

# A day in the life of Monja Smith: Connecting people and technology

In the world of IT, we often focus on systems, infrastructure and technology. But at the heart of it all are people – the ones who turn ideas into solutions. Monja Smith, Project Delivery Capability (PDC) Programme and Portfolio Manager at Stellenbosch University's IT Division, brings a deep understanding of this balance, combining strategic insight with a people-first approach.

Her role goes beyond managing projects or implementing technology. It's about connecting people, understanding their needs and ensuring that the tools they use truly support them. "Our core mission is to support, not dictate. We aim to create a central space for managing IT-related projects across the university, while balancing capacity, risk and stakeholder needs," she explains. "It's not just about management and systems – it's about understanding how people work and how technology fits into their world."



As PDC Programme and Portfolio Manager, Monja provides a structured, strategic overview of IT initiatives at the university. She helps ensure that projects align with institutional priorities, are feasible in terms of time and resources, and that their outcomes deliver real value. "We help projects to be implemented not just through oversight but by supporting the people who run them."

She draws on methodologies like PRINCE2 (Projects IN Controlled Environments), a globally recognised project management framework that emphasises clear roles, accountability and structured delivery stages. "PRINCE2 helps us manage risk, communicate better and stay aligned – but we always tailor it to the people and context."

No two days are alike for Monja. Her work is rooted in communication, collaboration and keeping projects on track. Agility is essential. "You have to expect the unexpected and be flexible," she says. Her success lies in understanding the unique environments of the university's many faculties and departments – and tailoring her support accordingly.

***"I didn't choose IT – IT chose me."***

Monja didn't plan on a career in IT. She studied marketing but became involved in her husband's IT consulting business, which sparked her interest in technology. "I didn't choose IT – IT chose me," she laughs. Her experience spans telecommunications, software development and finance, both locally and internationally. "Each job taught me something new, but when I came to SU, I felt like I'd found a place that excited me – full of fresh challenges and incredible people."

For Monja, IT has always been about people. "I work with people, not just systems," she says. "I want to understand how they work, what they need and how we can make their work easier. It's not about pushing solutions – it's about collaboration."

This people-first approach drives her work. She understands that not everyone in IT is a project manager, and not all stakeholders speak the same technical language. "I always say: meet people where they are. Adapt to their reality instead of expecting them to fit into yours." She also ensures that the projects she supports comply with security, governance and audit standards.

A key lesson Monja has learned is the importance of kindness. "Kindness isn't a weakness – it's a strength," she says. "It opens doors, builds trust and helps you accomplish more than technical skill alone."

She credits her team and the IT Division for embodying this value. "They're smart, wise and constantly learning – but they never lose sight of the human side of IT. People don't always see the pressure and dedication behind the scenes."

Outside of work, Monja has a deep love for ballet, opera, antiques and history. "I grew up in the theatre, so it's always been part of my life," she shares. She also draws strength from her faith, which she says has shaped her work ethic and grounded her throughout her career.

Monja is passionate about helping others harness technology to improve their work and believes this mission will only become more important as the digital landscape evolves. She reminds us that the best IT solutions understand and serve the people who use them. Collaboration, understanding and human touch transform technology into a powerful agent of change.