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The MBA: From a passport to wealth, to office joke

Firms now favour liberal arts degrees over the once-hot business credential -- and the uppity attitude that came with it

Jenny Jackson

The Ottawa Citizen

August 31, 2004

The MBA, once a ticket to stratospheric wealth and success, is falling back to Earth.

Management gurus deride people with them, television ads make fun of them and some employers have unofficial policies not to hire them right out of school -- let somebody else teach them some manners.

Meanwhile, the hot new ticket for some Fortune 500 companies is the lowly liberal arts degree.

A recent FedEx television advertisement features a young man on his first day. His boss tells him "we're just in a bit of a jam. All this has to get out today."

"Yeah, ah ... I don't do shipping," he replies.

"Oh no, no, it's very easy," she answers. "We use Fedex.ca. Anybody can do it."

"You don't understand, I have an MBA."

"Oh, you have an MBA?"

"Yeah ..."

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"In that case, I'll have to show you how to do it."

The voice over nails it with: "Fedex.ca makes shipping so fast and easy ... even an MBA can do it."

The ad hit such a nerve that senior FedEx officials refused to comment on it. "I think (senior managers) want it to go away," spokesman Karen Cooper said.

"I thought it was hilarious but some people have told me, 'I didn't think that was very funny'."

The most vociferous opponent of the MBA culture is Henry Mintzberg, professor of management studies at McGill University.

His recent book, *Managers Not MBAs*, argues that most management programs train the wrong kind of person at the wrong time to do the wrong kind of thing. Instead of teaching students in the art and craft of running a business, they churn out self-interested young people who have little ability and less concern for the long-term interests of the firm that hires them.

Disaster ensues, he says, from the corrupted Enron culture, which hired about 250 MBAs a year, to the administration of George W. Bush (Harvard MBA 1975), which has begun a war in Iraq with no appreciation of the historical context.

Mr. Mintzberg, named one of the Top 10 management thinkers in the world by the Financial Times, has, with several colleagues, developed a sort of anti-MBA program open only to working managers. The series of two-week modules spread over 16 months and five countries, including Canada, cover Managing Self, the reflective mind-set; Managing Relationships, the collaborative mind-set; Managing Organizations, the analytic mind-set; Managing Context, the worldly mind-set; and Managing Change, the action mind-set.

Companies are loath to admit they stay away from MBAs, but some universities' reaction to their complaints are revealing.

Ken Morse, managing director at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Entrepreneur Centre, teaches, among other things, "charm school" for MBAs.

A few years ago MIT's career development office and some students came to him saying they needed some pointers on proper behaviour. The MIT grads were smart and hard-working but, in job interviews, they were going down in flames compared to the Harvard Business School grads.

One employer told him: "I love these MIT guys but I wouldn't put them in front of customers."



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The MBA: From a passport to wealth, to office joke

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Harvard grads were better in the interviews, but they were just as obnoxious once hired. Mr. Morse suspects plenty of firms stay away from recent grads.

"I think that a lot of people do say, 'I'll let somebody else tumble them in a ball mill and get their rough edges off.' "

Are they rude? Unmanageable? Arrogant?

"It's worse than that," says Mr. Morse. They have a fundamental misconception of their place in the world, he says.

"That obnoxious, outrageous, egregious sense of entitlement comes from two sources. First, they come that way. Then, for two years, you do three classes a day in which you're solving important problems in a company. After awhile of drinking your own Kool Aid, you actually think you know what you're talking about.

"So what we teach is: 'Look, guys, when you go to work for a company, for the first year or so you'll know less than all the secretaries, so get a grip.' "

Most MBA programs encourage students to work for a few years between their undergraduate and graduate degrees, and they try to fold in a large professional component with co-op program and intern placements.

Envy plays a role too, says Mr. Morse. "In large companies, because they are low growth, you tend to have average people doing average jobs, and they don't like people to rock the boat or change the clock speed."

Sylvia MacArthur, director of Madison MacArthur Executive Search Consultants, says MBAs may be a little tarnished but they are hardly worthless in the job market. Certainly, the degree will likely beat a simple undergraduate degree.

But if the MBA follows an undergraduate bachelor of commerce, recruiters are not so impressed. "They see them as interchangeable," says Ms. MacArthur. "It's only one way of thinking. They do the same kinds of business cases (in both programs)."

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"Whereas if they had a liberal arts undergrad degree, that would really better."

Liberal arts degrees were considered a waste of time for years, but no longer.

"There is a big swing back to them because they teach to how to research and read and ferret out, how to think. A liberal arts teaches you how to learn."

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