

MBAid inspires Henley UK MBA students

By [Stephen Timm](#)

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Four years ago, amid the 2008 global financial crisis, mortgage banker James Wiedenhoef - having refused to sell the sub-prime housing mortgages that set the crisis off - closed his US firm, bought a sailing boat and took to the Caribbean.

"I bought a boat, refitted it and raised my middle finger to the whole lot," he said. But after his boat caught fire and he was picked up by a freighter, Wiedenhoef was forced to rethink things. He headed to the UK to do an MBA with Henley Business School to understand more about why he had been successful in business before.

But it was during a visit with fellow MBA students to Cape Town - through one of Henley's MBAid programmes - where he was to experience a paradigm shift after he and his group were paired with South African social enterprise Nexii.

He was one of a number of MBA students who visited five non-profit organisations and social enterprises in the city.

Profit tied with a social purpose

Now a more optimistic Wiedenhoef believes that the future is one in which profit is tied with a social purpose. He believes that profit-makers still have a role to play - in making social enterprises and NGOs operate more efficiently and in getting the market to fund them, especially with funding from the rich world drying up after the 2008 crisis and amid the Euro crisis.

"If you don't have filthy capitalists getting involved in this, the funding is going to dry up," he points out. Yet many people still view the social and business sectors as two distinct areas - almost as different as good and evil," he said. "But it doesn't have to be like this.

"If finding a way to feed Africa means making a whole lot of money, then that's the ideal. That's what this MBA programme has got us thinking about and that's what I'll bring back, because I didn't have that thought before. They can work together very, very well and you can do it for your mind and you can do it for your heart."

How to apply business models to real organisations

Sheilla Wambua from Kenya was also working in the financial sector when the 2008 crisis took hold. She left her job in an investment company to do an MBA to help her improve her career, but said her time spent in South Africa with a non-profit company that assists women to start their own businesses, inspired her.

Practical interventions such as the one she was involved with in assisting non-profit Mhani Gingi, has helped her think more deeply about how to apply business models to real organisations. "It just made me realise that it doesn't take 50 people to start something that can empower women in the community. It doesn't take a million dollars to open a small little nursery where children can start getting education at a basic level."

She was particularly inspired by the Mhani Gingi founder Lillian Masebenza: "Seeing one woman doing it made me realise that I can do that for Kenya, for my people."

The 2008 crisis has also shown that social enterprises and NGOs have an increasing role to play and that business can also learn from their social people-centred approach, said MBA student Luv Chaturvedi from India.

A long, slow, painful recovery

"The world has seen what happened in 2008 and it's been recovering and it's been a long, slow, painful recovery. I don't think the world is quite ready to get into a cycle like that again," said Chaturvedi, who assisted women's fertility organisation Marie Stopes in South Africa. He believes that MBA students could help NGOs to put in place sustainable management practices and tangible, measurable outcomes.

"An elitist view is that NGOs shouldn't exist and society and the world should be equal, and that you shouldn't really need to help other people because everyone is able to sustain themselves.

"Unfortunately that's not the world we live in. The world we live in is a world of contrasts; NGOs are a great conduit for developing people to become self-sustaining," he said.

Many of the MBA students were also struck by the diversity of South Africa - both in its various cultures and in the gap between the rich and poor.

Another student on the programme, Seema Khan from the UK, has been to South Africa a number of times, including a visit before the country's first democratic elections, but said she had noticed that a real sense of national pride had developed in the country since the end of apartheid.

"I think one of the things that was a massive revelation for me this week was how much of a community spirit there is in South Africa," she said.

Philip Loukart from Germany said that given its past history and the current tough period of transformation, he hadn't expected to see as many business opportunities and as much passion in South Africa as he had seen during his visit. He said that the visit to South Africa had helped him to become more aware of social responsibility and social differences.

A lot of opportunities

Nasser al-Maslmani from Qatar, was also struck by the country's diversity.

"There are a lot of opportunities here and there are a lot of smart people; it just needs the right support and direction," he said, pointing to the Alan Gray Orbis Foundation as one such organisation in the country that provides support.

He and his group assisted the foundation, which provides bursaries and support to university students with promising entrepreneurial or leadership ability, to provide solutions to improve its retention rate.

Before joining the MBA programme, Al-Maslmani headed a training development division at a liquefied natural gas community and government training programme, and said that he enjoyed learning from the experience of other students on the programme.

"You learn from the different situations, different cultures, different perspectives, including the interactions in the lectures. Henley creates a whole new flavour for learning which is why I chose Henley," he said.

The Dean and director of Henley Business School Africa, Jon Foster-Pedley, said that the business school is determined to shape a new generation of leaders that builds businesses that not only generate financial wellbeing, but that also help create rich lives and healthy societies.

"This is not rhetoric, it's our core purpose. It means engagement, empathy and beating greed within ourselves and around us," said Foster-Pedley.

ABOUT STEPHEN TIMM

Stephen Timm writes on small business in emerging economies through his regular blog Small Business Insight. He is currently a writer and editor for Ventureburn.com

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