

# *inquiry*

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ALUMNI PROFILE

**Sandy Schwan: Helping People Overcome Obstacles and Grow**

Sandy Schwan's business tagline and personal mantra are one and the same: "helping people and companies learn, adapt and perform"

By *Marya Smith*

Sandy Schwan (MS03) is a champion for change in her professional life and her philanthropic work, teaching others to meet new challenges, overcome obstacles and empower themselves in the process.

Her career title is organizational change consultant. To her colleagues, Schwan is also known as a pioneer. She has a track record for exploring untried territory, from embarking on the seminal Master of Science in Learning and Organizational Change (MSLOC) program at Northwestern, to creating her own consulting firm, to joining forces with a newly launched volunteer program in Peru.

Her volunteer work for the nonprofit Light and Leadership Initiative in Peru embodies her ideals of working with people to overcome social and economic disparities so they can achieve their full potential. The initiative's goal is to transform the futures of women and children living in poverty in the Huaycan community near Lima through education and leadership training.

"Sandy was our very first volunteer, ready to help in any capacity," says Lara DeVries, LLI executive director. "She arrived in Huaycan with suitcases full of donations — I was astounded by the number of people she had behind our cause in such a short time." Schwan dug in immediately, interviewing families, teaching English to women and children, helping set up the kitchen for the program and more.

Schwan also donates her time to Inner City Stars, a nonprofit group formed to develop community leaders among high school graduates by advancing their skills in business and technology. In 2006, she hired two IC Stars interns to build her web site. "She was our first client, and she continues to open new opportunities for us," says Brandies Dunagan, co-owner of Second Nature Digital.

Schwan's passion for helping others develop is evident in her philanthropic work. "Stewardship, or giving back, is a value that resonates with me," she says. "I gravitate towards organizations that focus on education and a vision to improve people's lives, especially women and children."

In fact, a belief in education informs all of Schwan's



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TOM BLUETT

activities. She recently accepted an adjunct faculty position in the MSLOC program. And as a board member of the Northwestern Alumni Club of Chicago, Schwan serves as liaison to the Chicago Public Schools.

In her career as president of Evolving Strategies LLC, Schwan has served organizations such as United Airlines, Thomson Reuters, Northern Trust, Blue Cross Blue Shield and the United States federal government. Before founding her firm in 1999, she worked for Accenture, Lante Corporation and the Corporate Executive Board.

In the midst of career success, she returned to school. "My graduate work at Northwestern added more tools to my tool belt and sharpened my laser focus on the value of strategic change for my clients," she says.

Schwan has earned her reputation as the go-to person for companies on the threshold of change, helping them build strategies and ultimately boost performance. "There are many reasons why a company faces change, whether it's an advance in the industry, a new government regulation or an acquisition," says Schwan. "Someone needs to look at the people side of the situation to focus on strategies, training and communication that can help individuals and leaders adapt successfully."

"I'm drawn to situations in flux because there is so much potential when change is taking place," Schwan says.

"Sandy is always interested in how people are going to be impacted by change," says John Fowler, senior vice president for a global financial institution. "When she walks into a meeting where everyone is sitting with their arms folded, she finds ways to engage them."

This generosity of spirit is often cited by those who know Schwan, including Jean Egmon, former director of the MSLOC program and currently research professor at Kellogg School of Management and director of the Ford Business Network.

"Sandy is always about helping people connect," Egmon says, "She believes that everybody — no matter who or where they are — can develop, and she believes that's the way to grow the individual and grow the whole."