

The USB Alumni Association's national chairman believes in doing his bit to strengthen society. SIERAAJ AHMED spoke to George Woods about why alumni associations are important to graduates and universities alike.

STRENGTHENING TIES

He's gone from theology to management studies via the University of Stellenbosch Business School, to an MBA from the Business School Netherlands and computer science studies via the University of Oxford. Now the newest role of George Woods, as national chairman of the USB Alumni Association, sees him bringing the passion and energy he's thrown at everything else to the challenge facing alumni associations worldwide: how to involve alumni and keep them in the *alma mater* family.

"Our challenge is to grow the number of active alumni in the Association and create a home for USB alumni, while also growing the School's brand and gaining exposure for the School," he says.

Woods joined the USB's alumni body after completing USB-ED's Management Development Programme (MDP) in 2002. "I started my business studies relatively late and felt the Association might open doors to an academic life I'd never been exposed to."

Before he was elected national chairman in April 2011, Woods had been one of between 400 and 500 alumni active in the Association's Gauteng region. "Nationally, we have several thousand graduates on our database, and one of the things we're focusing on is getting more alumni excited about the activities of the Association."

Woods was born and grew up in Johannesburg and after matriculating in 1992 kicked off his career in the credit office of a leading SA department store. His aptitude for project management saw him snapped up by Accenture (formerly Andersen Consulting), where he worked as a business analyst. After joining Nedbank Ltd in 2000, he completed an undergraduate certificate in Theology and the USB-ED's MDP.

"Before the MDP, I felt intimidated by the idea of an MBA, but after completing the MDP I immediately registered to do an MBA via the Business School Netherlands."

Because of his belief in life-long learning, Woods completed the Gordon Institute of Business Science's Nexus II Leadership

Development Programme after his MBA, and is near completion of an advanced diploma in data and systems analysis via the University of Oxford.

In his current position as a divisional technology officer for Nedbank Group Technology, Woods is responsible for implementation of technology services related to foreign exchange and commodities trading.

Woods is actively involved in society. He preaches regularly at the Methodist church in Bedfordview, Johannesburg. He is also the local constituency chairman for the Democratic Alliance and a volunteer for the Lambano Aids Sanctuary and the Save the Children Foundation.

Changing South Africa for the better is a priority for most of the alumni he's met. "The Association tries to be outwardly focused in terms of ploughing back and fundraising. The alumni's positive energy is specifically directed toward charities and bursaries for deserving students who can't afford an MBA or other management studies."

Woods acknowledges that, like alumni

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associations the world over, it is a challenge for the USB Alumni Association to convince alumni to remain active in *alma mater* activities. "The appeal of being active in your alumni association depends to a large extent on how attractive the association's events are and what value the school and its Association can add," Woods says. "Of course, many people are members of their alumni association for personal benefit – because events provide opportunities for networking with influential business people – but I've noticed that most active members share a desire to give something back to their society."

'Our challenge is to grow the profile of the Association and create a home for USB graduates'

Woods views a loyal alumnus as someone "who promotes his or her *alma mater* and alumni association through positive word of mouth; someone who's willing to reinvest."

It's difficult to define a typical Alumni Association committee member, he says. "Our committee is quite mixed in terms of gender, race and age. The most common thread is that members are people who have been successful themselves; highly networked

people who are very aware of their surroundings and want to make a difference."

He believes alumni associations benefit the alumni more than the school. "Of course, if the graduate feels positive towards the school, the school will benefit in the long run. It's a mutually beneficial relationship. Through networking and other opportunities, alumni are exposed to people who may be able to help them solve a problem they've encountered at work. That pool of contacts is just one benefit that makes alumni association membership valuable."

The Association has alumni chapters around the world, including in the UK, Germany, and in East and West Africa. "An immediate goal is to draw closer to those groups," Woods says. As a current Oxford student, he's been able to attend some of that university's various alumni events during his fortnightly visits over the past two years. "I've learnt that Oxford battles the same problems, despite the power the university's name holds worldwide. Their events are very similar to ours – wine tastings, guest speakers, networking events – and I am learning from their most successful events and innovations in communicating with alumni."

Woods has a very clear idea of what's next. "Eventually I want to start my own IT consulting business. Ultimately I want to be financially free in order to work for the United Nations and pursue a humanitarian life."

A quick glance over Woods's CV leaves us in no doubt that he'll be at the UN sooner than he thinks. **a**



GEORGE WOODS

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GEORGE'S TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Emotional intelligence is more important than your IQ for surviving in today's business world.
- You need to be spiritually centred and have a belief in something greater than yourself.
- Learn more about your Adversity Quotient (AQ), which indicates how adaptable you are to changing circumstances. This is especially important in a rapidly changing society based on diversity, such as South Africa's.
- Remember to have fun and be passionate about whatever you decide to do.

PHOTOGRAPH: SUPPLIED

For more information about the USB's Alumni Association go to www.usb.ac.za/Alumni