

# Managing diversity well a key to business success today

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Engaging with diversity and genuinely appreciating the value of different perspectives in the workplace offers the opportunity to harness very real benefits for South African organisations. So says Associate Professor Chris Breen who will run a programme in diversity management in association with the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) this August.



The programme, called Embracing Complexity and Diversity, encourages new ways of thinking about what makes an organisation tick.

“Individuals and organisations are operating in an increasingly competitive, complex business environment that is constantly throwing out new challenges,” explains Breen. “The demand for effective action is expanding – but ironically, conventional methods of operating are actually contracting the space needed to develop contemporary solutions.”

To put it more plainly, the old way of solving problems with a top-down, mechanistic approach which assumes there is only one way – most usually the boss's way – to proceed, is short-sighted and indeed impractical.

Breen says that conversely, in the modern business world, flexibility and the ability to draw on a wide range of resources are far more valuable than following a prescribed pattern. The organisation that embraces new interpretations and fresh perspectives, is the organisation that will deal most effectively with real-time problem processing.

“The most logical and, indeed, natural way to maximise on the different experiences found within an organisation is to recognise and harness the strengths of a diverse workplace,” he says.

In South Africa, much has been said and legislated in terms of enhancing the workforce diversity of companies. But reaping the full benefits of diversity within a business is not just about race, gender, culture, and getting the numbers right. It's about opening up to new ways of seeing, being challenged and even being surprised or confused, and learning how to genuinely value what others have to say.

Embracing Complexity and Diversity will help businesspeople break free from habits which restrict access to multiple perspectives, and open minds to the many contributions and insights that others make.

“All too often, we tend to listen only to people who are like us, or who say what we want to hear. We shut down the space for hearing different opinions, and we engage with those who reinforce our thoughts. We tend to play it safe, in other words,” says Breen. “This is a limiting way for an organisation to operate.”

An alternative way is to reap the full benefits of a diverse workplace by recruiting many different perspectives and experiences.

Simply put, every situation has the potential to elicit a range of responses. By acknowledging the value of these responses, the options for problem-solving are increased. It's the old adage of strength in numbers, adapted to suit a new business landscape.

"Engaging with diversity is about listening to what people have to say, and about genuinely appreciating the value of different perspectives," says Breen.

"In South Africa, we have a huge opportunity to transform the way we do business by engaging proactively with diversity. In this way, organisations will find themselves in a strong position to meet the demands of the competitive contemporary business environment."

The UCT GSB Executive Education unit has a global top ten rating in 2005 and 2006 from the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the business school was rated as the leader in diversity management in the Financial Mail this June.

For more information of the programme, contact (021) 406 1346 or visit [www.gsb.uct.ac.za/complexity](http://www.gsb.uct.ac.za/complexity).

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