

Charity begins with an EMBA

MBA INTERVIEW

The founder of an NGO believes her business school acumen has helped her to work strategically, says **Charlotte Clarke**

While Anjum Tahirkheli signed up for an Executive MBA at Bradford University's School of Management in the UK, she never thought she would later be deploying her management skills in Haiti after the devastating effects of the 2010 earthquake.

She had intended to use her MBA to help develop the law firm she runs with her husband in Bradford in the north of England. But media reports about martial law in Pakistan in 2009, part way through the course, were the inspiration she needed to establish Basic Human Rights, a non-governmental organisation, aiming to protect the most vulnerable groups of society. Its first assignment was dealing with the aftermath of the Haiti disaster.

She remembers asking herself: "What do I know about aid?" Yet as soon as she arrived in Haiti she was able to assess the situation using skills already learnt on her MBA.

"I hated operations management (a core component of her MBA), it just didn't click with me. But supply chain and procurement are used for charity work, all sit within that."

This business acumen is something she now values highly in her work as chief executive of the NGO. Focusing primarily on children and women affected by violence, poverty and natural disaster, the organisation involves local people to ensure basic needs such as sanitation, jobs and healthcare are met.

Though her choice of career may no longer be that of a conventional MBA graduate, her business strategy certainly is.

"In business, if I'm losing money, if I'm not achieving my goals and targets then I've got a certain amount of time before I'm out of business," she says, arguing that the mission of eradicating poverty should be subject to those same business principles.

A determined businesswoman, Ms Tahirkheli is often exasperated with NGOs, believing that their failure to think strategically wastes valuable time. She is keen to deliver aid, which she prefers to call "direct



Anjum Tahirkheli believes that NGOs often fail to think strategically. *Rosie Hallett*

investment", within short timescales. Long-term sustainability work is brilliant, she adds. But for those who are starving an immediate response is needed. She believes it is important to analyse how donations to the voluntary sector are spent, so is grateful when she comes across other MBA graduates. "We talk the same language [which] helps a great deal."

She now prefers to take on MBA interns in her NGO, as opposed to her original plan of hiring graduates or masters students from charity-related industries. She believes that the results achieved by an MBA student are far more productive and relevant.

Although she accepts that she does not have development experience, for example, what she does have, she says, is the knowledge of how to deliver high-impact value within a certain timeframe, how to take the macro-environment into consideration. "That's the kind of thinking that's needed."

Ms Tahirkheli is well equipped to deal with challenging situations. Married at the age of 20, she went on to have four children, three while she was studying on three courses, including a degree in business and management at Bradford University.

"There's a standard joke, actually, that every time I enrolled on to a

programme, I got pregnant," she says. That early period was undoubtedly the making of her time-management skills as well as her commitment to furthering her career.

As well as aid work in Haiti, Ms Tahirkheli is also managing projects in Kenya, Libya, Pakistan, Uganda and the UK. Last year she raised £70,000 for disadvantaged women and this year she has helped launch a five-year sports and education scholarship programme for poverty-stricken children in Pakistan.

She spends considerable time fundraising across the UK, but is wary of becoming what she describes as "donor-led".

"If you start chasing donors, they have a certain agenda to follow so you can't rely on them otherwise you lose your vision," she says. The grassroots are her primary concern.

Given her high level of education, her motto in life - "I know nothing" - may seem self-deprecating. Nonetheless, she is considering studying next year for a PhD in Islam and development. This time however, she does not intend to accompany her studies with pregnancy.

These days she dedicates herself to her NGO, which, if she is successful, might yet become a competitive recruiter of MBA graduates.

Knowhow needed for real-world problems

Soapbox

By Guy Pfeffermann

MBA students have a reputation for being hard-nosed "A types", focused only on the bottom line. Increasingly, the reality is very different. Many students at the world's best business schools are drawn to the challenge of addressing the developing world's most intractable issues. To borrow an apt cliché - they don't just want to do well, they also want to do good.

Are these "doing good" programmes merely a feel-good exercise for business schools or is there a shrewd rationale behind this apparent deviation from traditional business education?

There is a growing recognition in the business community that world markets are shifting from traditional industrial countries to the "emerging markets" of Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. While most of the world's managerial talent pool resides in the US, Europe, Japan and Australasia, companies are investing massively in India, China, Brazil and many other non-traditional markets.

The population in the developing world is rising rapidly and middle classes, already sizeable, are growing fast - India's alone will soon exceed the entire population of the US. Fine-grain knowledge of the developing world will be critical to business success in the future.

Increasingly, companies demand that business schools prepare MBA students to operate in these new markets. Schools that give students a chance to apply their knowledge and skills to make a difference in a developing country provide not only a

life-changing experience but also crucial business skills. Student consultancy projects in the developing world can be an effective way to do this.

Many of the world's best and brightest are making their way to top business schools. Who better to tap for solutions to the developing world's problems? They are smart, they are driven and they are being trained by global experts to lead organisations to sustainability and success.

In Zambia, for example, poachers are killing protected wildlife in order to feed their families.

So the NGO Comaco is giving them incentives to become farmers instead of further helping them by processing and selling their products locally. But resources are limited and to become sustainable they need to increase the scale.

After a month-long visit to Zambia, an MBA team from Berkeley's Haas School of Business helped Comaco develop a business plan using skills learnt in the classroom, and put it on a healthy growth trajectory. The team won the Global Business School Network's 2011 MBA Challenge Video Contest with a video showing how they had made an impact

on the lives of wildlife, while also improving food security and spurring economic growth.

These students applied their business knowledge to real-world problems. They learn to work in a developing country where they face different challenges. They now have a new perspective on opportunity, business and philanthropy that will remain with them after they graduate. That is something no case study class or Wall Street internship can ever provide.

As they become the next generation of global business leaders, they will have a personal connection to the issues facing the developing world. These are the students who will lead innovations in business that will further economic growth in emerging markets.

Sushma, a 12-year-old Indian schoolgirl, has severe low vision. Her glasses are supplied by Sightsavers, the NGO, but they are thick and she hates wearing them because other children tease her. As a result her eyesight is deteriorating. The Financial Times has invited MBA students worldwide to produce business plans for Sightsavers for its MBA Challenge. The challenge is to market glasses to young people in Asia and Africa. As a contest judge, I am excited to see what these students come up with. As a development economist, I am equally excited about the impact they will make as professionals working in emerging markets once they graduate.

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Guy Pfeffermann is chief executive of the Global Business School Network and a judge in the FT Sightsavers MBA Challenge. *Comment online: www.ft.com/soapbox*

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