While not many may know of the various research opportunities available in the field of business, Dr. Karen Wouters, a lecturer and director of the MBA Consulting program at the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, is striving to discover some of the secrets behind management that differentiates successful versus failing companies. Management is just one of the topics studied by research associates, professors, and students at the Smith School, ranked 7th in the world for business research by a study from the University of Texas.

Wouters was born and raised in Belgium, where she received her Ph.D. in Applied Economic Sciences and M.S. in Human Resource development. Wouters first entered the world of business research during her Ph.D, where she played a pivotal role as a researcher for the Flemish government. Wouters enjoys conducting applied research the most because companies can directly apply her results to their own management practices. Wouters attributes much of her success to “the fun in working with others” and successfully collaborating with companies.

Presently, Wouters, also an executive coach as part of the Smith School’s eMBA program, is working to develop a model to help coach MBA and undergraduate business students. Wouters applauds the Smith School for the “exceptional model for research” that the eMBA program conveniently provides. Wouters address the questions of what makes a coach a good coach and what makes a client a good client in her current research. She is studying the various techniques that can be used to train managers and clients. Furthermore, Wouters is performing research on the role of E-learning in management training and working to conduct experiments at the county level by collaborating with a software company that develops E-learning programs for polling training. Wouters hopes that her research will help to find the key in allowing for the coaching process to be more streamlined, and thus produce more top-of-the-line executive managers. Unfortunately according to Wouters, “research is typically one step behind business.”

Of course, with every research endeavor comes many challenges. Wouter described how difficult it was to control outside factors in business research. “Oftentimes research must be conducted while executives are on the job,” she says. In addition, much of business research is very longitudinal, meaning several years may pass before any significant results can be extrapolated.

For Wouters, a highlight of her research came in the form of a request for a presentation at the Smith School by the Norwegian Embassy. According to Wouters, “They loved it and it made us even more motivated to continue to work.” Wouters adds that research can be quite fun, especially if there is the opportunity to work with others on the project. Wouters says she also enjoys “attending conferences because it is interesting to share research experiences with [others].”

Although Wouters did not have the opportunity to start researching until after her undergraduate years, she suggests students begin as early as possible. According to Wouters, “it is oftentimes hard to learn as much on-the-job material while sitting in class.” Undergraduate students can volunteer over the semester or over the summer to help professors and research associates at the business school with research. If you are interested in working with Dr. Wouters, you may contact her at kwouter1@umd.edu.

Lecturer Dr. Karen Wouters.

Interview with Dr. Karen Wouters

BY ROSIE ZHANG