

Standards and tenacity - key towards developing pride in accounting departments

By [Lia Labuschagne](#), issued by [SAICA](#)

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Training is often seen as a 'nice to have' rather than a pressing need. Some think of training programmes as expensive, hard to plan and difficult to execute efficiently on a long-term basis. However, its importance is undeniable, especially in growing economies with large backlogs of highly skilled people.



Old Mutual graduates with their principals and Michellene Barnes, a SAICA Thuthuka bursary recipient who worked at Old Mutual with our graduates.

In the professional and business world, organisations are finding ways to benefit all concerned – whether the individual being trained contributes to operations or the finance area, the administration of the country or the development of new business. The involvement of relevant professional organisations is invaluable to ensure that standards are maintained. They also perform a critical coordinating role.

Through the three designations of the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) – Chartered Accountants (CA[SA]), Associate General Accountants (AGA[SA]) and Accounting Technicians (AT[SA]) – the country's leading accountancy institute has set out to professionalise all the functions performed in financial departments, especially within South Africa. Chantyl Mulder, SAICA Executive Director of Nation Building, says "the accounting technician qualifications and designation forms a strong foundation for all finance support roles to develop competencies that will lead to increased accuracy and productivity."

The AT(SA) qualification and professional membership is relevant for all finance departments across all types of industries in both the public and private sectors. "We have partnered with employers in various sectors – including wholesale and retail industry, the food and beverages, financial services as well as with government departments and municipalities," explains Mulder.

To accommodate different sectors of economic activity, Mulder says they have three specialisations, namely the mainstream Accounting Qualification, the Public Sector Accounting qualification, and the Local Government Accounting

qualification. "We have AT(SA) members who work at SMMEs and also at large organisations. They all believe that the foundational and support work performed by AT(SA)s are the solid basis of the accounting cycle and that it leads to a productive team effort."

Partnerships make it work

One significant example that underlines the importance of close relationships to support integrated programmes is the one between AT(SA) and a leading employer such as Old Mutual. They have run several cohorts across Levels 3 to 5 since 2016 and are proud of their 12 Level 5s, 16 Level 4s and 26 Level 3s. The plan is to continue with the programme. There are currently 20 students busy with level 3 (NQF3). Elzet Oosthuizen, CFO of Other Group Activities at Old Mutual, stresses that "Old Mutual, and particularly the finance community at Old Mutual, is committed to continuous professional development."

A high value is placed on programmes that support the basic philosophy: "Whilst it is mandatory for the CA(SA) staff to do formal ongoing training to retain their high level of skills, we realised that we also needed to ensure that our more junior staff are upskilled. We know that many of our people never had the opportunity to study post matric, and we want to ensure that they have a path to grow. People join Old Mutual straight out of school and work here for the better part of their career. We must ensure that they are constantly upskilled to be productive, value-adding members of the finance community," Oosthuizen explains.

Mulder adds that studies show that "a number of junior to mid-level employees within many company finance departments perform their duties without an accounting-related qualification. This partnership has given Old Mutual's employees the opportunity to gain qualifications that lead to a designation and to be part of a professional membership body.

"What is exciting about the AT(SA) and the Old Mutual relationship is that Old Mutual has large finance teams that work across various disciplines in accounting. The benefit of a programme such as the AT(SA) is that while the groups study the same competencies, their work becomes consistent with generally-accepted accounting practices and the outputs are more professional. South Africa has such a need for skilled finance staff, so this is an important investment in our own personnel."

Standards and tenacity towards pride

More importantly, Oosthuizen remarks that "the AT(SA) programme is flexible, as the lectures and assessments are arranged around the company's deadlines and reporting cycles. The classes are presented at our offices, making it convenient for staff to attend. It is very important to build a good relationship with the training provider. Flexibility is important, but the quality of the training material and the ability of the facilitator to connect with the learning staff, are critical factors. Old Mutual has been privileged to work with good partners in this programme."

The programme is also growing: "Initially we only offered AT(SA) training to staff working in finance departments, but have recently started rolling the Level 3 programme out to operations staff, as the benefits are immense. Covering concepts like budgeting, cash flow, basic costing and accounting create an understanding amongst staff of the impacts on the company's bottom line."

A growing programme does not mean that standards are neglected. The programme is challenging, yet leads to notable achievements: "Although the requirement for AT(SA) level 5 is very high and many of our staff really battled to complete the course in the allowed time, we have had great success stories amongst these groups over the years. Many of the Level 5s have been promoted to more complex roles or even higher role sizes in the organisation," says Oosthuizen.

Programme details

In essence, the programme covers topics to support succession planning (career progression through the different qualification levels, into the designation), increase employee value (increased and rounded skills set, increased teamwork and morale), reduce attrition rates, enhance productivity and operational efficiency exceeding industry standards, and

develop effective decision-making at middle management level.

In terms of the specific training, Anton van Wyk, a business consultant working with the top AT(SA) employers on this project, says that his approach is "centred around the development of each staff member." He says the corporate strategy for each company underlies the training, and explains that they ensure that "each learner has his own individual reason and motivation to do adult learning." The Jamavlo Training Management System which he uses, entails assessment of initial student competency, an individual student progress tool and reporting to student and corporate client, as well as detailed progress reports to steering committees of corporate customers. Students have the benefit of face-to-face contact as well as a WhatsApp support system.

Van Wyk also adds that, in his mentorship role, he focuses on strugglers very early, thereby ensuring better pass rates than the norm. Succession planning also plays a role and he says: "I believe in brilliant, to-the-point communication and provide the correct information at the right time to decision-makers."

Proof of success

The aim of the programme includes elevating AT(SA)'s influence and reputation as well as increasing broad brand awareness and positioning AT(SA) as the first choice profession for entry-level accounting for private and public finance professionals.

However, perhaps the most important proof of success of such a programme lies in the experiences of those involved. "We have had amazing stories of people's tenacity and determination to better themselves," says Elzet Oosthuizen. "Mothers with small children have had to sacrifice greatly to complete their studies; one person suffered from TB whilst doing the programme; another struggled with one subject, but after ten tries, she passed and graduated."

This shows why "Old Mutual is proud of employees who embark on this journey of self-improvement, through a challenging programme which maintains a high standard (pass rate is 70%). We get the benefit through a higher level of technical accounting skills which will ultimately improve the quality of our reporting over time," Oosthuizen concludes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lia Labuschagne is a Kleinmond-based communication consultant, writer, editor, and qualitative marketing research practitioner. She holds a BA (Honours) in English (UJ) and an MDP (UNISA) in Marketing Management and has extensive experience in corporate communication management, public relations, publishing and related fields. Her experience includes nine years in senior management positions in communication roles at major corporations. As independent consultant, she provides services to clients involved in a wide range of economic activity. She is an experienced writer who has been published in numerous publications. As copy editor she works on both fiction and non-fiction assignments for publishers and corporate clients. Lia has also been involved in successful start-up strategies for a number of companies and successfully works as a member of interdisciplinary teams. She is an experienced trainer and public speaker and is or has been involved in the leadership of a number of relevant professional bodies, including the South African Science Journalists' Association (SAJSA) and the Professional Editors' Guild (PEG).

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