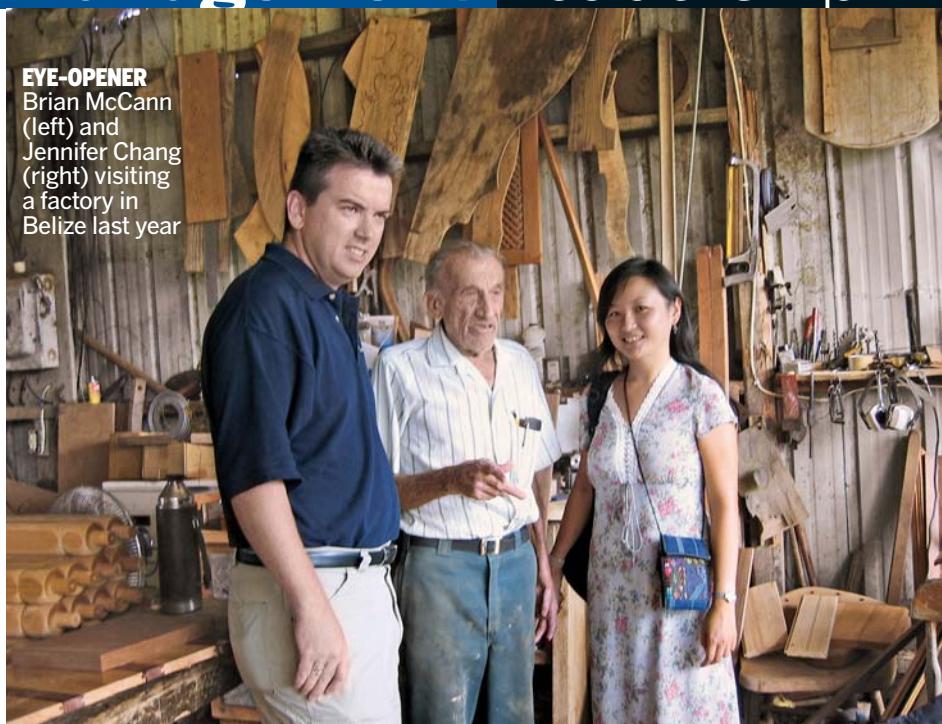


# BusinessWeek

## Management Leadership

### EYE-OPENER

Brian McCann (left) and Jennifer Chang (right) visiting a factory in Belize last year



## It Takes a Village — And a Consultant

PricewaterhouseCoopers tests partners by sending them to work in poor nations

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PWC

**L**AST SUMMER, ACCOUNTING-and-consulting giant PricewaterhouseCoopers tapped partner Tahir Ayub for a consulting gig unlike anything he had done before. His job: helping village leaders in the Namibian outback grapple with their community's growing AIDS crisis.

Faced with language barriers, cultural differences, and scant access to electricity, Ayub, 39, and two colleagues had to scrap their PowerPoint presentations in favor of a more low-tech approach: face-to-face discussion. The village chiefs learned that they needed to garner community support for programs to combat the disease, and Ayub learned an important lesson as well: Tech-

nology isn't always the answer. "You better put your beliefs and biases to one side and figure out new ways to look at things," he said.

Ayub may never encounter as extreme a cultural disconnect at PwC as he did in Namibia. But for the next generation of partners, overcoming barriers and forging a connection with clients the world over will be a crucial part of their jobs. It's those skills that PwC hopes to foster in partners who take part in the Ulysses Program, which sends top mid-career talent to the developing world for eight-week service projects. For a fairly modest investment—\$15,000 per person, plus salaries—Ulysses both tests the talent and expands the worldview of the accounting firm's future leaders. Since the company started the program four years ago, it has attracted the attention of Johnson & Johnson, Cisco Systems, and other big companies considering their own programs.

While results are hard to quantify, PwC is convinced that the program works. All two dozen graduates are still working at the company. Half of them have been promoted, and most have new responsibilities. Just as important, all 24 people say they have a stronger commitment to

**PwC says it is readying execs for the rigors of running a global firm**

PwC—in part because of the commitment the firm made to them and in part because of their new vision of the firm's values. Says Global Managing Partner Willem Bröcker: "We get better partners from this exercise."

The Ulysses Program is PwC's answer to one of the biggest challenges confronting professional services companies: identify-

ing and training up-and-coming leaders who can find unconventional answers to intractable problems. By tradition and necessity, new PwC leaders are nurtured from within. But with 8,000 partners, identifying those with the necessary business savvy and relationship-building skills isn't easy. Just as the program gives partners a new view of PwC, it also gives PwC a new view of them, particularly their ability to hold up under pressure.

For mid-career partners who were weaned on e-mail and the Blackberry, this was no walk in the park. They had become accustomed to a world of wireless phones, sleek offices, and Chinese take-out—so the rigors of the developing world came as quite a shock. Brian P. McCann, 37, a mergers and acquisitions expert from PwC's Boston office, had never been to a Third World country before his stint in Belize, where he encountered dirt-floored houses, sick children, and grinding poverty.

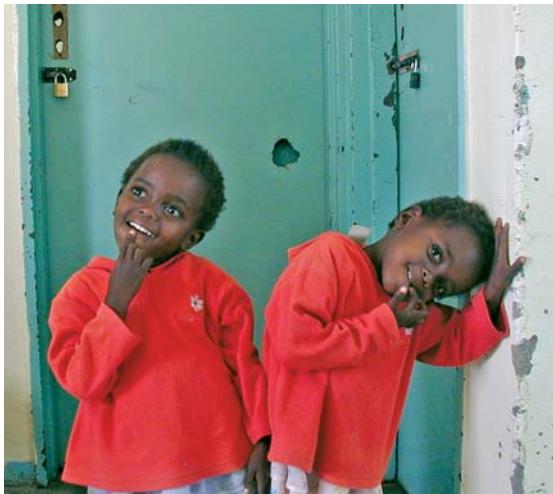
Ayub, having been born in Africa, considered himself worldly. Even so, long days spent among Africa's exploding HIV-positive population took their psychological toll. With his work confined to daylight hours—there was often no electricity—Dinu Bumbacea, a 37-year-old partner in PwC's Romanian office who spent time in Zambia working with an agricultural center, had plenty of time to dwell on the misery all around him. "Africa is poor, and we all know that," says Bumbacea. "But until you go there, you don't understand how poor it is. We take so much for granted."

For more than 15 years, companies have used social-responsibility initiatives to develop leaders. But PwC takes the concept to a new level. Participants spend eight weeks in developing countries lending their business skills to local aid groups—from an ecotourism collective in Belize to small organic farmers in Zambia to AIDS groups in Namibia. Ulysses also presents participants with the challenge of collaborating across cultures with local clients as well as with PwC colleagues from other global regions. Ayub, for example, was paired with partners from Mexico and the Netherlands.

## BEYOND ACCOUNTING

PWC SAYS THE PROGRAM, now in its

third cycle, gives participants a broad, international perspective that's crucial for a company that does business around the world. Traditional executive education programs turn out men and



## Giving the World a Lift

To build better leaders, PricewaterhouseCoopers' Ulysses Program sends partners to the developing world to help local aid groups.

**PURPOSE** To prepare partners for top leadership positions in 5 to 10 years. PwC hopes participants will hone their problem-solving skills and develop a more international outlook.

**ACTIVITIES** The program includes working with PwC colleagues from other global regions on ecotourism, organic farming, and AIDS awareness projects. Among other things, partners have helped local organizations create business plans.

**SCOPE** PwC sent 20 partners to 11 countries in 2004, up from nine partners and three countries in 2002. So far, 44 of PwC's 8,000 partners have completed the program.

**COST** PwC spends \$15,000 per participant for travel and other expenses, plus three months of salary. Each one spends eight weeks in country and two weeks in training and debriefing.

women who have specific job skills but little familiarity with issues outside their narrow specialty, according to Douglas Ready, director of the International Consortium for Executive Development Research. PwC says Ulysses helps prepare participants for challenges that go

beyond the strict confines of accounting or consulting and instills values such as community involvement that are fundamental to its corporate culture.

Ulysses is also a chance for partners to learn what they can accomplish without their usual resources to lean on. The program forces them to take on projects well outside their expertise. In the summer of 2003, for example, McCann developed a business plan for an ecotourism group in Belize. The experience was an eye-opener. McCann's most lasting memory is a dinner he shared in the home of a Mayan farmer after they spent a day discussing their plan. "He didn't even have electricity," McCann recalls, "but he made do."

PwC partners say they've already adapted their experiences to the task of managing people and clients. Malaysian partner Jennifer Chang says her team noticed a shift in her managerial style after the Belize trip. She listened more and became more flexible. "Once you see how slowly decisions are made in other places, you gain patience for the people you work with," she says. Ayub, who was promoted in June, now manages 20 partners. He says he favors face-to-face conversations over e-mail because the low-tech approach builds trust. "It made the difference in Namibia," he says.

If insights like those ripple out across the firm, Ulysses will be more than a voyage of personal discovery for a handful of partners. It could help build leaders capable of confronting the challenges of an increasingly global business. And that, says PwC, is the whole point. ■

—By Jessi Hempel, with Seth Porges, in New York