

# Alumni Profile: Trung Nyugen (MBA '87)

by *Belmira Amaral*

**Belmira Amaral:** Describe your role as senior vice president of finance and strategic alliances at La Caisse Centrale Desjardins du Quebec.

**Trung Nyugen:** My major responsibility at Caisse Desjardins – similar to that of a chief financial officer – is to take care of all the financial reporting, as well as human resource and administration strategic planning, and communication within the international banking division. The strategic alliances portion of my title was added a few years ago. When we were thinking of expanding outside of Quebec, instead of going the acquisition route we decided to form strategic alliances with the co-op sector and the credit unions outside of Quebec. I am also responsible for dealing with rating agencies such as Standard and Poors, Moody's and DBRS.

**BA:** In what capacity did you start out in this industry, and what were the keys to advancing to your current position?

**TN:** I started at the **Bank of Montreal** in 1975, in an administrative and credit function at the domestic level, and worked for about two years at the international level before joining the **Desjardins Group** in 1984. Desjardins sent me to the Rotman School to do my Executive MBA in 1987. I was the first person at Desjardins to do an MBA. This was a great opportunity, since it coincided with the opening of our Toronto office. The EMBA was a strong indicator of me advancing in my career. I was a senior manager at the time, and the day after I completed my degree, my boss made me vice president.

Although I worked at BMO in international banking based out of Toronto for almost two years, when I was transferred out of Quebec I was still a little disconnected from the Canadian scene. Mingling with the other students at Rotman gave me a better perspective on Canadian culture. We underestimate the

cultural aspects of the market, which are fundamental to being successful in any given market. It also helped me look at things south of the border when we set up a branch in Florida, providing me with a global view.

**BA:** As a company with strong roots in Quebec, what challenges and opportunities do you expect to encounter as Desjardins expands its operations into the Ontario market?

**TN:** Our main strategy for building the Desjardins Credit Union in Ontario is based on the existing human resources that are there. We transferred just one executive from Quebec to maintain the structure. So we've given them a lot of leeway and support, without imposing our way of doing things. The unit is doing extremely well: it is two years ahead of its business plan and very profitable. Normally, when you set up a new unit, you give it five or six years before it even reaches the break-even point. We recently engaged the Rotman Impact [student consulting] group to look at a small market in the Guelph and Cambridge area. There is no point for Desjardins to try to compete against the big five in Toronto. Our strength lies in providing excellent service to areas that are not as well serviced.

**BA:** How do you see Desjardins progressing at the international level in the years ahead?

**TN:** At this point we are focusing on Canada and U.S., what we call our 'natural market'. But we are conducting a study to find an international strategy that takes into consideration the needs of our members. We are much more involved in the U.S., where we have just been granted a license to open a **Caisse Centrale Desjardins** branch as part of the **Desjardins Bank** that we have in Florida. So the bulk of our efforts right now are concentrated in the U.S. and expanding



outside of Quebec into under-served regions of Canada.

**BA:** What are the most valuable tools the MBA provided, with respect to advancing in your career?

**TN:** The interaction between my peers and the teaching staff is something I valued very highly. The EMBA gave us a structure for our thinking process. There was never a wrong or right answer; it was about 'how do you perceive things?' and 'how would you deploy that?' The faculty were down-to-earth and very well connected to the market, so they were able to interact with us on real issues, instead of only referring to concepts. At most schools the faculty are highly academic, so there is a big gap between the reality and the concept.

**BA:** What's next for you?

**TN:** Ensuring that our strategy on moving out of Quebec is successful. We have a long way to go. The case we are making in Ontario and other Canadian locations is that we are very customer-oriented. If we can bring our strengths together to the table, I believe that the co-op sector can be much stronger, and the Canadian customer will be better served. 