

MBA graduate selected for Graduate Leadership Programme

Lebogang Gabela is a woman who fills one with confidence in the future. Smart, focused, articulate and self-motivated, she is about to embark on an exciting new chapter in her career. One of just 48 Masters graduates selected from 7,000 candidates for this year's Novo Nordisk Graduate Leadership Programme, Gabela is everything that forward-thinking multinationals are looking for in prospective trailblazers.



Born in Soweto and raised on a smallholding in the Klippoortjie area west of Johannesburg, she recognised early that business has the power to make a real difference in people's lives. The daughter of two entrepreneurs, she eagerly learnt from them and had decided on a career in business before she was out of primary school.

"My parents have been a tremendous influence in my life," she said. "Not only did they provide me with a strong family background, they raised me to believe that anything is possible if one has a vision and is prepared to work hard to turn it into reality."

Secure in this conviction, Gabela embarked on a B.Com in Business Management at Pretoria University straight after leaving school. Drawn by the opportunity to gain invaluable work experience, she later switched to part-time study through UNISA and moved to Cape Town. There she took up the position of function co-ordinator for a local events management company, and soon became events and concepts manager.

"There are two sides to success in business," she said. "The theoretical background is vital, but so is hands-on experience - and I wanted both."

The decision to work while completing her degree served her well and she was soon accepted to study towards an MBA at Milpark Business School in Joburg. On the encouragement of her mother, who also funded her studies, she did this full-time in order to devote her attention to this demanding course.

Graduating with flying colours, she already had her next step carefully planned, and applied to participate in the Novo Nordisk Graduate Programme.

A perfect fit

"I felt Novo Nordisk would be a perfect fit for me," she said. "It was at the top of my list of only two companies I'd decided to approach, as I felt it could offer me not only the opportunity to learn from the best and develop my business career, but also to contribute to saving lives."

This synergy had special resonance for Gabela, as her mother is living with Type 2 Diabetes, and she knows first-hand how important awareness, appropriate treatment and lifestyle choices are in the prevention and management of the condition. So when she heard she had been accepted for the programme, she "flew downstairs" to tell her proud family, who by then were also her business partners.

For a while she was exploring her post-MBA options, she, her mum, brother and sister had established a multi-purpose entertainment space called Zen in Joburg's Maboneng Precinct. A jazz club by night and a corporate venue by day, Zen is at the heart of a development that is bringing a whole new concept of urban living to the City of Gold.

For now, though, her family will be managing this venture, as Gabela has a packed two-year programme ahead of her. Beginning in September, she will be working in International Business Operations at Novo Nordisk, spending three eight-month periods in Joburg, Copenhagen and Dubai, respectively.

"It's an unbelievable opportunity and I can't wait to get started," she said. Currently standing in for someone who is on sick leave, she already has a taste of what the graduate programme will have to offer, and said she is learning something new every day.

As importantly, she feels she has been welcomed into the Novo Nordisk family, and hopes to have a long and productive career with the company. For the duration of the graduate programme, she will be focusing on strategy in the emerging markets of Africa, the Middle East and India, which is something she is really excited about.

"My family and I are passionate about South Africa, and passionate about developing opportunities both here and in other African countries."

On a personal note, she sees the task ahead of her not only as one of opening up new markets, but as one of raising awareness about diabetes and bringing much-needed education and treatment options to people in these key developing economies.

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