Floris van der Leest:
I love it when I can make things happen, things that people think are not possible and I think, yes it should be possible and maybe work. Floris van der Leest, senior systems analyst at KAUST, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology near Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. I love the quote from Hannibal Smith of The A-Team. "I love it when a plan comes together."

Carla DeMarco:
When plans come together. Yes, The A-Team, that A-Team. For those of us old enough to remember the 80s action adventure TV show that featured such notable actors as George Picard and Mr. T, and for those of you who are not familiar, I pity the fool, but I'm sure you can find episodes to stream somewhere online.

Carla DeMarco:
On this episode of SRAI Shop Talk, we make the connection with that quote from the show for my guest, Floris van der Leest, a senior systems analyst at KAUST, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia.

Carla DeMarco:
Welcome to SRAI's Shop Talk. A monthly podcast that will feature research administration professionals from institutions great and small, from pre-award and post-award compliance in communications and everything in between. I'm Carla DeMarco based at the University of Toronto Mississauga, in the office of the vice principal of research.

Carla DeMarco:
This first series of the Shop Talk podcast its pathways and perspectives, and it will showcase leaders and research administration and at the Society of Research Administrators International to talk about their respective career paths, their roles within SRAI, and our profession overall. With the opening quote by Floris on today's episode, we learn more about the motivations that drive his work at KAUST. How he initially got into this area of research administration, his words of advice for those working in this field, and some of the changes he has seen in research admin and also expects to see going forward.

Carla DeMarco:
Floris has worked in research administration for over 20 years and his work has taken him to many different countries including the Netherlands, the UK, Australia, and now at KAUST in Saudi Arabia. Aptly named as the new international section president at SRAI in 2020, Floris has had an enduring association with SRAI. And he also talks about the value of participating in this kind of research administration association for professional and personal development.

Floris van der Leest:
At KAUST, I support data systems based on analyzing users needs. And I confer these needs into integrated solutions. That's a nice word for it. For example, from designing apps that make managing some awards more efficient for a post award team. And that's a thing I do at the moment. I create different kinds of apps and I basically analyze all kinds of data and clean it up. I create and maintain a
core data repository that allows for quick reporting on a lot of different matters. And for that I've created routines. So automatic routines that have standardized and produce clean data sets. I'm currently vetting grant management systems to see which one of them or which combination of them could cover the majority of our current processes and workflows. So that's what I do with KAUST.

Floris van der Leest:
At SRAI, I'm currently the president of the International section. And as such, I've taken the initiative of organizing the inaugural Virtual International Convention for Research Administrators, short VICRA. And that will run from the first to the third of March, 2022.

Carla DeMarco:
And how long have you been working in research administration?

Floris van der Leest:
I think that's up to about 21 years now.

Carla DeMarco:
And were you always working in the sort of analyst role?

Floris van der Leest:
I started at James Cook University in Australia in 2000, and I was first employed as a research information officer. And that was based on my track record in getting grants for volunteer organizations. And I did that in the Netherlands. And I did that in the UK, and also one of the first few years in Australia. And so I was there to manage the internal grant process. And then they had to do a report that was in the first six weeks I was there. They hired a consultant to do a big report for the government. First time they had to do such a report, I was so many years, and the guy was running a little bit behind schedule, and they asked me if I could do a few graphs, and then asked me if I could do a bit of data analysis, et cetera, et cetera. So when that report was finished and submitted, I said, "I don't want to do this ever again this way. we need a system that basically, uh, stores all this information in a neater way than we have currently." And I basically wrote a job description for a person that could do this. And then my boss said, "Can you do this?" I said, "No, I cannot. I've never done this thing before. This is what somebody should do." And then she said, "Can you give it a try?" I said, "I can always give it a try." And since then, I work in research information management.

Carla DeMarco:
And I just wonder, you had mentioned you worked in the UK and Australia and now you're in Saudi Arabia and in the Netherlands.

Floris van der Leest:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Carla DeMarco:
Is there a country that you have sort of on your wish list that you want to go to, to work in? (laughs)
Yeah, international man of mystery.

Floris van der Leest:
I... basically, when I finished here, I will go back to Australia first. I have a nice property there in the middle of the rainforest. Uh, and I want to chill out there for a few years. And in the meantime, I'm building a house in the Philippines. And that is my second port of call. And I build a house in a small village on the north coast of a big island.

Carla DeMarco:
That's amazing. Now just we were talking offline about green space, I think if you're going to be in the rainforest, you'll have lots of green space.

Floris van der Leest:
Exactly. (laughs)

Carla DeMarco:
And so, uh, you did mention how you started out in information, in research administration. But how did you end up in that field to begin with? Was it something that you had decided you wanted to go into?

Floris van der Leest:
No. I am a biologist by nature. And I never did very much with my biology degree. I then first worked in nature and environmental education, helping all kinds of groups to be more environmental friendly. And in the UK, I did something similar for the bridge trust for conservation volunteers. And then I moved to Australia, I did something similar there for Australians, just for conservation volunteers, and the Marina Coastal Community Network. And then via side door, I came into university. I first get a environmental report for them, then I wrote something about intellectual property for students. And then they asked me to become the research information officer to work on internal grants, and the rest of the story, you know now.

Carla DeMarco:
And of course, you know, if for any of us who have been in research administration for a while, we have seen a lot of changes. But I'm just wondering what kinds of changes have you seen? And how have you seen research administration evolved since you've been working in this area?

Floris van der Leest:
One of the things that I think in... happens mostly in the western world or in the English speaking western world is that there have been big moves over the last few years to professionalize the business administration. So there's been bodies like SRAI, with [inaudible] all over the place that have tried to give people a better foundation when they start in research administration. European funding... big European funding has forced almost other universities in other countries to speed up this process. And international sponsorship for big projects in Africa and Asia have forced some of these Universities to
also think more about professionalizing their admin staff. So that's what I see really happening in our work field. And a second thing, and that's what I helped myself, things to do, more and more things will be done automatic.

Carla DeMarco:
Absolutely. And again, this ties into what other changes do you see going forward?

Floris van der Leest:
I think was just a report of the future of work, the report has been updated. And then you look at it. And then what they expect is that... and then what you see as well as digitalization of work processes will happen more fast, and COVID only increase that push to do that. And then you will see a decrease in demand for data administrators, you will have a decreasing amount for accounting and payroll staff, you will see less customer service workers. And basically that means also probably less resource administrators.

Carla DeMarco:
Get through to that automation of things, right?

Floris van der Leest:
Yeah.

Carla DeMarco:
And what do you feel is the most rewarding part of your job?

Floris van der Leest:
I think I love the quote from Hannibal Smith of The A-Team, "I love it when a plan comes together." I really love it when I can basically make a routine that really works and has almost no false positives and runs all by itself continuously without any problems. I love it when I can make things happen, things that people think are not possible. And I think yes, it should be possible and make it work. I love it also when I can share my knowledge and experience with other people.

Carla DeMarco:
Yeah. And I think some of the points you've just raised kind of harken back to your initial, how you got into research administration, because you said, they wanted to find a more efficient way to do, you know, the work that you were doing, and I think that also ties into the response that you've just given, is that it's finding these sorts of ways to make things more smoothly run, and-

Floris van der Leest:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Carla DeMarco:
You know, this podcast is going to come out at the end of 2021. So we have to think about maybe we're going to be in December, but we're going to be talking about people getting involved with SRAI who are international participants. And so I'm wondering if you could say what you think the value is in getting involved with an organization like SRAI.

Floris van der Leest:
I think it depends a little bit on where you are in the world. If you are in, let's say, Australia, and in some of the English speaking countries in Europe, then you will find there is a national and even an international organization. We can learn things about research administration. We can talk to colleagues, they organize events, et cetera. When you're in Africa, that is a little bit harder. There is [inaudible] and [Saaremaa], but there's a lot of countries Africa are not covered.

Floris van der Leest:
You see that in Eastern Europe, also slowly building up now is, is slowly building up in Greece and in Spain. So for those who have no umbrella organization or representative organization nearby, I think SRAI can do a really good job, and they can at least give the basics of business administration and teach that and give a, a kind of community where they can connect with each other.

Carla DeMarco:
Yeah, that's a great answer. You know, you touched on this a little bit already, but it's hard to have a conversation without talking about the pandemic situation. I'm just wondering what you feel has been one of the most challenging things to work through over the course of this.

Floris van der Leest:
If you work with data, and bringing data things together and work on screens, that was not a big challenge. I started working from home, and the biggest challenge was getting my IP address at home recognized by the university. And that only took a few days. So I had to call after that, and it's just plain sailing. And another way, what I found was really an issue, especially in the beginning, when I was didn't get used to it. What I usually do is I have a quick chat with someone. If I have a problem, and I don't know how to solve it. I just walk into someone's office and say, "Do, do you have five minutes, can I chat with you about something?"

Carla DeMarco:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Floris van der Leest:
And when you formulate the problem to the other person, by just formulating it in such a way that they can understand it, you usually have solved the problem already. So while I talk, I basically have already fixed it, and the other person doesn't have to do anything. So I have found now ways of doing that for myself at home. (laughs)
Carla DeMarco:
That's true though.

Floris van der Leest:
Yeah, so you become your own backup person, basically.

Carla DeMarco:
Yeah. It's kind of the same for our researchers that you just have to find these new creative ways to handle a situation just because of everything that we're all dealing with. So it's drawing on people's creativity I think. That's for sure.

Floris van der Leest:
Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Carla DeMarco:
And so this could be for people who have either been in research administration for a while, or people who are just getting into it. But what words of wisdom or advice would you have for people in this field, or just starting out in this field, or, you know, alternatively, if there's something that you wish that you had known when you were starting out in research administration?

Floris van der Leest:
One of the things that I always found in my position, there is usually only one guy in Australia, one guy or girl like me. So you look for other people other universities to work with. And, um, that's why I set up all kinds of connections within Australia. Here in Saudi, that's a bit harder, and I can understand it for some people that are further away from peers that that is a bit harder as well.

Floris van der Leest:
So I would say, find yourself, try to find a mentor, somebody that has been longer in the job than you do at another institution, and try to find an, an institution that's a bit further away from your hometown. Because this is good, because they will give a different perspective on things. Another way, if you just start with a job, I would try to reduce the steepness of your learning curve. I would attend workshops that are offered somewhere that are a little bit to do with what you do. I would do intensive training sessions, all those kinds of things, especially to... in the beginning, when you need that little bit of, uh, on the job is going pretty slow. So you need to be picking up the s- pace pretty hard.

Floris van der Leest:
Another thing what I would recommend anyone is to broaden your horizon. Go around, look at places, get to know other places, it will really open your eyes and accept a lot more from people, you become a lot more tolerant. And develop and nurture soft skills. And this is, I think, for the near future where digitization comes along, it's very important to know how to persuade things, how to negotiate, how to do critical and analytical thinking, how to think creatively and being able to change.
Carla DeMarco:
Yeah, that's great advice. Because I think a lot of times, we don't focus as much on the soft skills, and they are so crucial for being good at what you do, I think.

Floris van der Leest:
Oh, and especially for, let's say, in a few years time, the human side of our jobs will be so important to keep us humans in the job, basically.

Carla DeMarco:
Yeah, absolutely. And so this is also meant to be a little bit more of a personal side, getting to know some of our SRAI members, and maybe find some commonalities. But is there something in that you'd like to share that you'd like to do outside of work or something, an interesting fact that people at SRAI might not know about you?

Floris van der Leest:
Pre-COVID, let's say two years ago, I still enjoy traveling a lot. And I, I don't like to travel in the countrysides, I'll go on safaris or just looking in mountain ranges, but I also like to wander through cities and explore cities. And before I started working at KAUST, I enjoyed all kinds of cultural and artistic expressions. Any kind of performance, any exhibitions, art house movies. (laughs) I also like the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I'm also into big blockbusters.

Floris van der Leest:
I spent the first few years of my life on a farm, that was only the first five years, but basically, when I will start retiring, I will go back to the green and basically be growing my own veggies somewhere in the valley. And eat fresh food as well as the Philippines. So I think that little bit of the arty stuff, and a little bit of an edgy stuff.

Carla DeMarco:
Yeah. And though, you know, you've said that you do enjoy these cultural events. Uh, I'm just curious because I know that a lot of museums and galleries have tried to make an effort to offer, you know, some of their exhibitions online and all that.

Floris van der Leest:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carla DeMarco:
Did you participate in any of these sort of online cultural events?

Floris van der Leest:
No, not really. No. I try to watch music online-
Carla DeMarco:
Yeah.

Floris van der Leest:
... and, uh, live music online, and it doesn't do the same thing for me as being a part of the audience sweating in the front row, seeing the sweat on the faces of the performers kind of thing. And it's that whole human interaction you have when you... when the audience is also next to you and sweating at the same time. Those kind of things are really making that whole thing to me special.

Floris van der Leest:
Same as in a museum, you're just as... enjoy as much the art as the building where they are in most of the time. No, I'm not really a person for online enjoyment. The only thing what I'd love to do online is basically watching movies and those kinds of things.

Carla DeMarco:
I totally agree with what you're saying, because I feel like what is lost when you're trying to see some of these exhibitions online... You know, there was an exhibition here in Ontario of David Bowie's work-

Floris van der Leest:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carla DeMarco:
Like quite a few years ago now. It was actually before he passed away, but-

Floris van der Leest:
Yup.

Carla DeMarco:
... I went to that, and I brought my kids, and they were really taken away with everything that we saw, because it was a great exhibit, but they had one of his costumes that he wore, and they had it set up as though he was standing there. And I could see this costume online somewhere. But there really was something to be able to walk near it, get a sense of his stature, because he was quite a petite person.

Floris van der Leest:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carla DeMarco:
Like he would never get that same feeling if you weren't actually seeing it in person. And then they, you know, they sort of made this whole room seem like a concert hall. And it was just so exciting to be in that space. Yeah, there's no way that they can replicate that experience online, right?
Floris van der Leest:
Not really, I think. And... but I, I applaud everybody who tries to do these kinds of things. But I think if you experienced it the other way-

Carla DeMarco:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Floris van der Leest:
... then I still can wait until it's possible again. If it will never be possible again, I think then it's their only choice. (laughs)

Carla DeMarco:
Yeah, I know. (laughs) That's true. Yeah. What other option is there really?

Floris van der Leest:
Yeah.

Carla DeMarco:
That's great. And thank you so much for your time. It's nice to be able to have a chance to chat with you.

Floris van der Leest:
Good.

Carla DeMarco:
Thank you so much, Floris.

Floris van der Leest:
Nice, nice to see you as well.

Carla DeMarco:
I would like to thank everyone for listening to this episode of SRAI's Shop Talk. I would especially like to thank my guest, Floris van der Leest, for taking the time out of his busy schedule to tell us about his work as a systems analyst at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia.

Carla DeMarco:
And fun fact about my Mr. T reference in today's intro, while Mr. T was famous for saying that line, he never actually said it on the A-Team TV show.

Carla DeMarco:
I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the shaping of the series and podcast, especially our wonderful podcast committee posse, which consists of Debbie Appler, Jim Mitchell, Evan Roberts, Debra
Schaller-Demers, Nathan Vanderford, Rene Vaughn, Katie Watkins, and myself, Carla DeMarco. Your enthusiasm, great ideas, spirit and dedication has helped to make this project fun.

Carla DeMarco:
If you would like to submit a suggestion for a series for SRAI Shop Talk, or if there is someone you would like to see featured, please send the suggestions my way at car.deMarco@utoronto.ca.

Carla DeMarco:
Thank you.