

# Real people, real success: Talent building in action

*Building talent in South Africa is just as much about giving back and driving change as it is about your success as a business.<sup>1</sup> For organisations that have invested - seeking to understand not only their business' talent needs but the needs of their talent<sup>2</sup> - proof of concept lies in the progression of young talent from graduate to executive.*

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In the 17 years since SAGEA began as a community of graduate employment professionals, we have seen our member companies demonstrate this progression. We spoke to four executives who have been part of talent building journeys with some of South Africa's most recognised graduate employers.

Peter Links, Practice Leader: Strategic Risk Consulting at Marsh & McLennan Companies, Africa started his career journey with PwC in Matric, when he was awarded a bursary to study BBusSc, with Honours, in Finance at the University of Cape Town. "This was in the late nineties," Peter says, "so I was very much part of that transition generation when many of us – students of colour – were the first in our families, or schools, or communities to go to university. Right from the beginning, PwC made sure their bursary students were supported. We had a bursary dinner, for example, where we met each other, and PwC's Partners, and we became part of the family from the start."

Philani Potwana, CEO: Entry Banking at FNB South Africa, completed his BCom in Information Systems & Technology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in the mid-2000s. "I come from a deep rural background in the Eastern Cape," he says, "and even having a conversation in English was something I had to learn when I arrived on campus in my first year. That should really put in perspective how powerful it was that, when I arrived at FNB in Johannesburg on my first day as a new recruit who had never been in a big city before, I only felt out of place for the first hour. From day one, it was as if FNB was looking at me as an individual, and even today I feel like the bank only has eyes for me."

From Unilever Africa, Thami Sibisi, Shopper & Customer Marketing Director and Mechell Chetty, HR Vice President, have similar stories. They do not come from privileged backgrounds, joined Unilever on graduate programmes and found the company's immediate support to be crucial to their career development.

"It might sound silly, but Unilever even had a plan in place to support our integration socially when we first started," Thami says. "Most of us didn't know anyone in Durban, and Unilever helped us with everything from finding places to stay to a proper social calendar that allowed us to meet each other and senior leaders, and we all became friends through that. It's important because it creates psychological safety and a sense of belonging."

Creating this early sense of being valued and belonging for graduate recruits is key to a successful talent building strategy. The way graduates are welcomed onto the programme, the line managers, coaches and mentors they work with, and the company's strength of culture and shared values are all part of this.

{{IMAGE}}

### **Real jobs for real people**

Graduate programmes that form part of an organisation's talent development strategy, with the intention of retaining talent and growing careers within the organisation, must not feel like stepping-stone placements. All four executives agree that ensuring the graduate programme is "a real job", with KPIs, development plans, assignments that impact the business and opportunity to grow are.

"We were never regarded as graduates," Thami says. "Our resources and goals were clearly defined, and the onboarding programme was designed to expose us to every facet of the department we were joining. In my case – Customer Development – this meant exposure to every part of the supply chain from packing shelves in stores, to calling on customers with our reps, to spending time in our factories and calling on agencies, so that I could develop a full understanding of how things actually work."

Mechell concurs. "I've had a rich, immersive experience with Unilever from the beginning. I've been able to take on meaty roles, move from role to role, and was asked to do big things. As a result, I've been too busy to leave! Having that sense of being important, having an important role and being accountable for that role, is something we still provide for our graduates today."

Nor are they about filling pigeonholes. "I joined PwC with the intention to complete my articles and become a CA(SA), but was clear that Audit really wasn't for me," says Peter. "Instead of letting me leave, though, the HR team introduced me to Management Consulting and my career took off very quickly from there. They made the effort to find a place in the business that suited my strengths and capabilities, and I worked my way up to Senior Manager in Advisory in five years."

Philani, who joined FNB on their IT Graduate Programme, also found support at FNB for his aspirations to grow in a more business-focused direction when he told his manager he wanted to be a CEO rather than a CIO. He was asked to take on roles that would facilitate his development in this direction, and grew from Systems Analyst to CEO in ten years.

### **It's a culture**

Successful talent building strategies don't operate in a vacuum. Instead, they are part of the organisation's culture. Everyone from line managers to senior leaders and HR all work together to build talent. This culture is shared with graduates from the beginning so that as they grow, they also work to uplift those that come after them.

"We learned about the FirstRand Group's purpose, the founding members' philosophy and how they viewed talent, in orientation. We heard from graduates who had come before us, and who had become managers within two or three years – we especially remember the CEO at the time coming to speak to us, and it really struck me then that for someone that senior to take time out of his diary to come and speak to us, a commitment to growing talent was ingrained in the bank's culture," Philani recalls.

Mechell describes how Unilever ensures its graduates have a network of people looking out for them. "You obviously have your immediate line manager, but you are also exposed to a number of other senior leaders that you work with, as well as your peers. There's a healthy sense of competition amongst graduates, in that there it's clear that talent at Unilever is really great, people are producing good work, and it inspires you to want to produce good work, too. And our senior leaders are always there to champion our graduates and stand up for them. These are things I've always valued about being part of the company."

"It's important that the right people are driving talent development, from HR and from the business," Peter agrees. "Business partnering and leadership buy-in and support make all the difference between a successful programme and one that just won't work."

Though some of our interviewees have left the organisations with which they began their careers, their career trajectories are testament to the importance of talent building strategies in South Africa. “When I joined Unilever it was a point of pride that 70% of the business’ talent was Unilever talent,” Mechell says. “That ratio has shifted a bit over the years as we evolve our approach to talent. We know that young professionals may not stay with us, but we also know that people come to us to learn and that our strong employer brand makes our people sought after. As an organisation we believe in this so strongly that we are always looking for new and innovative ways to build skills inside our business and out, such as the Talent Swap we did with Dimension Data a few years back and are now doing with Vodacom.”

While talent build strategies are undoubtedly necessary to grow talent towards senior leadership positions within a business, they are also crucial to growing a talented, representative workforce for the country.

## References

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