

# Row, row the research boat

Industry needs solutions to its problems; business schools have the means to research them. CARIN SMITH investigated and found all parties more than ready to head for the water and row this boat together.



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– Prof John Powell, USB



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– Louis Bruwer, Sasol Technology

**B**ALANCE MAY BE an over-used word in the business world. The market place strives for post-recession *balance* and stressed-out employees struggle to *balance* rapid technological changes and increased corporate demands.

“The South African wine industry used to consist mainly of family businesses. Now these businesses are complex entities where a *balance* must be achieved between many workplace imperatives. Yet companies often focus on a few aspects such as production or marketing and not really on other management aspects,” explains Thys Lombard, marketing director of Tokara Wines outside Stellenbosch.

“Today, even soft issues like people skills are likely to determine business success. Balance is very important for a business,” he insists.

“Business schools can research how changes in the world and in the workplace have altered consumers’ and employees’ needs. Marketing is not simple when Lady Gaga has 4,8 million Twitter fans.”

Input that Lombard received via the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) saved costs and enabled vital market research for Tokara wines to enter into

the USA and Denmark.

“Innovation is important, but how do consumers relate to screw tops for instance? Business schools can find answers,” he says.

Abdullah Khan, a shared services project manager on a major capital project at Impala Platinum, says, unless research issues are long-range ones, the best research for business schools to do involves moving targets. Therefore, it is imperative for academia and industry to work more closely together.

Khan won the USB prize for the top MBA research report in 2009 and graduated *cum laude*. His case study, using different research methods, improved the manufacturing execution system at Impala’s base metals refinery. He solved many niggly problems and found unique solutions for more improvements.

He lauds his research supervisor, Prof Wim Gevers, for challenging him via constructive criticism to stretch his capabilities and think out of the box.

“In a business environment undergoing continuous change and a defined need to fast track skills improvement in South Africa and greater Africa, training strategies and practices are under increasing pressure >



Thys Lombard,  
Tokara Wines



Dr Lee le Roux,  
InterAlios



MC Botha,  
USB-ED



Prof Frikkie Herbst,  
USB

to develop a more productive and skilled workforce,” says Dr Lee le Roux of InterAlios.

Her USB PhD research showed a positive link between improved levels of job-specific knowledge and productive behaviour, and changed the ways in which training and human resource development are applied in certain institutions. In addition to knowledge and on-the-job behaviour improvements, learning retention scores after the implementation of her model increased dramatically.

For Prof John Powell, director of the USB, the relationship between business schools and industry is like two people in a boat. One is a strong paddler and the other knows the river. Each has different and mutually essential skills.

“Industry can decide to fund specific research, while business schools can dare to ask inconvenient questions and take an independent view,” says Powell. “Neither knows best. They just know different things.”

Industry’s agenda is proximate and contemporary. Research, however, is a frame-making activity allowing a series of proximate enquiries to form an understandable pattern for longer-term investigation.

In order to continue to build on well-

established connections between the USB and industry, Powell will liaise with the USB advisory board to establish broad needs in industry and to identify specific projects of mutual benefit.

Prof Marius Ungerer, a lecturer in Strategy at the USB, believes that in a complex world the future of business research is based on interdisciplinary cooperation. The USB’s recent participation with Middlesex University on a global study on brand recognition is an example.

“In the MBA programme we want to teach students to do systematic research, whereas in the PhD programme they have to create new knowledge – employable knowledge,” says Prof Frikkie Herbst, head of doctoral research at the USB.

Some of the research USB PhD students are doing include cutting-edge research on management of technology (MOT), ethics and corporate governance. He wants to see more of such cutting-edge research at the business school.

“The recession has made research more crucial. In Europe, academia and industry have a far greater synergy, something business schools in South Africa should be more proactive about,” Herbst concludes.

The crux for Dr John Morrison, a research councillor at the USB, and

Dr Carol Puhl-Snyman, a lecturer in Research Methodology, is not only the creation of knowledge, but for business schools to be more active in making such knowledge accessible to business leaders. Too much research merely gathers dust on library shelves.

The latest example of a win-win situation is an agreement between the University of Stellenbosch Business School, USB Executive Development (USB-ED) and Sasol Technology. Sasol engineers will allow USB MBA students to do research at Sasol along guidelines provided by the company.

The idea was born when MC Botha, head of the Centre for Project Management Intelligence at USB-ED, taught project management at Sasol Mining (Technology) last year.

“We need to stay relevant to industry,” explains Botha.

“We, in industry, are entangled in solving daily problems and do not have time to look at the bigger picture. Hopefully the students can find innovative solutions,” says Louis Bruwer, who is in charge of project management and control at Sasol Technology.

Sasol Technology spends between R6 billion and R12 billion per annum on projects. If the research can improve a process even by 10%, it would already mean a big saving.

“The danger of having lots of experience in an industry is that one turns to familiar ways in emergencies. Maybe the students can provide innovative solutions,” says Bruwer. “We are excited and a bit nervous. At least the process will keep all of us on our toes!” **a**

## To discuss your research needs

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