

Bird in flight

First she became a forensic crime scene investigator, then a pilot, and now she is also an MBA graduate. SIERRAJ AHMED finds out why for Fatima Jakoet the sky was not the limit.



A S A LITTLE girl growing up in Wellington, near Cape Town, Fatima Jakoet dreamed big: she wanted to be a doctor, a spy, a pilot, a supermodel ... and though she may not have ticked all those boxes, she has certainly already attained a few landmark goals. Jakoet (36) is not only a 2009 MBA graduate, but she has also been a pilot for South African Airways for the past five years. And in the days before she took to the skies, she spent six years working as a forensic scientist and crime scene investigator.

She smiles as she relates how her unusual career path unfolded. "I wanted to study medicine, but I wasn't accepted, so I studied

chemistry. I worked in the field of forensic science for a few years, but my childhood dream of being a pilot was always in the back of my mind."

While confiscating drugs at a crime scene at Cape Town International Airport, she found herself mesmerised at the sight of a Boeing 747-400 close up, and told a colleague, "Someday I'm going to be in control of that big machine."

Two years later, in 2001, Jakoet was one of 16 people accepted into a cadet pilot programme and spent 16 months in training in Australia, before joining South African Airlink as a first officer (co-pilot). Today she's an SAA senior first officer flying domestic routes – and she recently added another feather into her already impressive cap by completing her Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree at the USB.

"I have always been greatly inspired by a saying attributed to Islam's prophet, Muhammad: 'Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave'," Jakoet says of her latest milestone. "When I started flying, I knew I wanted to give back to the community in a more 'big picture' way, and I thought an MBA would be the perfect grooming tool to sharpen my skills, teach me new ones, and prepare me to interact with people on a different level."

MBA graduate
Fatima Jakoet

THINGS I'VE LEARNED . . .

Fatima Jakoet shares tips from her experience as a crime scene investigator, a pilot, and an MBA student.

. . . from crime scene investigations:

- Something that might seem quite ordinary can be a breakthrough and essential in solving a crime (or a business problem).
- When you start out in a career, pace yourself. This is the time to acquire the essential skills you'll need to get where you want to be.

. . . from piloting aeroplanes:

- Eat your elephant bit by bit. When you are unsure about the direction in which you're headed or when that mountain seems too big, proceed slowly by taking small steps.
- Remain flexible and be willing to make some compromises along the way.
- Life's too short not to have fun. Have fun while making your dream a reality.

. . . from MBA studies:

- At the most challenging times, it's OK to feel despondent. Just don't dwell on it for too long.
- Being able to work in a team is as important as being able to finish tasks on your own.



Completing an MBA while maintaining a demanding flight schedule wasn't easy, but she remained focused on her goal. "My MBA books must be the most well-travelled text books around," she jokes. "I was flying international routes at that stage, and I studied during the mandatory rest periods of a day or two before my flight home." Jet-lag didn't help with her study timetable, though. "The combination of flying and jet-lag meant it was hard enough remembering where I'd left my brain, never mind my books!"

But graduate she did, and Jakoet credits her MBA colleagues for helping her achieve another dream. "My classmates were very supportive, and were happy to share notes, pool resources and give me a pep talk when I needed it."

So far, the skills she learned during her MBA studies have helped improve her performance as co-pilot. "As the first officer, you're always a captain-in-training. While the captain makes leadership decisions, you are expected to have the skills to implement those decisions where necessary. Since completing my MBA, I've developed sharper people skills – including leadership and negotiating skills – and have gained a more holistic picture of the business side of the industry."

One thing Jakoet quickly had to learn to deal with is other people's opinions about a Muslim woman working in two industries

that are still seen as the domain of males.

"Sometimes I wonder how I would cope in a female-dominated environment, after all these years in male-dominated environments!" she says. "The way I deal with pre-judgements of me as a Muslim woman has become so automatic that I don't even think about it anymore. It's about attitude and how you see yourself: if you're not confident, people will step all over you, whether you're a man or a woman. Pilots have a saying: 'Your attitude determines your altitude'. Whatever your attitude, that's where you'll find yourself."

Her mantra when she encounters prejudice is: "Accept that you cannot control or change someone's opinions; you can merely influence them."

True to her knowledge-thirsty spirit, Jakoet already has her eye on her next goal. "I'm four months into a year-long NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) course, and hope to use the knowledge I'm acquiring to help me start an initiative aimed at mentoring young South Africans interested in careers in aviation."

For now, it's time to go: she's flying CPT-JNB-DBN-JNB-CPT tomorrow, and has to get some good rest in. You won't hear any complaints from Jakoet, though. "I dreamed about doing this, and sometimes still can't believe I get to fly a Boeing. I'm doing what I love, and I love what I'm doing!" ■

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