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# Property valuer and natural businessperson

Janet Channing brings an adventurous spirit to the workplace, helping to build capacity in municipalities – even a land claim nightmare has not put her off helping others work their land, writes Shirley le Guern

**D**ESCRIBING herself as a property valuer by profession and an entrepreneur by nature, Janet Channing is a forthright business person determined to make a difference in a space where legislation is complex and errors in data management expensive.

She brings meticulous attention to detail and a lot of colour to spaces notorious for being grey areas.

Her company, MetGovis, provides a range of software to support local government's property valuations and ratings.

Its flagship product, MetVal, synchronises valuation rolls with municipal billing systems, enabling accurate rates accounts to be generated by municipalities.

The solution complies with the relevant legislative framework, the Municipal Property Rates Act and the latest amendments which took effect in July.

Another feature of MetVal is a revenue management tool called InSight, which generates spatial reports or maps to show a municipal client where there's revenue "slippage" and how to remedy this.

Channing believes MetVal is making a difference to local government.

In the current distressed economy, it is critical that municipalities bill correctly and completely and the tax net is spread equitably.

The company also transfers skills and trains municipal officials and valuers.

"The municipal act amendments were a catalyst for

us to showcase our training skills. We make the act accessible. We almost make it fun.

"We believe hands-on training using the MetVal system beds down the knowledge. All municipalities, no matter how beleaguered or lacking capacity, have someone making the wheels turn. We find her and equip her with the tools to enable her to operate more efficiently.

"Ours is a backstage performance – it is about making the client look good," she says.

Channing's career began with undergraduate geography and computer science degrees followed by a postgraduate qualification in business science.

From there, she joined Woolworths as a junior management trainee.

"I was one of the white coat brigade with the blue 'W' on my chest, at about the time when Friday evening and Saturday afternoon trading was introduced," she says.

While the corporate environment had little appetite for innovation, Woolworths taught her the value of putting effective systems in place.

She went on to join her husband's building contracting business.

"It was hands-on and meant driving a tipper truck and a concrete mixer. I can tile a floor and knock a ceiling.

"It was hard, physical work, but it showed me what it takes to make a business work, especially from a

cash flow point of view," she says.

They bought a border farm in Weenen. This was "virulent heart water country" and their cattle died. They changed course and turned to game farming.

However, the property was subject to a land claim.

"Our land was our only asset, but the claimants had a political right to the land. Land is not a commodity out there – it is about raw emotion," she says.

The farm was

finally expropriated by the state.

All of these circumstances took their toll and in 2000 Channing moved to Pietermaritzburg with two small children and no job.

However, with exposure to the ground-level work done within the pilot land reform space and in light of the fast changing sociopolitical and regulatory environment, she decided to combine her experience with formal training by doing a valuation diploma.

Soon after she completed her diploma and registered as a professional valuer, the 2004 Municipal Property Rates Act was promulgated.

For her, it was about being in the right place at the right time. She took the gap and set about ensuring she became the go-to person for those battling with this new legislation.

She worked for the KwaZulu-Natal provincial government for five years before being appointed managing director of MetGovis in 2008. At the time, the struggling company was a small subsidiary of the Broll Property Group.

Metgovis owned software that compiled valuation rolls. "My initial brief was to transform this into an effective software solution – to take the "black and white" DOS version and develop it in technicolour," she says.

She concluded a management buyout in December 2010. This involved "exhaustive negotiations" that left Channing with a business in financial

distress and more determination than ever to "make it work" for clients and employees.

For starters, public sector procurement is littered with allegations of irregularities and corruption.

"I would rather close my doors than venture down that slippery slope. We compensate for refusing to participate in these practices by ensuring we do our jobs better," she emphasises.

Closely related to this is the fact that, in the public sector, one is only as

good as one's last project, she adds.

"In the public sector, your track record counts for a lot. Municipal officials network exceptionally well and a job poorly executed will come back to bite you a dozen times."

Along the way, she has earned the respect of colleagues and business associates.

"People respect me for saying it like it is. I am able to distil the real issues from seeming chaos, to get down to the genuine needs rather than the interests."

Would she do it again? "It has been a school of really hard knocks, but yes, I would – perhaps with a calmer approach but definitely with the same can-do attitude," she replies.

Channing believes success is about discipline and consistency. "Successful businesses aren't generally lucky. They have teams that work very hard for a very long time.

"If I am not on top of the business with my priorities not clearly defined by Monday morning, things tend to unravel during the week. Weekdays are, by their nature, full of meetings, travel and commitments. There isn't time for original thought and creativity."

Amazingly, she also takes time out to continue her commitment to land reform in South Africa and is involved in the Somkhanda community outreach project in northern Zululand.

There, the community acquired 35 000ha of land through a claim. Of this, 12 000ha is demarcated as the Somkhanda Community Nature Reserve.

African InSight, which manages the lodge on the reserve, initiated a cattle dipping programme with one of the communities.

"We're helping to develop a scaleable strategy to upgrade the cattle dipping programme and extend it to all seven communities in the Somkhanda neighbourhood.

"There is also a cropping strategy to promote small-scale, sustainable production through seed, cultivation and marketing support. The aim is to involve the communities in pursuits that address their entrepreneurial requirements within their traditional cultural frameworks," she says.

In addition to taking her spirit of adventure into the work space – she registered for a doctorate last year – she approaches what little leisure she allows herself with equal energy.

"I scuba dive and am licensed to fly a helicopter. I love horse riding, preferably fast. Some of my most exciting adventures have been on horse riding holidays in Morocco, Patagonia and Botswana.

"For me, it's about wild places, remote, strange and beautiful spaces that counter the office-bound work environment that makes up the rest of my working year," she says.



Janet Channing heads MetGovis, which is making a difference in the property evaluation business.

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