

A day in the life of a work and organizational psychologist in South Africa

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About the author

After finishing a three-year undergraduate programme in Johannesburg, South Africa (SA), Samantha wanted to learn more. Having a keen interest in psychology and what motivates individuals at work, she continued her studies by completing a one-year postgraduate Honours course in Industrial Psychology (equivalent to Work Psychology). Once this year was over the flame had been lit and she was certain that becoming an Industrial Psychologist (IP, the registered title of work psychologists in SA) was the career path for her.

Having the privilege of carrying out that next step of the career journey in a well-resourced prestigious university in the United Kingdom (UK), far away from home, was a luxury not many are able to experience. These experiences have led Samantha to have even more determination to bring, passion, drive and cross-cultural knowledge into the workforce of SA. This journey led to a number of enlightening experiences and growth in knowledge creating a well sourced outlook to life.

Abstract

This career path describes an aspiring work and organizational psychologist's journey from schooling in South Africa, post-graduate education in the UK, and the development of a fulfilling professional life on return to South Africa. Interesting educational and cultural comparisons are explored along with the timeless issues of registration to practice.

Keywords: transitions, career journey, work and organizational psychology, reflection

Introduction

A career journey offers the time to reflect and the space to unpack why you are where you are and how you got there. This is an invaluable experience and one that I feel feeds the human need to reflect and the indulgence in vanity.

The journey started in my South African home while I was at school, the topic of work and careers being high on the list of focus areas. My dad was an entrepreneur and the amount of time he, his colleagues and friends spent working made me curious.

I concluded that I have an interest in human patterns of behaviour and I decided that a General Bachelor of Arts (BA Hons) degree at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, SA would be the perfect place to unpack the motives of those around me. The BA programme allowed me to take Psychology as my major subject combining this with Anthropology, English and History as minor subjects.

Not knowing where I would end up and having had truly little understanding of the psychology profession, I made sure each step I made was small and easily flexible. In the second year the topic of Industrial Psychology was introduced. The psychology of humans at work, their motivators and how to help create a more 'human friendly' space had me captivated. Not only was this the chance for me to unpack the human patterns I was interested in, but it was the opportunity to help humans in the smallest, potentially unnoticed way, to create a space that could be happier and healthier.

This direction made the choices of my modules, honours subjects and later my master's degree easy; Industrial Psychology focused. The more I learned the more I was fascinated by the human need to create environments that required high levels of productivity without much investment in the 'resources'; the people who were producing the work. Learning about the research associated with these factors was fascinating, although the South African university environment wasn't always the easiest one to navigate. Education is a true luxury in SA, universities are often under-resourced and the competition for places on postgraduate courses is high. The need to succeed at an 'A' level was unavoidable. Lecturers and universities usually encourage competition in order to ensure the most academically inclined and determined students are able to secure studentships. Although this culture is common in the Johannesburg work environment, unbeknown to me, this was the perfect learning environment to be put in. Resilience, focus, determination and acceptance were qualities that would help me in the future.

After finishing my BA degree, I had my sights set on a master's programme. Looking at options in England was high priority on my list, being of Scottish decent combined with the need for adventure and independence. I did a large amount of research in an attempt to find a programme that fit the South African criteria of a comparable master's degree. The reason for this is that I had no intention of continuing to live in England, as I love SA, and was determined to be able to work as a registered IP here.

I identified four courses across England, based on the modules offered, whether they were courses approved by the health profession within England, and universities that

had a module that focused on psychometrics. I applied to the different institutions and the University of Sheffield was the first to get back to me. I was overjoyed! I loved the idea of studying in a student town because I hadn't had that experience in SA. Although there are university towns in SA, the one I attended was in my home town and in one of the largest cities, Johannesburg. The fact that Sheffield was located 35 minutes away from the countryside was a big positive for me, as I had only ever known a big city not to mention that the University of Sheffield was a well rated and a universally recognised institution. The decision was an easy one.

Being an international student

The journey to pack up and move 13000 km was easily made with the support of my family and friends; but would not have been possible without my parents. On arrival I did not know what to expect but I was blown away. Not only was the university exceptionally well-resourced, fantastically staffed, but there were also small classes. Also, I was not the only international student, and everyone was so welcoming. This was the start of being in the safest space to learn and grow. The syllabus was well set out from day one. The lecturers made themselves available to add assistance where they could and the modules offered the practical experience that I craved. Greatest of all I had no distractions, nothing else to focus on but being a full-time student. The opportunity and luxury of the situation was unfathomable. I spent the year creating fantastic friendships, having multiple adventures, but most importantly growing my knowledge of psychology day-by-day. Understanding the work environments from a British context, understanding the difference of putting people first in such an environment was a powerful addition to the passion that I had already developed.

At the end of the programme in Sheffield I watched my university friends go through the process of applying for jobs in the British context. This was a great learning experience for me; we discussed the places we wanted to work at and the opportunities we hoped were on our horizon. I learned a number of lessons in England that helped me in my job search in SA. For example, apply for multiple jobs and go for as many interviews as you can to gain experience. Look for an organizational culture that suits you and that you match; as well as a suitable job role. Further, consider travel time to and from work as a contributing factor in your choice of work.

These lessons were all immensely helpful, I also had to consider work environments that allowed me to complete my internship so that I could move from having a master's in

industrial psychology to being a practising IP. Following the job search steps I had picked up in England; combined with ticking the boxes of my Industrial Psychology internship requirements, I realised what I had to do once I got back to SA.

Arriving back to South Africa

Once I arrived in SA, I had dived deep into finding the perfect company for me to work in. Resorting to my lists I attempted to locate the organization I thought would be a good cultural fit for me; finding the one company that really would suit me. The organization would: a) be accredited to offer the practical experience the internship required; b) have a mentor to lead me through my internship; c) be one that prioritised social interactions; d) focus on consulting over contracting; and e) was small enough for one to still have a voice. After going through a few different interviews I heard back from my first pick, which aligned to all my criteria; it was – go!

Obstacle one on this journey was trying to ensure the South African health board would accredit my British degree. Despite trying to find a comparable British master's degree to the South African master programmes and choosing an organization that was happy to take me through the Industrial Psychology internship proved difficult. The Health Board had recently changed their criteria for international acceptances and did not allow me to sign up for an internship. The Industrial Psychology internship is a mentored work experience lasting for one-year; allowing annual accreditation with the South African Health Board similar to the work experience programme required before you can register with the Health and Care Professions Council, in the UK.

It was hard for me to accept 'no' as an answer and I tried multiple paths, speaking to several different people. This caused me to stop and take a step back and consider how this would impact my career. I spoke to several different connections, past professors and senior members of staff at my organisation. The impact mentioned was that this would not allow me to apply for positions as a registered IP (there are not many of these job roles in South African corporations) and I could not administer psychometric tests in a South African environment. The organisation that had given me a job did not mind either way and were quite satisfied with my master's degree. This made me more comfortable than before, and I decided to focus solely on giving my best to the job rather than focus on factors I could not change.

It was time to test all that theoretical knowledge; and see how it was going to play out in reality. I was nervous and worried! What if everything I loved exploring theoretically; I hated doing practically. What if the work was nothing like I had imagined?

Working as an IP in Johannesburg

Well I was right it was nothing like I had imagined. In the first month, the 45 new starters were put through an intensely simulating training programme. The programme had classroom-based training sessions for eight hours a day (from 8 am to 4 pm) with a one-hour lunch break, followed by an eight-hour group project simulation. The group project mimicked situations we would later experience with clients. This included being grouped in cross-skilled teams and meeting with our 'clients' (these were senior members of our organization), where we would have to try understanding their requirements. There were last minute changes to expectations from clients, which we would have to manage. Most important were the deliverables, which included, project management reporting, change management plans, IT test approaches, to name a few.

We were put in awkward, hard and potentially emotionally upsetting environments. But I was one of the lucky few who had been in several different cultural environments, having completed my master's thesis in an organization and had some corporate experience. Above all, I knew I had experienced an educational journey many could only dream of; and I wanted to give this work opportunity my all.

This attitude came in handy as the month ended and I was put straight into a client environment, in one of the biggest South African banks. Having had conversations with my British peers I realised that an early client-facing experience wasn't offered to everyone; and once again I was thrust into one of the greatest learning opportunities I could have been granted.

In the space of the next four years I have experienced working in four different client environments: learning and facilitation, project administration, project management and change management departments. Each one of these roles were at various levels in four of the biggest financial institutions in South Africa. I learned at an accelerated pace. Some environments have been 'safer;' with bigger consulting teams, others were much more personally exposing having the consequences of my mistakes served on a silver platter. At each client site, there was an opportunity to learn from my mistakes in the previous environment, and to use the theoretical knowledge I had developed. This experience

was supported by plenty of training and development opportunities to keep me at the forefront of changing working practices.

However, dealing with the relationships with my clients, while managing the expectations of my employer was supported by my psychological education, with each unfamiliar environment building on what I had learned about managing people. For example, I found Arnold and Randall's 2010 book *Work psychology: Understanding human behaviour in the workplace*, particularly helpful. Specifically, how to facilitate training to a group of people, how they may learn best, how to lead a group of individuals with different personalities and how to manage human resistance. The 'tips and tricks' I had learned in my studies directly aided my methods of facilitation in my first role as a trainer. The theory I had learned supported my leadership style and communication methods in my role as a junior project manager. Lastly the things I had learned gave me confidence and a starting point when managing and mitigating human responses to change in my current role as a change manager. Theory has really been a reference point at each stage of my career thus far, forming my starting point for each one of my human performance roles, but also giving me the confidence to try a few different initiatives.

Where am I now?

This current journey is my favourite. I have chosen a career with the greatest choice of flexibility, autonomy and progressive learning. But it has not been without obstacles, disappointment and failure. I am however currently in a space where I have been awarded and rewarded with training programmes and facilitation opportunities as I grow as a consultant. This has allowed me to become specialised in corporate frameworks like Agile (<https://www.agilealliance.org/agile101/>). This enabled me to help people to manage corporate changes within an Agile environment and encourage them to appreciate their failures as learning when adapting to this new mindset.

Agile is an up-and-coming corporate framework that encourages specific culture and ceremonies across an organization to facilitate collaboration, learning, growth and creativity in IT, human and business environments. This passion area has allowed me to do a podcast on how to enable change in Agile organisations. Recently I received an award from my client at our bi-annual conference for being '*The individual who is able to bring a change of perspective and who is resilient at all costs.*' And in the wider Human Capital department I received an award from my peers for being the "Culture Custodian" *upholding the culture we strive towards.*

Interest in Agile has also driven my development path giving me access to some of the newest change management courses. I have had the luxury of being certified as a Lean change agent (<https://leanchange.org/>), as well as a certified as an Enterprise Business Agility Strategist. I am expecting to complete my Lean change certified facilitator course over the next month and will be able to train and certify others in this area.

These learning opportunities have enabled me to grow my skills supporting my current role as a change manager in an environment that is moving towards being Agile. A change manager role aims to enable individuals going through change to be supported and better equipped to deal with the change. This can be through a number of different initiatives based on the requirements of the people going through the change. Examples include socialisation sessions, coaching sessions, awareness communications (emails, newsletters, app notifications), motivation sessions, demonstrations and masterclasses.

I am delighted that within my current role I get to use all my skills; from those learned theoretically through my degree, as well as those associated with Agile frameworks and new change approaches. All this helps me to support individuals going through project specific changes as part of an organizational transformation. Having a strong understanding of people through my education and a beginning that required cross-cultural acceptance, resistance and working with failure has undoubtedly been the motivation helping me to embody my training in my work. This experience makes me passionate about wellness at work and work-life balance (being at maximum capacity without giving up on living) which aligns directly to the Agile framework and where my client's environment aims to end up.

Summary and reflections

How did my cross-cultural learning translate to this current passion? I think the diverse beginning in multiple environments with several different people, facilitated my growth in people skills. South African corporations are multiskilled and diverse workspaces with a requirement to leverage our differences to better understand the people we are hoping to help. Without having the experience of working with diverse cultural and skilled individuals in SA and international and skilled individuals in the UK I don't think I would feel as confident or be as capable to listen to and leverage the mixed approaches each team has. This also fuelled my motivation to collaborate in a work environment and to truly understand the advantage of having multiskilled teams.

South Africa's corporations still have some way to go in order to overcome the patriarchal culture South Africans are accustomed to but my experience in the UK allowed me to have a different understanding of gender roles and encouraged my approach to the environments I am in today. This aids me in prioritising the needs of the people who are going through corporate changes and to champion the importance of emotional wellness.

Ultimately, reflecting on the experiences I have had in SA and UK has aided my career journey of learning, growth, confidence and opportunity. All capabilities I think I may not have practised had I not had the luxury of experiencing both environments. As I have mentioned many times this journey is not one that many people get to live through; and it is one I am acutely grateful for.

For those who do have the luxury of being able to follow a similar path I would recommend immersing yourself in every stage of your career. Utilise the resources, maintain relationships and networks to ensure you gain a diverse understanding of human behaviour, in your studies and beyond. I recommend taking each step as an opportunity to learn something new and grow your abilities. I recommend grappling with any discomfort you may feel by being in a new place or in a foreign culture because the opportunity for growth is much greater in discomfort. I recommend humbling yourself in what you can be taught by those around you from different countries and cities around the world despite their ages. I recommend taking what the journey can throw at you as a plot twist to life instead of attempting to control its outcomes. Lastly, I recommend genuinely enjoying the luxury that it is, because, like I will say for the last time, this is an opportunity that can only be advantageous and one that is awarded to few.

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