

# TEAM SOUTH AFRICA

## How you can play a role

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GET GOING – RIGHT? NOT IF YOU'RE PREPARED TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY A BRAND NEW ECONOMY, ONE WHERE YOU STAND TO MAKE A SIGNIFICANT MARK.

'In a young country, there is always room for the self-motivated to lift themselves above the crowd,' observes Tanya Vandenberg director of Three Ring Circus (a youth marketing company which develops educational roadshows such as the Standard Bank Rocking Future Roadshow), pointing out that in a country where the economy is still in its developing stages, competition for skilled jobs is lower than in developed economies.

Claire Opperman, lecturer at Rosebank College in Johannesburg, agrees that South African graduates are in a unique position: yes, the country faces challenges, but our social and political milieu creates fertile ground for lateral-thinkers. In fact, she says, South Africa has become a continental leader in the provision of high quality graduates who can answer the demands of a rapidly globalising, information driven world.

'With South Africa's present skills-scarce economy, there are many opportunities for growth, promotion and entrepreneurship,' Opperman insists. 'Graduates from South African tertiary institutions can contribute to our economy in a number of ways – this country is a pulsating mix of traditional and modern cultures and among the co-existence of first world infrastructure and third world developmental challenges, South Africa is a highly advantageous country for growth and development. It is a country in the midst of change, where modern solutions based on in-depth studies

are being developed in response to a number of the world's most critical tribulation and challenges.'

Opperman is of the opinion that the ordeals faced by the country have helped to forge its mettle. South African graduates, she says, have a unique role to play thanks to their appreciation of human rights, ethics and justice, which makes them prime advocates for improving the sustainability of the environment and the economic sector. 'Input to these sectors creates a sense of assurance and development within many economic fields, and graduates can apply positive transformation, direction and expertise which provide value-added services to that sector.'

While these attributes would make South African graduates an asset to any company in the world, Opperman maintains that it is in their own country that they stand to reap the greatest rewards. She points out that despite the current economic climate, South Africa has enjoyed sound growth in recent years, thanks to the implementation of solid policies. 'Added to this, high commodity prices and constructive global fiscal environments have benefited the markets,' she points out.

Opperman further believes that 'out of crises emerge the greatest leaders. Challenges unite people and make them think more resourcefully. South Africa is a seed of opportunity for entrepreneurs who can contribute to transformation. And, in utilising their skills, graduates in the workplace can impact on South Africa's political, economic, cultural and social transformation.'

But it's not only in the office that young South Africans can make a difference. With many communities crying out for upliftment, here is a chance to make a tangible contribution to the country's development. Both Opperman and Vandenberg note that most South African companies have corporate social investment (CSI) programmes in place, which makes it that much easier for people who would like to volunteer their time or resources, but aren't sure how. According to Vandenberg, 'Most companies are willing to listen to their employees' ideas regarding new avenues of CSI. In

contrast, in more developed countries, the need to give back is frequently overlooked. I think being part of a relatively young nation gives huge scope for meaningful contributions.' The ultimate way for a graduate to give back whilst building their own skills, she says, is by taking an African gap year, volunteering in a country where there is great need.

Opperman, meanwhile, has this to say: 'Volunteer work and CSI projects are traits of a vigorous, dynamic society. Studies have shown that volunteers take pleasure in physical, physiological and societal rewards from voluntary actions, discovering their own management strengths and potential through assisting others.' There are other spin-offs, too, that go beyond the straightforward outcomes of the CSI project. Opperman informs that voluntary activity in the community is associated with better wellbeing, lower crime rates, improved educational performance, economic growth and greater life satisfaction. 'Hence, communities with public and society engagement are also communities that have environments cultivating positive outcomes.'

Looking at the economic sector, Opperman continues, CSI projects allows for an understanding of broad-spectrum project management and business ideologies – so the fact that South African companies encourage employee involvement in these areas is a further benefit to graduates. 'Creating a network of sharing amongst practitioners, CSI projects help build extensive partnerships and generate flagship projects. Combining these projects with commercial initiatives will allow businesses and entrepreneurs to be visible at grass roots level – and in this way, CSI can become a tactical business imperative and a business tool.'

All told, it's undeniable that South Africans face challenges perhaps unheard of in other countries. But at the same time, they afford learnings, experiences and opportunities also foreign in other parts of the world. 'It's up to you, as the graduate, to empower yourself through further education and training. Make sure you're equipped to meet the opportunities that come your way by networking with other trade sectors and participating in joint programmes that will assist vocational aptitude and development,' Opperman concludes. ■

### Use your skills here...

According to Claire Opperman, a lecturer at Rosebank College, skills shortages in vital sectors pose a major threat to economic growth. Industries where graduates' skills are in huge demand include engineering, construction, communications, management and information technology...

### ...Or here

A number of South African industries boast world class skills. As Claire Opperman points out, international icons like Richard Branson and Oprah Winfrey have invested significantly in South Africa, their confidence in the country buoyed by economic growth and sound infrastructure. 'Sectors where South Africa has proved its worth internationally include agriculture, tourism, sport and business. South African graduates can boldly contribute to these sectors, ensuring the development of our economy,' Opperman says.

## SOUTH AFRICAN SUCCESS STORY

Charl Norman discovered the Internet when he was 15. He designed his first website with a design tool he Googled – and from there, his imagination took flight. Now, nine years later, he's the brains behind Blueworld Communities, which owns several social networking sites. On top of this, he lectures on the Internet at the UCT Graduate School of Business and CPUT, whilst freelancing for Leadership and Intelligence magazines.

If the rapid expansion of Norman's empire sounds impressive, consider that in January 2008, a portion of his company was purchased by media giant Naspers. And that's not all: the same year, he was named a runner-up in the ICT Young Entrepreneur of Africa, and nominated as one of the top 30 entrepreneurs under 30 in Africa.

With such enormous talent, Norman could find a job anywhere in the world – so why does he choose to stay in South Africa? 'Because in the world's techno hotspots, like Silicon Valley, there are millions of guys doing what I do. With our environment, there are so many more opportunities, especially given that the number of people going online is growing. I have the chance to carve my own niche and grow a foundation.' Norman is particularly excited by the potential of mobile, where he believes the country is headed – and he's ready to make his mark in this growing area. Once we address challenges like limited broadband and high costs, we'll be faced with a plethora of exciting possibilities, he says.

His tips for young entrepreneurs? 'Learn how to use the Internet. Starting an online business costs next to nothing, and you can run it from your garage. You can even sell goods internationally – and it's something you can do while you're studying.'

'I know so many people who went overseas, but they've returned to find their careers one step behind those of their friends. That's why I believe it's better to focus on your career from the outset: take time, start slowly and build your contacts. The opportunity to travel will always be there.'

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