

UMUC Business and Executive Programs Podcasts
Executive MBA Education in Global World

Interviewer: Nancy Gentry Glenn, Director of Administration, Business and Executive Programs

Interviewees: Dr. Mary Ann Spilman, Paul Kendall, Paul Bruton

Podcast Title: The Practice of Global Strategy – Part I

Broadcast Date: November 28, 2008

Glenn: Welcome to Executive MBA Education in the Global World, a weekly podcast that features an overview and highlights of the Executive MBA program. Thank you for joining us. I'm Nancy Gentry Glenn, Director of Administration, Business & Executive Programs—your host for this segment.

Our guests today are Dr. Mary Ann Spilman, Executive Director of Executive Programs; Mr. Paul Kendall, President and CEO, GEOMET Company; and Mr. Paul Bruton, Manager of Strategic Partnerships at NBC Universal Local Media.

The topic for today's show is "The Practice of Global Strategy." Our discussion will focus on one of the international business plans that executive participants developed for sponsoring corporations. Mr. Kendall will discuss his company's experience as a sponsor of the plan and Mr. Bruton will discuss his experience as a member of the executive consulting team.

Dr. Spilman, would you describe the objectives and structure of the strategy project?

Spilman: Thank you for asking, Nancy, I'd be happy to. I think the Executive Project is probably the most exciting part of the Executive Program, maybe next to the international trip. It is what I consider the final exam of the program. It's because we do a real project for a real company, and it shows what our executive graduates can do, so not just what they know, but what they're able to do for business. We bring in a lot of corporations to participate in this part of the program, and we have a lot of the business community that looks at the results of this program. It reflects the real applied approach of the entire program. The focus, of course, is on strategy, but in order to develop strategy effectively, you have to use all of the previous components of the Executive Program: finance, marketing, HR. We have to be able to do profit-and-loss statements. We have to be able to do market sizing and forecasting. We have to understand HR laws in other countries and how to motivate workers in other countries. So all of these go into strategy in an international business plan. So in that sense, it's a final exam of the program.

Glenn: And would you explain to us how companies are selected as sponsors?

Spilman: We have some business partners that help us select the companies. The Prince George's Economic Development Corporation, the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation, the World Trade Center Institute, and the Technology Council of Maryland all find companies for us and send them to our program. They understand what our students are able to do for them, and they're very enthusiastic participants and they actually come to the final readouts of the strategy plans.

What they do is they find companies that are ready to look into new international markets and then they send them to us. We can actually do projects for companies in any industry and of any size, because the value of this project is the discipline in the structure itself, not in understanding any particular industry or in working for any company of any particular size. So it's the discipline we teach and that's what our Executive participants show in their final presentations: what they can actually do with what they've learned in Executive Programs.

Glenn: Thank you, Dr. Spilman. Mr. Kendall, as a corporate sponsor, what can you tell us about your expectations going into the relationship, and was there anything about the final plan that surprised you?

Kendall: Well yes, thank you for that question. We, at our company, had been involved with development of new products over the years and this particular product line that we are looking at was essentially designed to support the first responder community. And as part of that, we were looking for some new markets. The U.S. market had certain saturation and we wanted to take a look at some other international marketplaces. And when the opportunity came up to participate in this study, we felt—in fact, the gentleman who orchestrated this, Dr. Frank Augustine, and I felt—that this would be a good opportunity to one, see what a professionally designed marketing plan might look like for a product rollout, and two, as far as expectations go, we wanted to see what some creative thinking from folks who have experience in other domain areas, or other technical areas, would have when applied to our product.

And I tell you, I thought both of those objectives that we had and expectations were met. We had great interaction with the team that was assigned to the project. And I think one of the things about a UMUC program is that you're bringing in people who have real-world experience out of other disciplines. And being focused on engineering and also focused on activities associated with first responders, we're in a fairly narrow segment of the market. So having folks on the project who had commercial experience, retail experience, media expertise, I think was very useful for us, in terms of the day-to-day interaction. And that spun off some other ideas that we had, actually, beyond the project. And that—I wouldn't call it a surprise, but it certainly exceeded our expectations.

With respect to the second issue, or the more focused issue, I should say, associated with marketing in a foreign country, specifically Russia, I was surprised at the amount of information that was generated by the team. Specifically, they went to a number of different sources that we hadn't thought about when they went through their process, and when they did a market study, it was very interesting to see how that was done. And I actually went back to that program and used some of those charts that were developed in the final product and the final presentation to quantify some markets in other areas. So once again, it was—the expectations were focused on getting information from other disciplines, and I was surprised and very pleased with the response we got as a team. And I was also able to swing some of the material that I got into other domains.

Glenn: So could you share with us a bit more about how the business plan was useful to your organization?

Kendall: Yes. The business plan itself actually is still continuing. And what we are doing is, we actually took a look at expanding the concept that was originally developed for this heat stress calculator system into what we call a wellness—what a human factors-based product line. And we had some new products coming online that were not addressed during the original study, but the marketplace assessment and the projected software costs, and the marketing plan associated with bringing on some individuals who had sales expertise in this particular area, are actually being implemented. It turns out that some of the certifications that we discussed for let's say sales in the European market, were of interest as well. And that was touched on in the study, but we expanded on it from there. So the format of the plan was, again, very professionally done and I was able to use some of that in briefing some of the people who we turned the project over to, subsequent to the study itself.

Glenn: Thank you, and most importantly, would you do it again, and even recommend the experience to other businesses?

Kendall: Well, not only would we do it again, but I'd wholeheartedly endorse the program. We would participate again, both from our parent company which is associated with Versar—the subsidiary company, GEOMET, that we did the study with. So any offers we can come up with, we would certainly love to participate again. And frankly, enthusiasm of the student team was really what I would call infective, perhaps, in a good way, and really, I think, had a wonderful experience throughout the whole process. As far as the focus on what markets to approach, etc., my overall take was that it was not only focused on a particular product area that we have and a particular market that we're interested in, but the process of going through the evaluation of these different markets and the techniques that we talked about with some of the team members, I think, were very useful for me.

Glenn: And finally, Mr. Kendall, would you offer any advice for other companies that might like to be corporate sponsors?

Kendall: I would, and a couple of things there. One of the items that I would make sure that the sponsor company did was make sure that they've got somebody internal to the company who is going to champion this program. We were fortunate in that I did have some background in this area, but we had an individual, as I mentioned, Dr. Augustine, who was very excited about the program. And I think if you don't have the internal sponsorship, like any of these things, it can tend to—because you do have to devote some time to the process. And if you don't have the internal enthusiasm, I think that could be a potential issue. So that's the first thing, to make sure you have an internal sponsor.

The second thing that I would recommend is that you take a project that, again, would have real-world application. One of the reasons that we wanted to look at the former Soviet Union as a marketplace is that it's one of the key growing nations and also our

particular product line that we were looking at does have direct application in their demilitarization programs. And it turns out that one of the important members of the Senate who was involved with funding some of these initiatives in the former Soviet Union, is our new President-Elect, President-Elect Obama. So it's kind of interesting how a lot of different things fit together. And we see a real critical aspect of stabilizing weapons of mass destruction, etc., and that's where this particular product fits in.

So to make it relevant—I guess the second recommendation—relevant to your business, as well as having a key sponsor. Those are the two major factors that I would suggest that a sponsoring company take a look at.

Glenn: Thank you. That's very helpful. Let's turn now to one of our Executive Program participants who worked with his team to develop a plan for GEOMET. Mr. Bruton, what did you find most interesting about working on the GEOMET business plan?

Bruton: Thank you, Nancy. As Dr. Spilman stated earlier, this really comes to an opportunity for all the students to take all of the things they've learned in the prior semesters, look at this project with an actual business in the area, as if you were the CEO of this company. And you're also working with your teammates, so you have got six CEOs looking at a project from that basis. Additionally, what you're trying to come up with a solution and you're dealing directly with the senior management at that company, so the solutions and the recommendations you come up with are going to be examined and implemented directly upon the basis of what your team has come up with.

And one of the industries itself that was interesting was this GEOMET, was their personal protection equipment. None of the people on our team—this is brand new to us, they're a government agency—worked with a government agency, so this gave us the opportunity to really stretch ourselves as a team to go in a brand-new area and examine what are the things that we would recommend, and also examine our own assumptions going forward. And it really brought all of these things together, especially when we culminated or actually bringing together any ideas of we're going to possibly introduce this product into Russia or Ukraine, which is so different in so many ways from the United States, both culturally, economically, and politically, and all of these ramifications all had to be brought together as, how would we recommend this, justify this, and come up with a logical solution.

Glenn: Thank you. What would you consider the most challenging part of the project?

Bruton: I think we would agree as a team that we were charged with the client's point of view to introduce a product into either the Ukraine or the Soviet—or the Russia. And there was no idea of what was the size of the market. We couldn't figure out for this personal protection equipment how many users there really would be, because the information, unlike the United States or some of the European countries where you have access to much more open information, we didn't have that as much. And so that became an issue that we had to really work through. We also had to decide as a team how we were going to help and recommend a strategy of marketing this product with the company. Should they market it in the United States and then sell overseas, or should they find a

way with the company to sell directly to a partner in the former Soviet Union—areas like that. And just because we had to come up with solutions just because GEOMET was the manufacturer, should they actually be the seller of this product? So we had to examine what are their situations, what are their marketing situations? What are the situations they've got with their internal people? Do they have a marketing department that actually executes all of the issues going forward? And that the industry itself, we were unfamiliar with, so this really – we had to ramp ourselves up to really become, as quickly as possible, experts on what we could do to help GEOMET market this product in an industry we weren't originally familiar with. But we spent hours and hours and hours really dedicating time to come up with solutions.

Glenn: And very significantly for prospective students, has this experience proven useful to you in your current position?

Bruton: Absolutely. What I—we—talk about with this program is you come out with sort of the UMUC thought process, to really in your— every day in your regular job is to come up with what we'd say is the “so what?” Not so what as if a child would say so what, it's so what does this mean for the customer? What does this mean for the client? What does this mean for the shareholders in the business itself? We have to question all of our assumptions ourselves, but also the assumptions that the client has made. Because some of these may be just their own perceptions, their mental models, which may not really reflect what the market is doing. And this is what we do as team members and I do every day in my job from there, which is great experience.

Glenn: And a very important final question: How did you feel about this project in the context of your entire Executive MBA experience? In other words, how important was the project for your Executive education?

Bruton: Tremendously useful in every day, because personally, you can take these—the way you approach a business problem, or even there are ways in which you can apply this to your personal life as well. How do you analyze situations? How do you step back, get independent information? Also, through this process at UMUC, you had the access to some of the greatest minds in business today when you talk to Peter Drucker, Peter Senge, Michael Porter. These are people who are known globally, that they've now become, in your personal life, sort of your own personal coaches, in a way, that you may not have gotten, or you would not have gotten on your own if you had to do it yourself. So this is one of the unique aspects I've found from this campaign and program. Would recommend it to anyone.

Glenn: Again, this is Nancy Gentry Glenn. I'd like to thank Dr. Mary Ann Spilman, Mr. Paul Kendall, and Mr. Paul Bruton for helping us to understand the business plan project, and its value to corporate sponsors and participants in the Executive MBA program. Thank you, listeners, for joining Executive MBA Education in the Global World.

UMUC Podcasting Disclaimer

University of Maryland University College podcasts contain recorded lectures, speeches, commentary, interviews, and recordings of events of interest to the university community.

Statements expressed by non-UMUC faculty, staff, students, or alumni do not necessarily reflect the views or official policies of UMUC. Discussion of content, goods, or services provided by outside entities does not imply UMUC endorsement.

END