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Channelling
Change for an Icon

"Entry into publishing was not a strategic career decision for me," admits Lynne at our interview. In fact, she studied English, archaeology and teaching, thereafter teaching in the United Kingdom for a while and getting involved in curriculum implementation before taking the leap into the world of publishing.

"My love for language and communication and, in particular, learning has served me well in this industry. It is an industry that is surprisingly dynamic, with technological advancements happening daily. This makes for an exciting and unpredictable environment conducive to innovation, which energises me," she explains.

At the time of joining Juta and Company (Juta) in 2006, it was going through a process of change, particularly with respect to its retail operations and educational publishing. Lynne says she considered it both an exciting challenge and an honour to be instrumental in channelling the direction of this iconic company. "Beyond that, Juta plays an instrumental role in supporting effective administration of justice, education delivery and skills development in the interest of South Africa's economic growth and social upliftment, and this is closely aligned with my values," she points out.

Since Lynne du Toit's appointment as Chief Executive Officer of Juta and Company six years ago, South Africa's oldest publisher has flourished, enjoying double-digit growth in turnover and operating profit year on year. We spoke to her to find out more about her plans for 2012, her source of inspiration, and what's still on her to-do list.

Like any company, Juta continues to strive to be more efficient on the one hand, while innovating on the other. "This includes new products and diversification into new areas, often with new business models. Some of these remain under wraps at present, but an example would be our migration into accredited training provision for adult learning and professional development. Although we launched this initiative only two years ago, our brand perception shows that we have gained enormous traction in this area and that Juta is now recognised as a key player in customised training provision in the health sector, in the adult basic education segment and in other professional-development areas. With our content and author networks and our quality-assurance capabilities, we see ourselves as uniquely placed to make a difference to targeted skills development across a range of disciplines in this way," notes Lynne.

She adds that it also must not be forgotten that Juta is South Africa's oldest publisher (it was established in 1853), with an enormously rich repository of content such as the legal information contained in the iconic South African Law Reports. "While we have been publishing content electronically since the 1980s as Jutastat, we are constantly using technological innovation to make information accessible in ways users require it. Organising such a depth and breadth of content for electronic distribution in interactive formats that go beyond the conventional e-book format is no mean feat. We are investing heavily in ensuring that our content repository is categorised and tagged to the most miniscule level for extraction into the next generation of electronic products and services, including e-learning," Lynne elaborates.

"It comes as a surprise to many that Juta has opted not to compete as a conventional schools textbook publisher. The textbook space is not only highly contested but, because of stringent specifications and time frames for approval, there is also little room to differentiate and thereby add value. At Juta, we choose to bring our various resources and competencies to bear on particular pressure points in the education system where we believe we can add meaningful value as a stakeholder and partner in education delivery. These include assessment tools, literacy resources and training interventions, school management and professional teacher development."

Lynne believes that it is unfortunate that educational publishers are often perceived to be engaged only on a transactional book-provisioning level as a supplier into the system rather than a legitimate stakeholder interested in effective education delivery. "There is an inexhaustible richness of assets and capabilities within this industry that, through consultative innovation, could offer extraordinary value to education delivery way beyond the current models of engagement," she insists.

As for Lynne's personal agenda, initiatives that will contribute to improved education delivery are high on her list, as are the continued growth, diversification and success of Juta. "On the personal side, my children are an ongoing project and, with them spanning the ages of 23, 18 and 6, I am engaged at every phase imaginable, trying to support them to be the best they can become. I am an avid cook and would love to do a cordon bleu course. Also, my mother was an artist and I love to draw and paint, so I would love to enrol in formal art classes. And, then, there's that novel that I've written..." she says, laughing.

It comes as no surprise, then, that her advice for other women is to put their hands up when new opportunities are offered. "Don't be too stuck in a vision for your own path to your future, otherwise you will never know where opportunity might take you. Even though I journeyed into my role via a very circuitous route and across three continents, it is the unique combination of my own personal adventures that has defined me."

Lynne also says that perhaps she left it fairly late to get a business qualification, as well-meaning people said that it was unnecessary. "I found doing an executive MBA an incredibly enriching experience and I wish I had had the opportunity to engage with systems thinking earlier in my career. My final piece of advice is to know yourself. Understand your personality and the way you prefer to operate. Such understanding is incredibly powerful in a management team when you know how best to work together as unique individuals – it is so much more productive. Men and women need to be recognised for the respective qualities they bring to an organisation," she concludes. □

Lynne du Toit, Chief Executive Officer, Juta and Company