



# FINANCIAL LITERACY FOR YOUTHS



Journalism Article – Ms Natasha Mohd Zulkifli

by Ethan Ganes



## Through the Eyes of a Public Transporter: The Working World



**NATASHA ZULKIFLI** (left), a law graduate of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), is currently the Executive Vice President of the President and Group CEO’s Office at Prasarana Malaysia, Malaysia’s biggest public transport service operator. In early April, Journalist Ethan Ganes (right), from FLY: Malaysia’s Journalism Team, had the opportunity to interview her. In an hour long interview that zipped past, she shared her backstory and passion for her work, her views on a good working environment and how she achieves work-life balance. Topping it off, she also spoke about her efforts at paying it forward and her plans in the non-profit sector, leaving the journalist questioning his self-expectations, as good inspirational stories often do.



## **The Curious Case of Natasha Zulkifli (Backstory and Passion)**

While most people's adolescent interests fizzle out, Natasha's interest in the workings of ASEAN field has remained since her teen years, even as she moved on to her pre-university days. At a boarding school in New Zealand, she precisely recalled adding a line in her yearbook about wanting to be a consultant on International Trade. Growing with time, her interest led her to do European Union (EU) Law at the LSE which, by her own words, was "exhilarating". Today, that passion has come full circle with her sitting on the ASEAN Business Advisory Council and representing Malaysia in the Business Women's Working Group.

Her story, like many a good one, contains an interesting plot twist in the middle.

After completing her law degree, she came back to Malaysia, where she worked in the business field with her father. Upon the arrival of her first child, Laura, she made her stand, saying:

*"Look this is it. I want to focus on raising Laura (her daughter) because there's no one else to raise her and this is my job. You can't outsource this. I don't want to outsource this. She is mine to raise."*

With that she decided to dedicate her energy and effort into being a fulltime stay-at-home mom. She took seven years off the working life in what she quoted were her "Desperate Housewives days". She focused her time on teaching her children to be independent and take care of themselves.

As she shared this, however, she recalled nostalgically how she always knew she wanted to get back to work.

One pivotal night, her husband came back from a work event and mentioned that her old friends sent their regards. She realised these were people she had known for years and now that she was out of the field, she never saw them anymore. Since she had first gotten to know them, they had all climbed the corporate ranks. Feeling the need to get back up and out, she decided it was time.



Her first job thereafter was to work at an organisation called the Malaysia-Europe Forum, a platform to promote and strengthen Malaysia-Europe relations. Being a not-for-profit, the company eventually faced challenges with funding and operations, ending with its suspension. But the connections that Natasha made during her three years there led to another career move. This brought her to the Suruhanjaya Pengangkutan Awam Darat (SPAD) as Special Officer to the CEO. In her three and a half years with SPAD, she found herself and her confidence, and felt it was time to meet new challenges. In her search for a place where she could push her limits and utilize her strengths, she found herself at Prasarana, where she is doing International Relations today.

Natasha Zulkifli, someone who grew up knowing what she was passionate about, came full circle in her career. Having started off working for her father in business, she took seven years off to build up her family. She did what many of us find challenging to do which is to keep the passion in mind all the way, even when taking breaks. She went from the not-for-profit to the public transport industry, while continuously pursuing her love for international relations and the ASEAN dimension.

### **Achieving that Work-Life Balance**

When it comes to work, Natasha aims to provide world-class results that are accepted in every company, city, and country. In a company like Prasarana which has approximately 10,000 employees, there exists a network of interdependency which calls for immaculate people-managing skills to maintain high standards of work.

In any field of work, it is important to learn to manage people, as there is only so much bossing around people can take. Often, leaders in any field of work who are good at managing people can bring out the best in their employees. Natasha believes that *“If you can do that well, half the job is done.”* In submitting work to higher ups, she highlights that once you reach a certain level, *“The boss doesn’t want problems, he wants to know how you’re gonna solve them. You can’t bring problems to the boss, you have to bring: problem + solution.”*



In her career with Prasarana, she has enjoyed playing a part in helping the organisation find its place on the global map. In her experience in International Relations, she had the chance to speak at a CEO panel in Copenhagen. From there she was invited to join the Finance and Commerce Committee for the Metro Platform, where Prasarana was one of the only two Asian companies on the committee. A firm believer that it's not where you work, but who you work for, she enjoys her position at the company where she works under a boss who inspires her to work hard and try new things.

With a both heavy and vibrant career, this journalist was compelled to ask this question: "At this level of work, how does one obtain and maintain a good work-life balance?" A common answer is by having good time management, but Natasha's way of evening the scales is to make conscious efforts.

She accepts the good and the bad as they are in all spheres of life, and strives to focus on what is going right and positive. In her daily commute to work, she psyches herself up for a positive day -- "*summoning the energy from within,*" she calls it.

Natasha makes it a priority to spend quality time with her parents and have at least one meal together every weekend. She also ensures that they have a meal with her husband's parents so that her children will have fond memories with their grandparents. Through this she sets herself as an example for her children, showing them the values family ties and bonding.

Having to travel often in her line of work, she makes sure her children know that she is always there for them. Despite the distance between them, they make it a point to stay in contact. When her children call her up because they need to talk, she would, without fail, make time for them in her busy schedule.

Natasha's commitment to balance is comforting and encouraging to others, as it shows that even for someone in such a busy position there is always a way to achieve and maintain that elusive work-life balance.

## Prasarana - “Bringing Transport Convenience Closer To You”

### *The Bus Captains*

Prasarana Malaysia Berhad (Prasarana) is the biggest public transport service operator in the nation. Under its many offerings, it runs the bus services of Rapid KL, Rapid Penang, Rapid Kuantan, as well as the Bus Rapid Transit - Sunway Line. In the country, however, there has been an ongoing shortage of bus drivers. Natasha shared some insight into this issue.

To encourage the growth of this role, Prasarana has taken a spin to its image, from the rebranding of this occupation to “bus captain” all the way to establishing its Bus Academy. This not only challenges the stigma of the job position, but helps paint a more professional image. According to Natasha, however, the real challenge lies in the nature of the work. Driving the same routes day in and day out can prove to be a monotonous and stressful routine.

*“You get bored driving your car in the traffic jams, imagine the bus drivers. They can’t weave in and out.”*

Recognizing this, Prasarana takes the extra mile for its drivers. The organisation offers a salary of approximately RM 4000 to ensure competitive pay in the line of work. To take things further, Natasha also talks about how offering career progression could stimulate interest. Prasarana is looking to a future where it can operate services in other countries. Should this materialize, it would be good to explore the idea of offering good bus captains a chance to take their work and experience abroad.

Be it this way or another, she believes that providing a clearer career pathway for future bus captains would be the ultimate carrot in increasing this job’s attractiveness.

In terms of current recruitment efforts, Prasarana has signed a MoU with certain government bodies to help identify bus captain candidates and are considering opening up this position to retired army personnel. Open interviews are held approximately every fortnight all over the country. Training is provided for interested candidates to well equip them for the role.



## ***The Youth of Today***

One of the biggest challenges in the public transportation industry today is that many Malaysians view public transport as the last alternative. Despite the increasing interconnectedness, there are still a large number who insist on driving. Natasha points out that even with the upcoming projects like the MRT and its new routes, the root of this challenge is the accessibility: getting from one's homes to the stations.

The KPI to tackle this for the industry is to have a station or bus stop within 400 metres of every home. Unfortunately, the lack of proper footpaths to get to these stations on top of the hot and humid weather makes the walk tiresome, posing a challenge in terms of accessibility. Having said this, Natasha notes that Prasarana takes other efforts to make public transport more accessible in a variety of ways, such as offering free bus services in KL.

*“We are a car-driving society and we accept that. Just drive your car to the station, park your car and jump on the train.”*

Prasarana, seeing through this, has come up with an effective solution: the Park N Ride facilities at LRT and MRT stations. These facilities aim to encourage people to drive to stations and park their cars there, continuing their journey via public transport. While the number of people doing this has increased, a significant difference would be made if the top guns across industries and fields show their support by using public transport instead of relying on personal drivers. This would serve as a message that public transport is made for all, be it those in t-shirts or full suits.

## ***The Future?***

*“Here in the public transport space, our priority is to roll out the lines, provide comfortable, convenient, safe, integrated, and efficient services.”*

One thing to look forward to is transit-oriented development. For example, Prasarana is looking at creating more centres like KL Sentral to increase accessibility and connectivity. It is also looking to develop these areas by having apartments, hotels and offices within the same area.



On the topic of tech advancements and their applications in this industry, Natasha shared her opinion on autonomous forms of transport and cashless transactions in Malaysia. She believes it may take a while to implement autonomous transport in Malaysia as they would have to cover the large existing transport network.

Our country won't be using fully cashless transactions any time soon in this context as *“there will always be an uncle or aunty who only has cash”*. Natasha adds, however, that the country is already gearing towards that direction, with discounts and offers for cashless payments.

### ***Prasarana and People***

At present, Prasarana has over 10,000 employees who, as well as their spouses, get free travel benefits on public transport. Having a huge number of employees, Prasarana is on the lookout for talent. Where there is a need for hiring or strong justification for employment, the company strives to make space for these good talents. Prasarana is mainly in search of bus captains, engineers, and people with strong technical skills, due to the upcoming projects such as the MRT development.

### **Talking about a Rail-volution**

Towards the end of the interview, Natasha shares about her interests and ideas in giving back to society. As she points out her 13-year-old daughter's potential in becoming a good engineer, she also makes a critical observation.

*“When she graduates in 10 years' time, what is she going to do? Yeah great, she's an engineer, but what is she going to work as? So many young women are unaware of the potential that the public transportation industry will offer in 10 years. University students need to ask themselves this: “How will Malaysia look like when I graduate in 4 or 5 years' time?” ”*

This means that at the end of the day, finding out where their field of work is growing and where they can make a place for themselves is just as important as equipping themselves with skills and qualifications.





In her journey to help nurture the current and future generation in the public transportation industry, she came across Women in Rail UK sometime last year, and decided to approach the not-for-profit organisation. Recognising its potential to create opportunities and provide training for women in this industry, she set out to and is already in the midst of setting up a “Women in Rail Malaysia”.

*“This is for Laura, for girls like her, and for their parents to know that there’s an opportunity for their child in this industry.”*

Through the establishment of Women in Rail Malaysia, not only can they provide workshops and mentoring, they can also conduct outreach programmes that target high schools and universities to raise awareness of what this industry is like and its tremendous potential in the next ten years.

This project, as she quotes, is her baby, and way of paying it forward for 2017. Along the way, hurdles and potholes are inevitable, but she believes that if one’s “niat” (intention) is good, one’s path will be smoother.

## In Closing



In an hour's worth of back and forth conversation, this journalist has witnessed the learnings of years' worth of experience. Journeying with Natasha Zulkifli has left him with a lot to ponder on when it comes to challenges in the working world, the struggle of achieving work-life balance and insights into the future of the Malaysian public transportation industry. From the bottom of our hearts here at FLY: Malaysia, we thank you, Natasha and Prasarana, for taking us on this enlightening train ride.