

# The old school ties that bind Babson

Two MBA classmates have created a thriving technology company, writes Sarah Murray

Stacked on the bookshelves in his office in Burlington, Massachusetts, Bill Brodnitzki has folders containing information on everything from pricing to supply chain management - valuable material that he acquired while taking his MBA at Babson College.

However, Mr Brodnitzki's bulging business school books and files are not the only useful items that Silverlink Communications - the company he and his former classmate Paulo Matos were instrumental in building - inherited from Babson. Silverlink's expanding team of employees includes a growing band of Babson MBA graduates.

Founded in January 2002 by Mr Matos and Stan Nowak, a graduate of Harvard Business School, Silverlink has grown from two laptops, a table and an idea to a rapidly expanding technology company focused on the healthcare industry, with clients that collectively represent more than 150m patients and healthcare plan members.

Silverlink provides automated voice applications that allow its clients to communicate with their patients and members. Patients can, for example, be called automatically with reminders to refill their prescriptions 10 days before their drugs are due to run out.

In the case of drug recalls, healthcare companies can send out thousands of automatic voice messages by phone telling patients what to do about finding an alternative medicine rather than waiting for thousands

of panicked callers who, having seen news of the recall on television, would call and demand information.

Using voice recognition technology, the system can also call patients and request information from them since it recognises words or numbers that have been pre-programmed for each question. Even free-form responses to questions such as "how are you feeling?" can be captured by being recorded and then transcribed.

"Companies are interested in maintaining good relationships with their patients and members and so simple things such as sending flu shots or mammogram reminders is something they have their eye on," says Kat Eden, the company's marketing director. "This technology allows them to be proactive rather than reactive."

As Silverlink makes further inroads into the healthcare sector, the Babson alumni present in its team, several of whom joined the company early on, readily acknowledge that, when it comes to entrepreneurship, business education is not only about being exposed to disciplines such as marketing, operations and finance - it is also about the contacts you make while in school.

"The relationships you build as you go along in your career can and should be leveraged in other things you do in your life," says Mr Matos, now the company's chief operating officer.

Mr Matos and Mr Brodnitzki, now the company's vice-president of enterprise services, met when they were placed together in a

team of six people at the beginning of the MBA programme. At Babson College, which emphasises the entrepreneurial focus of its MBA programme, teams are set up to resemble small consulting firms and are then required to work on projects for real companies.

As with any group of people randomly thrown together, the mix is not always an immediate success. But that, say course participants, is part of the value of the exercise.

**The relationships you build as you go along in your career should be leveraged in other things you do in your life**

"Bill Brodnitzki and I were on the same team, with six people, all of whom had type A personalities, where no one likes to listen to anyone else and everyone is anxious to show how good they are," explains Mr Matos. "So we had to learn to work together to deliver the type of assignment we were expected to deliver."

In this case, their task was to examine a graphic imaging software company that was struggling to expand. In doing so, the Babson team was forced to establish a hierarchy quickly, to learn to co-operate and to divide up tasks among the team members. Looking back, both Mr Matos and Mr Brodnitzki cite this element of the course as providing one of the most important lessons they learnt on the MBA programme.

Ms Eden, also a Babson graduate, agrees. "At Babson there are a lot of team projects, so there is an

opportunity to get a real sense of what it would be like to work with those people," she says. "And the ability to work together smartly and effectively in teams is something I really see at play here every day. In prior lives, I have known executive meetings to be incredibly painful as everyone has an agenda and you can feel the politics in the air - and it is not that way here."

In addition, building friendship and trust was crucial, says Mr Matos. "Bill was one person that, from the time I left business school, I knew I wanted to work with again."

Mr Brodnitzki says that he did not embark on the programme with the idea of finding a future business partner. "But pretty quickly you discover people you might be interested in, and I was very interested to meet Paulo," says Mr Brodnitzki. "One of the key reasons I joined up with Paulo early on was that I knew he was a good guy, that he had a lot of integrity and was someone who I would enjoy working with."

Silverlink Communications was not the first fruit borne of this relationship between the entrepreneurs. During the heady days of the dotcom boom, Mr Brodnitzki and Mr Matos worked together on an internet business called StorageNetworks. Like many start-up hopefuls on the scene at the time, the company rose quickly employing some 600 employees by 2000, after only one year of operation - and sank even faster, shrinking rapidly to only 50 employees, at which point it closed its doors in 2003.

StorageNetworks might have been a failure but it served its purpose by giving Messrs Brodnitzki and Matos a chance to see how they could work together. It also gave Silverlink Mr Nowak, who is also a former StorageNetworks executive.



Founding fathers: Paulo Matos (left) and Stan Nowak started Silverlink in 2002

CJGunter

The company now employs 37 people, has closed two rounds of investment and is engaged in raising a third round of institutional funding. Among its more than 35 clients, it counts industry names such as Aetna, the leading US healthcare insurer; FamilyMeds, a speciality retail pharmacy; GHI, a New York State non-profit health insurer; MSC, which delivers medical products and pharmacy services to the workers' compensation industry; and Pharma Care, a phar-

macy benefit management company. As the company expands, Silverlink executives are regular visitors to the Babson campus, this time as recruiters.

"We have hired a number of Babson MB As," says Ms Eden. "Knowing what that person has gone through and the education they have - combined with their experience - is definitely at play in the teams that we build."

Team building is not the only reason the Babson campus is a regular destination for Silverlink executives,

however. They also go back to the business school to participate in teaching sessions because the experiences the company went through in its start-up phase have been turned into a Babson case study.

"It is a lot of fun to go and study what you have done right and wrong in an academic setting, so we are planning on doing a follow-on case that goes from our pre-institutional to A-round funding and B-round funding," says Mr Matos. "It has all come full circle."

Sustainably sexy:

Richard Tomkins asks why businesses are jumping aboard the ethical trading bandwagon  
[www.ft.com/businesslife](http://www.ft.com/businesslife)

