job interviews

THERE is plenty of information around for first-time job applicants, but what about those people who have been working for many years and now have to go to an interview, possibly for an executive position?

Zinhle Matentji, founder and MD of SearchSpecifics, has this advice:

- Just as you did when you set out for your first interview, dress appropriately and beware of the nonverbal messages you send through your body language, general behaviour and appearance;

- You might feel that your years of experience mean you do not need to do any research into the position, but do not let arrogance lose you the job. Take the time to find out about the company and the position you are being interviewed for;

- When it comes to being interviewed for an executive position, the process is usually longer and can be more personal. This makes the rapport between interviewer and interviewee crucial. Gather information about the interviewer beforehand — their career history, what projects and deals they have worked on, other companies they were employed at and in what positions, career successes, as well their personal interests — so that you can immediately establish common ground;

- Find ways during the interview to show that you understand your industry at a macro level and that you are informed about developments both locally and globally. Give examples demonstrating your problem-solving skills and how you have overcome challenges in the past and improved or transformed systems and processes; and

- Do, however, be careful not to come across too strongly or as someone who has all the answers, because this may be considered arrogant behaviour on the part of someone who has not worked at the company in question and is at this stage still an observer. — *Margaret Harris*