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To MBA or not to MBA? Is there a question?

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Here are many reasons for embarking on an MBA. For some, it is to improve career prospects; for others, to prove to themselves or to others they can. Some are inspired by the example of a colleague or a manager.

For me, it was all of the above and more. And as I am now coming to the end of my MBA experience, I find myself reflecting, and I am left to ask crucial questions: Was it worth it? Has it been as beneficial to me as I had hoped? Was it worth the late nights and early mornings and the blood, sweat and, yes, tears? For me, the question of whether I should do an MBA was answered clearly about four years ago. As I looked at those senior people around me who I respected the most, I realised all had one thing in common: an MBA.

I remember how they demonstrated a level of understanding of complex problems. I was impressed by the skill with which they solved problems and then worked at getting others on board. They also impressed me with the breadth and depth of their perceptions and insights. So, it was with this hope for myself that I submitted an application to attend Wits Business School part time.

Syndicates

One of the great challenges and learning opportunities of the MBA is working in syndicates. In a syndicate, you work as a team that includes people from completely different backgrounds and with diverse personal styles. Students are all constantly under pressure from a multitude of sources and, consequently, are often required to bring more to the table than they are normally able. At WBS, the very first class you attend is group dynamics.

During this class, you have an opportunity to do a self-assessment of your personality type. This profile helps you identify your strengths and weaknesses and, specifically, how well you work in teams. What was surprising to me was how accurate it was. Additionally, what surprised me were the aspects of my personality that were applicable to team work.

We were encouraged to share the results of this assessment with our syndicates, with a specific focus on those areas of growth. What came out of the assessment is that I am predisposed to focus on my own ideas and not necessarily those of others. After sharing this with the syndicate and requesting that they point out to me if I negate others' ideas, one of the members of my syndicate quickly responded: "Don't worry, we will!" Working in syndicates is often described as the worst part of an MBA but, for me, this was one of the best. Another unique aspect of the MBA is the case method of teaching. This requires students to read and consider a set of case studies for a class, and to participate in a class discussion. The

value of this approach was incalculable. When I started my MBA, I was a specialist in a very technical field. I had limited exposure to subjects like economics, marketing and finance. Consequently, I had little knowledge of these subjects and virtually no hands-on, practical experience. What studying real business cases enabled me to do, was to put myself into the scenario and to explore the salient aspects of each case from my own perspective. Without exception, I learned something new or unique from each case study. Also, each case would spark off hundreds of thought-provoking questions.

The next step in this teaching method is the class discussion. This is where I found the greatest learning. The lecturers' teaching styles revolved around how they facilitated and guided the in-class discussions, in order for their students to absorb the information. A typical in-class discussion begins with the lecturer asking a question, and that's where the lecturer generally steps back and lets the class's learning begin. In a class of 48 people, you generally have at least 68 different viewpoints, and that's where the best lessons are to be found. Listening to my classmates' different views was such a learning and growing experience for me.

What is surprising is just how much you can learn about a field from someone who is not even working in that area. I can honestly say that I left every lecture I attended with some new way of thinking and with some new tool or technique that I could immediately find a use for in my working context.

The other lesson that has proved to be most valuable to me was that irrespective of the questions, in business, the answer can almost always be "depends". By the second year, almost every question is initially answered by "depends". The reason is that we are so exposed to differing views that we quickly realise that there are no simple answers to business questions, and that you first need to ensure you understand the full context before you make decisions.

The research report

The intensive value in the final MBA research report is that it gives students an opportunity to study something of their own choice in depth. While the curriculum of the MBA is generally prescriptive, the research report allows you to expand your horizons. It took me nearly two months to decide on a topic for my research. I had numerous considerations – not least of which was whether to focus on something I had experience in or something new. Once that was decided, I considered whether my topic would be a novel one or something similar to existing research and knowledge. Another major consideration in choosing my topic was finding a supervisor to assist in my research.

After all this and much work, it was about 10.30am on 13 October 2011 that I found myself standing outside the research office at WBS, about to present my research proposal for final approval. The panel reviewed the topic, the research questions and literature review, and a research method was proposed. This was the first time in my academic career that

I needed to perform a formal research exercise. Having only completed an undergraduate degree, I found myself in uncharted waters. Needless to say, I was feeling apprehensive.

Fortunately, thanks to the effort and assistance of my research supervisor, I passed the panel and now, with a few months to go, I am in the final stretch. There is still a lot of work to do, and I cannot afford to slack off now that I am beginning to get the sense that 'the end is in sight'.

So, in answer to my initial questions: Yes, yes, yes, and then some.

And if anyone asks me if they should do an MBA, I find myself saying: "Depends." If they are able to articulate the reasons clearly enough, then I would say "yes". Are they are prepared for the sacrifices? "Yes." Will they stick it out? "Yes." And, finally, I would say, good luck – they are going to need it.

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