

Jabu Mahlangu

Standing
TALL
among
LEADERS

By Annalise Kempen

Jabu Mahlangu has experienced many challenges and successes, from his investigations at the State Capture Commission to assignments in other African countries. His broad knowledge and experience earned him positions on the Boards of two listed companies and the ICFP. As part of his achievements, he and his team celebrate the 15th anniversary of Ligwa Advisory Services this year. Despite these successes, Jabu's gratitude and passion for his work and industry are clear, and we were curious to understand why.



Nearly 30 years ago, a young man born in Middelburg in Mpumalanga finished his articles, ready to jump into the accounting world with big dreams and a desire to learn. The financial industry wasn't his initial plan. After finishing high school he had hoped to study law, but since he was too late to secure a bursary, Jabu ended up working at a bank. Sometimes life throws unexpected curveballs, and it depends on how you handle them. For Jabu, working at the bank helped him develop a strong knack for numbers, which led him to enrol at Vista University for a BCom degree in Accounting.

After completing his articles at one of the “Big 4” firms in 1996 and acting as an assistant manager (audit) at the same company, Jabu joined the Office for Serious Economic Offences for two years, where he served as an in-house forensic accountant. He subsequently returned to the same firm in 2000 and was admitted as a partner in 2002, his role for the next eight years.

The risk and the reward

In what he describes as "a natural process where grown-up adults decide to leave the comfort of their parents' home to set up their own abode and family," Jabu Mahlangu made that proverbial move by exchanging the comfort (and security) of working at one of the "Big 4" accounting firms to starting his own company, Ligwa Advisory Services in 2010. Jabu recalls that the decision to start his own company was also motivated by his desire to implement lessons learned over time.

Celebrating Ligwa's 15th anniversary this year, Jabu said that it was a "personal milestone, a self-actualisation journey I would have regretted had I not embarked on, regardless of the outcome". And, as those who have embarked on similar journeys will confirm, it is only by the "grace of God and the people who were supportive of and became key to the project (in particular my co-director), that Ligwa has been, to date, a good story".



"Top secret" clearance becomes part of his game

During his 30 years' work life, Jabu has gained experience in both the conventional and expert aspects of forensic work, including preparing forensic audit reports for court; and subsequently, testifying in the High Court of South Africa about findings. His assignments ranged from investigating VAT fraud to currency round tripping and "kickbacks"; conducting searches and seizures to taking appointments as curator bonis; investigating advance fee schemes to company asset stripping.

During his career, Jabu received some special assignments that required top secret clearance, necessitating being vetted a cool five times, namely:

- In 2001, Jabu formed part of the team investigating strategic arms procurement packages, on behalf of the Auditor-General;
- In 2012, he assisted in the Seriti Commission;
- In 2018, Jabu had to investigate allegations of State Capture on behalf of the Zondo Commission;
- In 2021, Jabu was tasked with doing various investigations into forensic matters on behalf of the State Security Agency; and
- Providing investigative assistance to the Investigating Directorate Against Corruption (IDAC).

Looking at these and other investigations involving company executives or senior officials, it must be one of the reasons why Jabu transitioned into forensic investigations, as **"no one assignment is the same as the other; and this becomes a constant driver for creative thinking in formulating different approaches for different matters"**. Jabu admits, the element of the unknown was the primary attraction and motivation to move from mainstream audit after he completed his articles. And, because this type of work drives constant creativity, it also ensures that one "does not get sucked into any form of monotonous streak," Jabu said. He added that **the ultimate test of the quality of one's work is the opportunity to testify in court or other forums** - often following investigations conducted over a long period and by different team members.

Not every "golden opportunity is worth the grind"

Although it may seem almost "glamorous" or "prestigious" to have been assigned State Capture investigations, obtain top secret clearance and enjoy the creative thinking of different assignments, this type of work does not come without challenges. Jabu highlighted two distinct challenges relating to forensic investigations: first, the timeous availability of evidence to undertake investigations, especially when considerable time has lapsed before the investigation is eventually commissioned. This aspect directly impacts timelines.

The second reality and potential challenge deals with the cost of an investigation. Jabu elaborated this point by explaining that "in all the years I've been in forensics, **I still don't think one can scope a forensic assignment to align perfectly with the required investigation effort, and thus the investigation costs**". Clients ordinarily require a fixed cost before an investigation commences, but this is, according to Jabu, "a perennial challenge. It really is a hit-and-miss approach, which is more often than not, signified by misses".

When challenges become risks

Facing personal threats has become a reality for forensic investigators. However, Jabu recognises that it is very concerning that professionals, including forensic practitioners, are being targeted because of the work they do. Staying motivated amid the threats and keeping on doing the right thing is important. **"As much as it is possible, we need to undertake the necessary risk assessments when accepting engagements and, depending on the outcome, formulate how to proceed from there,"** Jabu advised. This same sentiment was shared during the panel discussion about threats facing forensic investigators at the ICFP Financial Crime Conference in July 2025.



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- Jabu Mahlangu.

Motivating the next generation

The ICFP is resolute on building a strong membership of young, upcoming forensic practitioners. The success thereof includes motivating the next generation to enter an industry many people are still unfamiliar with and ensuring they will have career opportunities once they complete their studies. Jabu is excited about the growing number of young people entering the profession. He added that they may also find the digital and even AI-driven methodologies adopted in the industry appealing. Added to this is the unique nature of almost every assignment, which breaks the monotony which young people may quickly find unappealing. "I have seen a growing interest in the profession from the internship and job shadowing programmes we run at Ligwa, and it's good. I therefore encourage matriculants to consider a forensic accounting/investigation career as part of a suite of options available to them," Jabu advised.

The ultimate challenge

Achieving a work-life balance is one of the greatest challenges of our times, especially since the traditional eight-hour workday no longer seems the norm and clients and management are increasingly expecting "constant availability". Many people hope that by establishing their own companies, they will be in a better position to maintain the proverbial "work-life balance," yet it often remains elusive. This is also Jabu's sentiment: "One of my wishes when I set up Ligwa was to have more of exactly that. Needless to say, it hasn't really worked out that well on that front. It is something I consciously endeavour to address and improve on as much as I can."

Jabu's comparison of us as humans to the loadshedding situation we are so familiar with in South Africa leaves us with food for thought: "Anecdotally, we know what happened to our state energy supplier when power stations were run full throttle with minimal maintenance. Unfortunately for us humans, loadshedding may mean a total shutdown, and that's not what we want."

This is a thought worth considering.

So, what does Jabu do when not running an investigation as part of his strife towards a work-life balance?

Top of his list is travelling, and when that is not possible, one is likely to find him playing an odd round of golf - nothing beats the open air and feeling of nature on a course. He keeps active as much as he can. "I believe the biggest asset one could have is good health; and we need to invest in that. And," he adds, "I also try as much as I can not to take work home."

Closing thoughts

Despite his professional achievements, it is his humanity that matters most to him as he endeavours to keep good relations with everyone who crosses his path. Jabu's life motto of striving to get better all the time, because **"your best today may not be good enough tomorrow: both in one's professional and personal life,"** is one we should all strive towards. That, along with his sentiment about respect, we surely cannot expect to be respected if we do not always accord the necessary respect.

Jabu, your contribution to the forensic industry has been noted, not only as one of the founding members of the ICFP, but as a continued servant to the industry. And that deserves our gratitude and respect - and your honorary membership of the ICFP.

