

From orchard to office

Anton Alexander, the 2016 Prestige Agri-Worker of the Year, made every opportunity count to work himself up from a seasonal worker to an HR officer.

By Leah Moodaley



Anton Alexander worked as an apple picker before working his way up to become personnel Officer.

Driving through a contrasting landscape of arid land and dense forest, you'll find a place nuzzled closely between Villiersdorp and Grabouw, just outside of Cape Town. Here you will find many farms rich in fruit, including Ouwerv Estate, with its sweet apples and pears. This is the farm that Prestige Agri-Worker of the Year 2016, Anton Alexander, has built his career on over the past 20 years.

Born in the Northern Cape's Victoria West in 1974, Anton grew up as one of three siblings raised by a single mother. After completing Grade 9, he made the decision to leave school and look for work. With a limited education and poor literacy skills, this was not an easy task. "I worked in the building sector because in the Karoo you either go into construction or something similar," Anton explains. "We did this thing called 'Ama'join', you know when everyone gets onto a bakkie to go look for work and gets dropped off after the work has been done." Anton persevered and worked odd jobs to earn his way, relocating to the Western Cape in the process.

In the absence of fear or hesitation, he grabbed hold of each opportunity that came

his way; the same way he would grab fruit from a tree in Vyeboom Valley a few years later in 1996. This is where he would spend the next two decades building a sound career in helping people.

"In 1994, I got onto a truck looking for work. I then came to Vyeboom Valley and started at Dennebos. When you think of fruit picking, you think of it as a four-month job and expect to spend the next six months without one. After the picking season, farm management decided that they would send some guys home and choose a few to stay behind to learn more about the farm. I was one of the lucky few chosen to stay behind and I started to enjoy learning new things - picking, pruning, and thinning."

Anton worked as a picker at Dennebos for two years before moving over to the Crookes Brothers at Ouwerv in 1996. "At that point, Ouwerv needed someone to work with the maintenance teams. Because of my background in building, it was easy for me and I was able to fit in. That's where it started. I was a general worker, and then a tractor driver; then I moved over to the production section in the orchards where I started to look



after teams during the harvesting season.” Anton goes on to explain how he took on various roles wherever the need arose or opportunity presented itself, from being a spray driver to operating a forklift. “It was interesting for me to learn new things because with limited education, opportunities are scarce.”

Anton explains that one of the biggest obstacles to progress is called a comfort zone. “I’ve seen workers with so much potential and I’ve offered them training and opportunities. They’ve told me ‘No... I’m happy where I am’. Some people are just not willing to explore anything outside of their comfort zone.” He adds that one of the best traits to have, and one that has helped him grow, is curiosity. “What we need in our business is a willingness to learn; people who want to know how things work. Gone are the days when you’re told ‘take this, put it there’ without knowing why. Now we ask why.”

In 2003, seven years after starting at Ouwerf, the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) literacy programme was introduced. Proving once again that opportunities are meant to be taken, Anton chose to join the programme. “They began with the ABET programme through Media Works and offered Maths and English. I joined and did very well at that point.” During this time, Anton not only took the opportunity to empower himself, he also took the time to help others as a shop steward and member of the worker’s forum on the farm. He explains his experience in the forum as simply “lekker”. “I really enjoyed my work. For me it’s always about finding solutions that work for both management and the workers. In 2008, I was offered a trial position as an assistant personnel officer. I remember speaking to the general manager and telling him ‘this is something new for me, I need guidance’ and he told me to find my way. I found my way. That’s just it. You need to find your way.” Anton explains that “his way” was about helping people.

For Anton, another significant part of the job was acknowledgement – not in the form of a prize or promotion, but in the form of trust and appreciation. “The other day someone asked me to do something for them. I asked, ‘Why are you asking me to do this for you? You should do this for yourself’.

The person told me that they want me to do it because they trust me. It’s things like this that make me go the extra mile for people. I’m also in a position now where I need to advise management and make sure that we don’t fall foul regarding legislation guiding the industry.”

Anton has come full circle in his career; learning and executing all aspects of the job – from the orchard to the office, from picking pears to pushing papers. “Because I understand the man

on the ground, I can be the link between him and management. I have realised that people management is about communication and understanding. The previous group HR manager told me that if you take everything personally when trying to resolve issues, you will never make it in this business. You need to be the middle man, analyse the situation, understand each person’s point of view and get the right message across.”

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Looking back, Anton laughs at the memory of his very first HR report. “It was a one-pager. Now my reports are too long to read. HR is about me being the link between management and workers.” He has also identified a lack of pride in the farming sector, and that he needs to develop people and help them find pride and happiness in what they do. “The perception of farm workers is that we are the lowest level of people – either illiterate or half schooled. I once approached someone to apply for a bursary to study agriculture and they told me that they don’t want to be a farmer; but there is so much more to farming.”

Anton describes the Prestige Agri-Worker Award as one of his greatest achievements. “This acknowledgement means that people can see that a farm is a place where you should want to be. There are things happening in the agricultural sector. Part of this award is about empowering people.”

Anton has built his focus around three things: “growing fruit, growing the business and growing people”. He now encourages young people to enter the sector by assisting them in applying for bursaries, changing perceptions of farming and spreading awareness of the many agricultural career paths. ●

PRESTIGE AGRI-WORKER 2016

In addition to winning the title of the Western Cape’s Prestige Agri-Worker of the Year 2016, Anton also won an iPad, a R20 000 Shoprite gift voucher, an overseas study tour valued at R60 000, and a R20 000 cash prize sponsored by the Western Cape Department of Agriculture. He also joined the competition’s previous winners as a member of the Minister for Economic Opportunities’ Prestige Agri-Worker Forum.