

Advancing S'pore's nation-building goals

This Iras scholar expected a job of endless calculations but she is shaping tax rules and reforms that power the country's progress

Standing in the monumental halls of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) headquarters in Paris last year, tax director Joanne Tan found herself at the crossroads of global tax policy.

Representing the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (Iras), the 36-year-old was helping to shape global rules that ensure multinational companies (MNCs) pay their fair share of taxes in the countries they operate.

A part of the rules – which was agreed upon by more than 140 nations – has been implemented in Singapore since January this year. Joanne explains that with these changes, the Government will collect taxes on certain profits made by Singapore-parented firms and MNCs operating here. These will contribute to state coffers for national development.

"This experience showed me how tax policy plays a big role in shaping Singapore's tax and economic landscape," she says.

Today, Joanne leads a branch of 22 officers responsible for income tax policy at Iras. Her team supports the Ministry of Finance with budget proposals, drafting tax legislation and providing technical guidance on tax issues. Her team also reviews policies to ensure Singapore's tax system remains competitive while supporting national social goals.

"Every tax dollar contributes to critical nation-building needs – from caring for our ageing population to building a more resilient healthcare system," she says. "It became clear to me that our work in Iras has a real impact on society."

In 2009, two years into her double degree in business management and accountancy at Singapore Management University, Joanne applied for the Iras Mid-Term Undergraduate Scholarship.

Back then, she shared the same preconceptions about working in the taxation industry as her fellow accountancy classmates.

"I initially assumed my job would largely involve sitting at a desk and crunching numbers with a calculator," she says.

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Joanne Tan
Recipient of the Iras Mid-Term Undergraduate Scholarship

But it turned out to be far more strategic than that.

Since her first posting as a senior tax officer in 2012, she has risen through the ranks over her 13-year career with Iras and been thrust into the heart of policymaking – from strengthening Singapore's tax landscape to negotiating international frameworks that influence the local economy.

Beyond tax assessments, Joanne works on projects to improve Iras' processes. For instance, she helped simplify tax filing, making it easier

for individuals and businesses to file their taxes more accurately.

In 2021, she pursued a master's in public administration at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy through the Iras Postgraduate Scholarship in 2021.

"While most of my peers had switched jobs for career development, I found my own growth through the different roles and projects I've taken up right here at Iras," she says.

"The postgraduate degree was another way to grow, especially since I wanted to stay in public service."

Nurturing lives and careers

As a tax director, Joanne is also helping her team discover that a career in tax can be just as dynamic as her own.

She consistently hones her coaching skills, setting aside an hour daily to chat or discuss work issues with her staff to foster an open environment for communication.

"I find it interesting that I can play a role in developing people in my current position," she says.

"I want them to get the same amount of satisfaction as I did from the work we do."

The skills that have made her an effective leader also serve another important role: being a mother of two young children, aged seven and four. Joanne tries to strike a good work-life balance despite the occasional late-night calls and business trips, proving that a high-flying career can coexist with family life.

She says: "I am thankful for where I am, and I want to be here, at this very moment, contributing in whatever way I can."



Iras tax director Joanne Tan leads a team of 22 officers to develop their career potential.
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