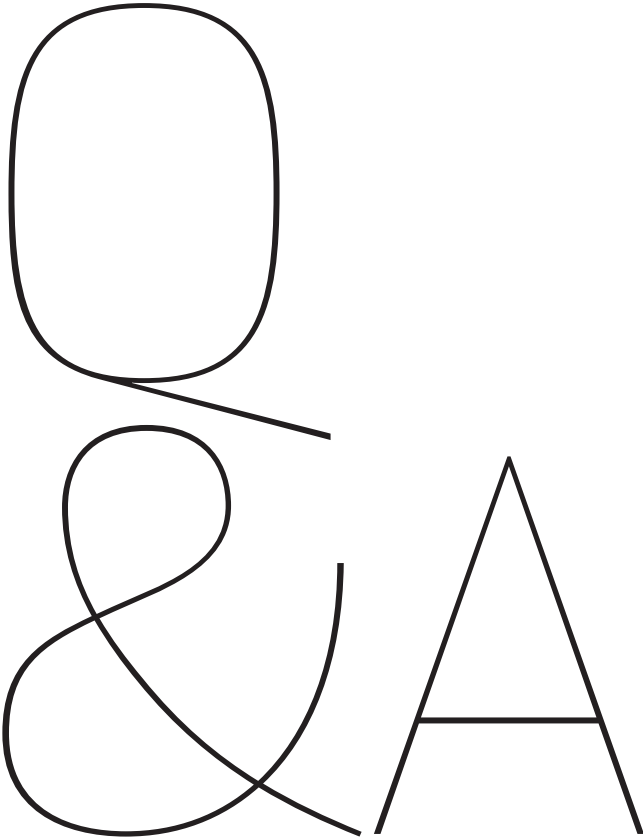




Questions for:
Mark Albion



The 'saviour of business school souls' discusses values-based businesses and his quest to uplift the human spirit.

Interview by Stephen Watt

While still in your thirties, you gave up a teaching post at Harvard Business School to bring the gospel of personal integrity to 125 business schools (including the Rotman School) on five continents. What inspired you to pursue such an unusual path?

I'd like to say I was inspired by some great calling, but I was really motivated to start this journey by the pain expressed by some of my students when I was a professor, and by my own frustration at not being able to help them. They wanted meaningful work, and they wanted to see more social and economic justice in the world, and so did I. It seemed there was a 'hole' in our collective soul, if you will, that had to be filled.

Many of my students were interested in creating a better world, but they also didn't want to spend their life working for peanuts. In the 1980s, this kind of thinking was not part of the business school culture. Students from top business schools, particularly women, wrote to tell me that they felt like they

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were the only ones who cared about anything but making money. They felt so alone, and yet I knew that even then, many – if not most – of my students also cared about making a difference. However, as I said, business as a force for social betterment was not part of classroom discussions yet, or even ‘allowable’ within the culture of a business school.

At the same time, I was feeling many of the same frustrations in my own job. While well paid, I didn’t feel that I was helping my students do much more than make more money. I, too, was exemplifying those same values in my corporate work outside of the classroom. I knew I needed a change, a platform other than that of a business school professor, to address this issue for MBA candidates around the world, and for myself.

Your books have charted on the *New York Times* non-fiction bestseller lists; *BusinessWeek* has called you “the saviour of business school souls.” What is it about your message that resonates so well?

Hopefully people understand that that quote, “the saviour of b-school souls,” was meant to be tongue-in-cheek! We all dream of noble purposes, we all want to lead a meaningful life and know that the meaning comes from being part of something bigger – a bigger story than one life, one person, one family. At the same time, we’re worried about disappointing our parents, and looking smaller in the eyes of our peers. I interviewed a 104-year-old, and asked her what the best thing about being 104 was. She replied, “No peer pressure.” Not so for the rest of us! We all feel a lot of social pressure, and while we want to make a difference, we also want all these material things. We’re afraid to not take the highest-paying job out of school, the one that pays off all our loans and sets us on a golden path toward upward mobility.

Deep down though, we know there’s something missing from this model of success. You need to ask yourself regularly, How do I measure success? What does it look like operationally? You’ll find the answer is that personal fulfillment lies much more in our common humanity than in personal opportunity. We know that life is not about how much you get and accumulate; it’s a lot more about how much you give away. And that’s when we really feel good about what we’re doing and who we are. Smarts are good, but it’s really about kindness, about how we treat each other.

All I do in my work is give MBAs ‘permission’ to be who they really want to be. There’s a quote I once heard: “We’re all angels with one wing, able to fly only when we embrace each

other.” Today, thankfully, my e-mail box is still full, but nowadays it’s more about helping people network and making it easier for them to make what is still an unusual decision at most business schools (though becoming less so exponentially since 2006.) It’s great to see that most schools are changing course work and supporting these paths; now we just need to change the business school culture from competitive *taking* to collaborative *giving*.

Describe Net Impact and how it fits into your vision of a values-based business.

When I founded Net Impact in 1993, the vision was simple: I wanted to have MBAs use their lucky lottery tickets to make the world a better place. Net Impact is a decentralized network run by its student members, who are interested in using their skills and the power of business to create a more just and sustainable world. It develops leaders who are interested in the environmental and social impact of their actions as well as the financial impact. It is a safe environment where MBA candidates, graduates and business professionals can come together to support each other, help each other find jobs, learn from experts in the field and bring exciting new models of responsible leadership into companies around the world.

Last year I visited 45 or so NI chapters, and it’s just amazing what a 15-person board at UCLA or 12 board members at McGill are able to accomplish. Each chapter, organized by school or city, can grow organically in its own way, but always in concert with the core purpose of Net Impact: to develop socially-conscious business leaders who are changing the way we do business.

Net Impact is one part of a three-part strategy a small group of us co-created in 1989 at **Social Venture Network**, the premier organization for socially-conscious entrepreneurs, investors and visionaries. We wanted to first link current business school students together with an organization where they could discuss these issues, learn, launch and regenerate their careers. The next initiative was to start our own business schools with this collaborative culture, where social and environmental concerns are part of the DNA of the school. Social Venture Network (SVN) founders **Gifford** and **Libba Pinchot** launched Bainbridge Graduate Institute in 2001 to start that process. And third, we hope to endow chaired professors in the field once the academic research accumulates, so that professors can get tenured in these fields.

While many people would like their work to serve the common good, combining profit with purpose is not easy. What are

some tips for getting started on putting your values to work?

My first tip would be to buy my book *True to Yourself* [laughing], since all proceeds go to SVN for outreach programs. In the book, I present five best practices to address the question of how to turn your values into value. The short version is this: Start now, don't wait. There are always 'yes, buts,' there are always ways of living a deferred life plan, but be careful of taking that route. One of our students once said to **Warren Buffett**, "I want to go out and make a lot of money, and then I'm going to really serve the common good," to which Mr. Buffett replied, "Sounds to me like you're saving sex for old age."

Very simply, you have to know what your values are. We all have different things that are important to us. Once you know them, you can think about putting your values to work. And lastly, put together a good set of business arguments and a business process by which you can make it happen. That might be within a company, with your own company, a not-for-profit or a for-profit. The point is to find the most effective vehicle to meet that social challenge.

A dozen years ago I was working at **Kinko's**, and we were the least environmentally-responsible document-reproduction company. A team of MBAs from California universities did a research project on environmental sustainability, with hard numbers showing how Kinko's could cut costs and increase revenue. A few years later, Kinko's was number one in terms of environmental responsibility. Today, for example, there are strong economic arguments for companies to lower their output of carbon dioxide that students can make use of. That is why the time is now to change our business models.

Recently, even global giants like Wal-Mart have shown interest in sustainability, social responsibility and protecting the environment. If their interest is genuine, aren't big companies risking trouble by losing sight of the bottom line?

They're just as focused on the bottom line as ever. When you look at the cost/benefits analysis, the global economics of being a profitable business have changed. These social and environmental programs are sources of innovation – the big word in business today – as well as vehicles for reducing costs and increasing corporate reputation as perceived by all stakeholders.

The three most highly-respected companies on the *Fortune 500* list are **Wal-Mart**, **GE** and **Toyota**, all noted for their greening programs. As former GE CEO **Jack Welch** said in the 1990s, "A leader's job is to increase company reputation and productivity, and reduce the possibility of regulation." These

efforts are directly affecting the short-term and long-term profitability of the company. I am proud to say that I've been told that much of the Wal-Mart greening efforts are the results of hard work by three of our young Net Impact MBAs, all under the age of 30.

That said, remember that these efforts to be a better citizen or more environmentally responsible are being done in a way that assures that 'doing good leads to doing well.' It is a business decision, not a sudden change in corporate commitment to the bottom line. Corporations big and small are very responsive to what their stakeholders want. If stakeholder interests change, so will these programs.

What are you questing for in business and life, and who are your heroes who serve as role models in bringing you there?

If we're talking about having a meaningful life, the point is really to love and be loved. What else does it mean to be human? We can define love in terms of being needed and needing, and having those needs fulfilled. Think about the famous survey which asked people what they fear: the number three fear is death, number two is public speaking, and number one is not living a meaningful life. So the quest is really to find meaning, to say 'my life counts and I was important in the lives of others.'

My heroes developed a platform of wealth and influence, and used that platform for common good. Most notable are people like **Arthur Ashe**, **Muhammad Ali**, **Shirley Temple Black**, **Robert Redford** and **Oprah Winfrey**. I have also known many women who have dedicated their lives to raising their children, often as single parents and through difficult times. Finally, many Net Impact MBAs over the past 15 years have inspired me through their faith, determination and courage by showing me that what I thought wasn't possible is possible. Many members of this next generation are already inspirational heroes of mine. They are teaching us another way to think about how we live and work, that business can uplift the human spirit and alleviate poverty and suffering in our world. What better quest is there than that? **R**

Mark Albion is a social entrepreneur who has co-founded seven organizations, including Net Impact, a global network of MBA students and professionals committed to using the power of business to create a better world. He is the author of *True to Yourself: Leading a Valued-Based Business* (Berrett-Koehler, 2006), *Making a Life, Making A Living: Reclaiming Your Purpose and Passion in Business and in Life* (Business Plus, 2000), and a monthly newsletter at www.makingalife.com.