

# MBA Admissions Primer

Tips on Business School Research, Financing your MBA, Writing your Application and Selecting Recommenders.



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## About the Author

Kavita Singh has over 13 years of experience working in the U.S. and India. Kavita is the CEO of [FutureWorks Consulting](#). She is an MBA graduate of Columbia Business School and holds a BA (Hons) from Oxford University. She has worked for leading companies such as Mars, Colgate-Palmolive and WebMD at higher management roles. Kavita is a CBS Ambassador and on Columbia's panel as an alumni adviser (coaching MBA students through the program). She also writes for elite publications like the Hindustan Times.

## About FutureWorks Consulting

[FutureWorks](#) is a professional admission consulting firm providing one-on-one admissions consulting services to applicants to leading undergraduate and postgraduate programs abroad - such as Harvard, Columbia, Stanford and MIT

FutureWorks is not just an 'admissions consulting' service. We help you through the entire process from advising you on pre-application strategy, admissions consulting, pre-departure skills training and coaching on the job search process while you are at university

[FutureWorks](#) gets around 4000 visitors a month who enjoy reading our articles dealing with admission news, tips for students and parents, insights on top schools, breaking news etc. We are actively engaged on Facebook and have two pages:

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## Interview with Kavita Singh - CEO of FutureWorks Consulting

**FIGMAT:** Tell us a little bit about yourself

**Kavita Singh:** I have grown up and lived all over the world: Calcutta, Dubai, Delhi, Oxford, London and New York. It was a great experience and has shaped who I am quite fundamentally.

**I am extremely passionate about innovation, and have spent my entire career in new product and new business development.** I was lucky to have discovered my passion early on in my career and realized that as long as you follow what you are passionate about, you are much more likely to be successful in whatever you do. It also made me realize that as your interests develop, you should ensure you let both you and your career evolve with it. We now have the opportunity to make multiple career shifts in our lives, but the common link between those shifts should be what you are most passionate about. I have worked across several different industries – confectionary, personal care, healthcare and education - but the common thread across all of those was innovation.

**I have found that an MBA lets you make those career shifts and changes because it helps you develop the skills and thinking you will need to in order to do so.**

**FIGMAT:** What motivated you to do an MBA?

**Kavita Singh:** I had been thinking about whether or not I wanted to do an MBA for some time. At the time I was working for one of the leading marketing strategy consulting firms in India and we were discussing a role wherein I would open and run a new office for them in one of two potential locations. The option was extremely attractive and would have given me the entrepreneurial and general management experience I was looking for.

However in the end **I decided to do an MBA because I really wanted to get global experience and round out my skill set.** Also, I wanted to move over to the client side and I saw an MBA as a great bridge to do so.

**FIGMAT:** What are some of the biggest takeaways from your MBA Experience?

**Kavita Singh:** **For me, the biggest take away is the network I made.** It's a network of close friends, colleagues, and acquaintances and potential peers, advisors, and investors. I walked away with a great set of friends who all act as informal advisors to me and even now I continue to build more contacts through the Columbia network, which is extremely supportive.

When they say your time at Business School is '2 years as a student and a lifetime as an alumni', it is something that really rings true for me.

**FIGMAT:** What were the events and circumstances that led you to create FutureWorks Consulting?

**Kavita Singh:** I found that the Indian educational system focused on academics and not the other skills that universities in the US look for: be it leadership or communication skills. While this is something that has been talked about a fair amount, I hadn't seen many firms that were helping talented students to fill these gaps.

**So at FutureWorks Consulting we aren't just focused on getting someone into university but rather also about building the skills that they will need to get in.** Those very skills will be extremely beneficial to students for the rest of their careers; and that is exactly why universities focus on them.

That is why we start as early as Class 9 for applicants to undergraduate institutions abroad. When a parent tells me 'my daughter's personality has evolved and blossomed working with FutureWorks', I see that as the success that makes us proud and not just the fact that she got into Yale or Columbia.

**FIGMAT:** Only top candidates are selected to Columbia Business School. What were some of the strategies that you followed for getting admission to Columbia Business School?

**Kavita Singh:** When I visited the Columbia Business School campus, I fell completely in love with it and knew that it was the school I wanted to go. I came back and thought rationally about what I really wanted out of an MBA program and Columbia was the only school that fit all my requirements perfectly. So I decided that I was going to apply to Columbia – and that was the only school I applied to. As you can imagine, that made it really easy to answer the 'Why MBA and Why Columbia Business School' question.

**In thinking about my application, I thought about my strength, talents, and weaknesses. Most importantly I thought about what made me unique as an applicant and what would set me apart from other applicants.** I then focused on demonstrating this to the admissions committee through my resume and essays. The important point here is 'demonstrate' – I made sure I followed the 'show rather than tell' principle so that the admissions committee could really understand my strengths and differentiating factors.

**FIGMAT:** How important was your Pre-MBA experience in the MBA Admissions process?

**Kavita Singh:** My Pre-MBA experience helped me in two ways. Firstly, and most importantly it helped me clarify my goals. Had I not had a sense of where I wanted to go in the future, it would have been hard for me to figure out why I needed an MBA and what type of program would be best suited to me. When I refer to my goals, I don't just mean my immediate post MBA goals but also what I was looking to do about 8-10 years after I graduated. Since I knew I wanted to be an entrepreneur eventually, I ensured that I focused on developing my skills and experience in this area.

Secondly, my Pre-MBA helped me to differentiate myself from other applicants and to show the school how I could bring a unique perspective to the classroom.

**FIGMAT:** Is there a myth about MBA programs that you want to break?

**Kavita Singh:** **Yes, the biggest myth is that as long as you go to a top brand name school that's all that matters.** I don't intend to suggest that brand is unimportant; in fact I think it is very important. What applicants should think is what make one top brand different to the other and which one is best suited to you. I have close friends and colleagues who studied across the top 10 MBA schools globally and while most of them were happy with their choice, several people did realize they had chosen the wrong school.

**FIGMAT:** On looking back, were there any classes or activities in your MBA that have helped you with the day to day operations of your Business?

**Kavita Singh:** **There were specific classes that have been extremely helpful such as corporate finance, negotiations, turnaround management and new product development.** However as I look back now, it has been less about the specific classes and rather more about the way an MBA program make you think about and view both a problem or an opportunity and potential solutions.

Being in a class with people from multiple difficult professional backgrounds and countries makes you think about how to view things from multiple perspectives and helps you to hone and adapt your own approach. At university, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, I believe you learn as much or even more from your classmates than from your professors.

**FIGMAT:** How important are MBA Application Essays and Interview in the MBA Admissions process?

**Kavita Singh:** They are critical. **I think a lot of people still think it's really a lot about their grades and GMAT.** While your grades and GMAT score are not unimportant, you will generally be competing with applicants of a similar capability. So your application essays and interview are your opportunity to demonstrate your skills, what makes you unique and why you would be a strong candidate for that particular school.

**FIGMAT:** What advice would you give to recent MBA graduates?

**Kavita Singh:** Unfortunately, recent MBA graduates will have graduated in a down economy. I know exactly what that feels like, since I graduated in 2003 when the economy was not doing well and the opportunities were even more limited since I was an international student.

**My advice would be to look beyond the regular companies that come to campus and look for opportunities that may not be typical 'MBA jobs'.** There are a number of companies that don't recruit from Business Schools but do have great positions for MBA graduates. After Business School, I joined M&M/Mars who did recruit MBA graduates, but did not have a regular Business School recruiting strategy. I managed to get in touch with them by using my network of alumni contacts and in fact found two Columbia Alumni at the company. Had I just focused on campus recruiting I would have missed out on this opportunity, which turned out to be one of the best jobs I have ever had,

## Difference between an MBA and a Masters in Management Course



As most of you know, if you are looking to get an MBA abroad from a leading institution then you need, on average, about 4-5 years of work experience. Of course, you can still go ahead and apply if you have 2-3 years of work experience – and if you are a strong applicant you will be successful. Some Business Schools, such as Harvard, are also encouraging younger applicants. However, few MBA programs accept applicants with no work experience

**In 2009 London Business School launched a new program – an MSc in Management for graduates with little or no work experience.** It is a 11-month full-time programme and is designed for people without work experience who want to lay the foundations for a successful career in business and beyond. It would be taught by the same faculty on a dedicated campus (Regent's Park) adjacent to the London Business School campus.

To quote LBS, the program is for “top recent graduates who have less than one year’s previous work experience and an undergraduate degree in a discipline other than business or management studies.” If you have excelled in non-academic areas such as sports or the arts, or shown your leadership potential in community activities, this may also make you an ideal candidate for the programme.

**The essay questions are identical to that of the MBA program** – which indicates what they are looking for applicants in this program? So if you know you want to get a management degree, and are concerned about waiting to do so then this could be a good option for you.

**There are also other such examples at Universities such as London School of Economics, University College London and Duke University.** Richard Ivey, one of the top 10 non-US Business Schools as ranked by Business Week, has launched of the first new Ivey degree program in almost 50 years: Ivey’s Master of Science in Management (MSc). The Ivey MSc is a direct-entry program requiring no previous full-time work experience.

The program is designed to build on your previous undergraduate experience and prepare you for international career interests in an ever-evolving, multicultural business world. The program is approved by the Senate of The University of Western Ontario and the Richard Ivey School of Business.

In December of 2009, Ivey was selected as the exclusive Canadian partner in the internationally renowned CEMS alliance. This partnership gives Ivey MSc students the opportunity to participate in the Master of International Management program with students from other schools in the alliance like the London School of Economics, HEC Paris, National University of Singapore, ESADE (Spain) and Fundao Getulio Vargas (Brazil). Students register as Ivey MSc students and pursue the CEMS MIM program concurrently.

So aside from not requiring work experience, how is the Masters in Management different to an MBA? Well there are several ways in which the program is different

**1) Because it requires no/little work experience the profile of class is obviously quite different to an MBA program.** By implication this means that the peer-to-peer learning you will gain from class discussions and group projects will be quite different. In an MBA class you can debate and discuss best practices and different approaches you may have used at work, in different work environments, industries and countries to solve the problems you are discussing; however in a Masters in Management programs such real life experiences will obviously not be a regular part of the discussions.

**2) The course curriculum itself is often different.** If you review program details for the MSc. in Management from LBS and compare it to the MBA program from LBS you will see the differences for yourself. You will see that MBA program offers greater width and depth in the curriculum; for examples it covers much more in the area of leadership development.

**3) The job opportunities available after an MBA program, in general, will be at a higher level than that available after a Masters in Management program.**

So a Masters in Management is not a 'replacement' for an MBA and you should consider which option is better for you. For example, if you intend to join your family business and think that you need management skills but may never have the opportunity to do an MBA later then the Masters in management could be a great option for you.

## MBA for Non-Traditional Careers - Emerging Trends

Most applicants to MBA programs, still plan to pursue fairly traditional post MBA careers such as finance, consulting and general management. However, there are a number of 'non-traditional' careers after an MBA that applicants are now considering. Some students are considering this largely because of the economy, while others join an MBA program with the intention of pursuing an alternative path.

### Non-Traditional MBA: Alternative Paths

So what are some of these alternative paths? Working in a social enterprise is one that seems to be gaining steam. A social enterprise could be a non-profit organization or a for profit organization that has both profit and social goals. In fact, Columbia Business School's 2010 Employment report showed that in 2010 7% of alumni were working in the non-profit sector and Harvard Business School's Class of 2010 career statistics show that 6% of the class was employed in the NGO/Government sector.

### Non-Profit Sector Needs Skilled Leaders

So why do an MBA if you want to join the non-profit sector? It is largely because future MBA students are looking to apply the leadership and management skills taught in business school to the nonprofit sector. Further, key skills such as accountancy and marketing skills, are often lacking in the not-for-profit world. By getting an MBA students can acquire these skills, setting them apart from other prospective job applicants, and help drive change within the non-profit world. A recent article in Businessweek talked about just these very transferable skills and how they helped Charles Abani, Oxfam's regional director for Southern Africa who manages 450 people across the region with an annual budget of \$28 million. The article stated that "After taking a four-week executive course funded by University of Oxford last year, Abani says he gained private sector skills, such as strategy planning and brand development, that are transferable to his work on poverty eradication and government advocacy in Africa."

Further, some of these students plan to immediately or eventually set up social businesses of their own or start an NGO. An MBA helps them to build key skills relevant to being an entrepreneur as well as the resources develop and refine their business plans; this includes mentorship programs, business plan competitions and various avenues that give potential entrepreneurs access to funding. Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford offers 5 Skoll scholarships a year, a Saïd program funded by eBay co-founder Jeffrey Skoll that pays the tuition and living expenses for five students each year who are pursuing careers in social entrepreneurship.

### Government Jobs

Another career path that was picking up pace for MBA students at US business schools over the last two or three years was that of a role with the Federal Government. An MBA can be valuable at a time when government is playing a key role in several sectors, from finance to education to energy. When the regulations being implemented can change the rules by which corporations play and the direction in which an industry is moving, the experience and skills and MBA brings to the table can be quite valuable;

skills in strategy, innovation and turnaround management are all transferable. Further the experience of being involved in the government can be one that is in turn quite attractive to an MBA student.

## Education and Health

Other non-traditional career paths include opportunities in sectors like education and health; both these sectors continue to show an upward employment trend in both the US and several emerging economies such as India. In addition, opportunities in emerging markets are also seeing an upward trend amongst potential MBA applicants. Gaining experience in a diverse, global class can help MBA students learn global best practices in an industry of functional area that can be seen as very valuable in an emerging market. Additionally the experience and skill of being able to work effectively across borders is another skill that is valued in emerging economies, where many companies looking to recruit international MBAs are doing a significant amount of their business across different countries.

## Harvard Business School – New Trends

Many potential applicants assume that a nontraditional career goal may hurt their chances of getting into an MBA program. However if you do have a non-traditional goal the questions you should be asking yourself is 'Could having a traditional post MBA career goal help me get into Business School?'. There were several articles towards the end of last year that were debating as to whether Harvard Business School was trying to change its admitted class profile. This debate was spurred by comments made by Harvard Business School Dean Nitin Nohria on a National Public Radio show in Boston. "People think we only turn out MBAs who become consultants and investment bankers," said Nohria, "but the reality is that we have people who go to work in social enterprise and in small business. What people want of us are leaders who can contribute to all these different types of organizations in society." It was further stirred by reports that several admissions consultants had found that 'private equity and investment banking superstars' that would normally have close to 100% chance of admission were having a much tougher time getting into HBS this year. It will be interesting to examine the class profiles for the Class of 2013 to see if there really is a significant shift in the profile or not.

## Dual Degree Programs – Myths and Realities

A dual degree program is simply a program where you apply, pursue and gain 2 degrees at the same time. A dual degree may involve you getting either a Bachelors and Masters in the same program or getting two Masters degree at different universities. If it is the latter, then you will pursuing these degrees either at different schools in the same university or perhaps across 2 different universities. There are several dual degrees programs you can pursue along with an MBA such as masters in urban planning, international relations, law, nursing, public health, journalism and engineering amongst others.

### **Myth 1: Getting into a dual degree program is easier**

You need to apply to and be accepted by both programs to be able to pursue a dual degree program. Hence, you will need to put in more work into the dual degree application than if you are applying to one program. Further, you will need to meet the high standards of two admissions committees and not one. Importantly, you will need to explain why you want to pursue a dual degree program.

### **Myth 2: Pursuing a dual degree program is always better than an MBA alone**

I speak to several potential applicants who believe that a dual degree program is always better than pursuing an MBA alone. It's actually really important to assess if it is the right program for you. Assess your background to determine what skills you already possess and what skills you need to gain. Then assess whether the MBA alone could help you to gain through requisite skills. For example, during your MBA you could chose to cross register at another school for a couple of classes to help you build specific knowledge and skills - if that is sufficient given your background and goals then the dual degree may not be right for you.

### **Myth 3: You would only pursue a dual degree if you have a very specific career goal**

In general, it's a good idea to assess if you have a very specific career goal and whether or not a dual degree will help you to enhance your skill set significantly compared to other people in the field. However, you may still choose to pursue a dual degree if you do not have a very specific career goal. For example with a dual MBA/Law degree you will gain knowledge of both disciplines as well as experience two complementary intellectual cultures: the problem-spotting, analytical culture of law, and the problem-solving, practical culture of business. The combination is of these two cultures can help you whether you decide to pursue a career in law or business. What is important to assess is whether the additional skills you will gain from that extra year of study is worth it - i.e. weigh it against what skills/experiences you would gain if you were in the work force for that additional year.

## Studying Abroad – Calculating Return on Investment

How would you figure out if you could justify the cost of studying abroad? After making sure you can afford to go abroad, you need to try and calculate your return on investment (ROI) to see if it is worth it.

**First, estimate your investment.** This will include the cost of tuition, living expenses, travel expenses, any salary forgone, any interest on loans minus any scholarships or financial incentives offered. Create at least two possible scenarios — one where you get a job immediately after graduating and another where you have to wait for several months. In the second scenario, your costs could increase by as much as 5 per cent.

**Calculating your return is much harder to do and it requires thorough research.** You need to try and estimate your starting salary as well as your future earning potential. For the universities you are considering, ask questions such as:

. **What are the average starting salaries and placement statistics for the types of jobs I am looking for?**

. **What are the average starting salaries and placement statistics in ‘boom’ years vs. ‘recession’ years?**

Calculate your ROI under an optimistic scenario and a pessimistic scenario to ensure that you can justify the costs even if the economy goes south.

. **Dig deep and understand what the starting salaries and placement statistics are for international students versus domestic students.** Are there any differences? Why? Is it harder for international students to get jobs in a specific industry? To what extent do salaries and placement statistics for international students change in ‘boom’ vs. ‘recession’ years?

. **What are alumni doing five years, 10 years, 15 years after graduation?**

. **What are the average increases in salaries that alumni experience over five years, 10 years, 15 years?**

Look at the jobs/industries you are considering, not just broad averages.

. If you consider returning at some point, **understand what your earning potential will be in your country.** What have been the experiences of alumni who have returned?

. **If you are considering going to a lower-tier university** mainly because it costs less, then determine to what extent your ‘return’ will be affected. Make sure the type of companies you want to work with come to the campus.

Find out how big the alumni base is, how active it is and whether there are alumni in the type of jobs and industries you are interested in. Alumni connections can be critical to help you land jobs that are not advertised.

### **And where can you get all this information?**

- . University websites
- . University admissions office
- . University careers office
- . Current students
- . Alumni abroad: Ask the admissions office to put you in touch with some alumni.
- . Alumni in India: If there is an alumni chapter near you, contact them.

## Before taking a Loan - Points to Consider

### Loans do not cover all expenses

Usually, loans offered by public and private institutions cover the cost of tuition and books, but do not cover other expenses attached with life in college. While this is a cause of concern for all students, it becomes even more serious in case of MBA students, who have more financial responsibilities than an undergraduate.

### Puts pressure on graduates immediately

If your loan does not have a grace period, then you will be expected to start making repayments as soon as your course finishes. Even in the case of grace periods, it is usually up to six months and sometimes students may not find their dream job in this time. However, students are often pressured into settling for the first job they find in order to start re-paying the loan without incurring penalty.

### Long re-payment durations

Another thing to be considered while going for a loan is how long it will take to actually repay it. The total cost of the loan may go up to very high in some cases, which may lead to graduates being buried in debt long after the program is completed. This is a bigger concern for students from countries like India who usually like to get married and settle down soon after getting their MBA and a nice job. In such a case, the liability of re-paying a huge loan doesn't sit well with responsibilities of married life.

### Aggressive banks

Education loans are nowadays driven by the aggressive and forceful marketing done by banks offering these loans. More than helping students, the stake of the financial institutions lies in increasing the profitability of their business due to which they sometimes give wrong advice or push students towards borrowing more than they need.

Sometimes, students take more than one loan to help them cover various costs. Paying the interest for different loans is a tough task and here, the student loan consolidation comes in the picture. Student loan consolidation is a practical repayment tool that combines your student loans into one master loan, significantly reducing your monthly payment (up to 50% in some cases). Although the concept is very popular in US, they also have some drawbacks:

**The biggest disadvantage is that, you should consolidate your student loans before your six month grace period is expired;** you will forfeit the rest of your grace period and be forced to start repaying your student loans within sixty days of your consolidation approval. If you select a longer repayment stage, the total amount you will be paying in the long run will end up a lot more than the unusual loan amount.

**You can consolidate your various loans only once.** So, to sum it up; student loan consolidation helps students ease their financial burden to a great extent. However, the pros and cons must be evaluated carefully before consolidating the loan.

The bottom line is that considering the challenging economic conditions, education loans are beneficial if chosen wisely, else they become a burden for the borrower for years to come. **One should be thorough with the terms and conditions of the bank** and all the other involving parties before taking up a loan.

## MBA – An Opportunity for Networking

The most frequent reason that potential MBA applicants cite for wanting to pursue an MBA is gaining an academic grounding in business skills. They are invariably surprised when I tell them that if that's the only reason they are going to Business School then they are wasting their money. When I then go on to tell them that I don't really believe in campus placements, they start looking at me like I have suddenly grown two heads ..... until I explain why.

**There are so many resources at your fingertips when you are studying at a leading university**, whether as an undergraduate or postgraduate, but many potential students don't realize what they are, how to leverage them and how to go about doing so. One of these resources is the network you gain access to - a network of peers, alumni, faculty and corporations. It's a phenomenal resource and one that gets stronger over time. In talking to hundreds of potential Indian applicants it's interesting to find that few of them never really think about the importance of networking or how to use the power of the university network.

While I always knew that networking was important, I think I really learnt what it meant and developed that skill at Business School. And why was that? Well, I was graduating in a recession and there weren't too many companies hiring, and even fewer were hiring international students. So basically I was forced to – that was my silver lining around a rather large gloomy recessionary cloud. I found that leveraging the Columbia Business School network gave me access to people I wouldn't normally be able to get, **information about job openings that wasn't widely available, insight into companies that could help you to win a position and finally the credibility that comes from being recommended by a Columbia Alum.** But rather than droning on about the benefits of networking, let me share some examples that may bring my point to life.

### Urban Legend: The Warren Buffet Story

Now this story has become an urban legend at Columbia Business School and so I am no longer sure which of the facts are totally accurate and which ones are exaggerated, but I do know that the story line is true. And here's how it goes. One of my classmates was very clear about what his dream job was - to work with Warren Buffet. For those of you who do not know who Warren Buffet is he is world's wealthiest investor and currently the 3rd richest person in the world. One share in his company, Berkshire Hathaway, would cost you USD 120,000. He is also an alumnus of Columbia Business School. Apparently my classmate, who had solid credentials, felt that he would need to do something to get his attention. So my classmate wrote to Warren Buffet and told him that he would be willing to pay him to do an internship with him – and even enclosed a check to cover the first week of the internship. He got a letter back, returning the cheque, which apparently said that he may have a project for him and suggested that he stop by if he was ever in Omaha... and of course he was kind enough to return the cheque. Now if you live in New York you probably aren't making too many plans to visit Omaha. My classmate did. He managed to meet Warren Buffet, get a project, impress him and finally get his dream job. Now don't go off sending checks to potential employers – it won't be unique anymore! You should

also think about what you can say or do that in that specific case will get their attention or impress them rather just using the same idea for everyone.

## **Making one of your classes your business**

One of my friends' took a class at Business School that focuses on 'Personal Creativity'. It helps you find your calling in life – or what we in India would call your dharma. My friend was really inspired by this class and decided to launch his own business in career coaching. He spent hours with his professor, who is now on his board of advisors

### **Your classmates can become your investors**

There are umpteen examples of people raising money to start their business from fellow classmates, professors or alumni.

### **So, what was my story?**

Well, I managed to get two job offers I really liked. And they both happened in rather different ways. I found out about the first job through one of my professors. I was very interested in his class and spent a lot of time talking to him about potential business ideas and asking him for advice about career opportunities. So when he found out that one of the companies he had brought in to talk to his students was looking to hire, he introduced me to them. This company did not hire on campus so I probably would never even have found out about this job opening in the normal course of things.

The second job I found was through a Columbia Alumnus – or actually 3 Columbia Alumni. I had reached out to an Alumnus to set up an informational interview. The informational interview went very well and the alumnus in question, now a close friend, offered to introduce me not only to more people in his company but also to other alumni he knew in other companies. The next day, I picked up the phone and called one of his contacts who worked at another company. The call went well and he mentioned that his company actually may have a job opening. So this Alumnus, let's call him Alumnus number 2, suggested I first meet with him before he introduced me to other people. Basically he wanted to informally interview me before he recommended me to anyone else – people won't just blindly recommend you because you are an alumnus, you do still have to impress them! After we met, he checked to see what job openings his company and handed over my resume to the hiring manager – Columbia Alumnus Number 3. Strangely enough, I had spoken to Alumnus Number 3 several months ago and had had a great conversation with her – so she immediately recognized my name and called me in to interview. A prior informational interview, an alumni recommendation, and a really great interview (I had had a lot of practice by then!) later, I had another job offer.

## MBA Networking Experience

- Firstly it is about not expecting immediate returns. It's the combination of your activities that may get you to where you want to go.
- Master networkers realize that networking is a life skill, not just something you do when you want something. Their networking includes connecting with different cultures, ages, special interests groups and networks. They are constantly making strong connections, following up, keeping in touch, identifying and making contact with spheres of influence, and forming win-win strategic alliances and mastermind groups.
- However, influence gained through forming strong networks, and by becoming a sphere of influence, can be a two-edged sword. Master networkers understand that their ongoing success depends on treating their networks and the people within them with respect and integrity. This is one of the reasons why building networks takes time, effort and, most of all, sincerity.
- Great networkers also make heart-to-heart connections with people when they talk to them. Master networkers can smell insincerity from a mile away; they quickly identify people who want to use them, use their good name and benefit from associating with them. I didn't just make contacts, I made really good friends.

Bill Gates has often spoken of a trilogy of trust – the trust that one person has in another, that is then passed on to the third party. For example, Bob knows, likes and trusts Sue, who knows likes and trusts John. Based on this two-way trust, Bob will be open to discussions or possible connections with John, even though John has never previously had contact with Bob.

So an MBA can help you get the network, what you do with it is of course totally up to you!

## Getting into Leading Business Schools without Work Experience

Several potential applicants are looking to apply to leading Business Schools with no or limited work experience. As most of you know, if you are looking to get an MBA abroad from a leading institution then you need, on average, about 4-5 years of work experience. Of course, you can still go ahead and apply if you have 2-3 years of work experience - and if you are a strong applicant you will be successful. Some Business Schools, such as Harvard, are also encouraging younger applicants. However, few MBA programs accept applicants with no work experience. There are a few programs though that are designed for applications with no work experience and also a few universities that are open to accepting a limited number of applicants with no full-time work experience. So what are your options?

### 1. HBS 2+2 program

You apply to HBS in your junior year at college. If you get accepted then after you graduate you will go into your 1st summer program at Harvard. This will be followed by two years of approved work experience. After the 1st year of work experience you attend your 2nd summer program at Harvard. Once you have completed your work experience you immerse yourself in two years at the Harvard Business School MBA Program.

### 2. Yale Silver Scholars program

Each year Yale SOM admits a select handful of college seniors to a three-year MBA program called the Silver Scholars Program. The program provides the unique opportunity to enter an MBA program immediately after your undergraduate education. The program was created in 2001.

As a Silver Scholar, you will spend your first year at Yale developing the basic skills and mindset of a manager through SOM's core curriculum. During the second year, you will complete a full-time internship. In your third year, you will return to campus for the conclusion of the MBA program, taking electives at SOM and elsewhere at Yale in the areas that most interest you. You can only apply if you are a college senior.

### 3. Programs open to college seniors or early career applicants

Apply to programs that are more open to college seniors or early career applicants like Stanford, MIT, Chicago, CMU, UCLA and Simon Rochester

### 4. MSc in Management

A few leading MBA Schools have introduced an MSc in Management for college graduates with little or no work experience. For example, Last September London Business School launched a new program - an MSc in Management for graduates with little or no work experience. It is an 11-month full-time programme and is designed for people without work experience who want to lay the foundations for a

successful career in business and beyond. It would be taught by the same faculty on a dedicated campus (Regent's Park) adjacent to the London Business School campus.

To quote LBS, the program is for "top recent graduates who have less than one year's previous work experience and an undergraduate degree in a discipline other than business or management studies." If you have excelled in non-academic areas such as sports or the arts, or shown your leadership potential in community activities, this may also make you an ideal candidate for the programme.

The essay questions are identical to that of the MBA program - which indicates what they are looking for from applicants in this program. So if you know you want to get a management degree, and are concerned about waiting to do so then this could be a good option for you.

Other leading schools that offer an MSc in Management include Duke, Richard Ivey, IE and ESADE

## Extracurricular Activities that Count

When you are applying to a College, extra-curricular activities can go a long way in enhancing your profile. Even once admitted to an institute, students must realize that an overall learning doesn't come solely through in-class work. Classroom learning also needs to be supplemented by extracurricular activities and off-campus work experiences. Here are some useful ways to highlight and utilize extra-curricular activities in an application

### The quality is important, not quantity

In the increasingly competitive application process across all programs, extracurricular activities have become essential for students to distinguish themselves from the pack. However, in an attempt to stand out, many applicants mention a whole list of extra-curricular stuff in their application including the 'not so important' bits. For example, being part of the national level inter school swimming team for 3 years in a row definitely deserves a detailed mention, but being voted the 'Best singer in class' during one semester does not. What we mean is that you may be an applicant who for some reason hasn't been involved in extracurricular so extensively, and in such a situation, it's better to not mention anything than to try and sell a meager looking achievement like it was something fabulous; just to add something in there. So one should keep in mind that, where extracurricular is concerned in your application, quality matters; not quantity.

### Use it to tell a story

While writing personal statements or essays, one is expected to tell a story about themselves which covers various aspects of the personality & candidature. Here, involvement in extracurricular activities can be used smartly and in gaining an edge over others. Most of the applicants write more about their professional experience, at times even to the extent of seeming repetitive; but they forget that relying exclusively on one's work & academics is not the best approach. At each point, the applicant should aim to share a different side of them. Submitting five essays about electrical engineering or investment banking may not be a bad idea, however, as long as the information is available, writing one essay each about your stellar achievements in academics, work and sports is an even better idea. Simply because it will touch upon the various dimensions of the applicant as an individual and bring out different qualities which will help them do well in different situations.

### Using it for scholarships

Extracurricular activities sometimes play a major role in getting scholarships to applicants on basis of activities & fields that the concerned institute may be interested in. For example, sports teams are a very popular and integral part of most of the top universities in the US and organizations; like the NCAA, that has institutes under 2 of its 3 divisions that offer hundreds of athletic scholarships to

undergraduate students every year. Therefore an applicant who has an impressive sports background and talent can try at one of the institutes under these divisions.

### **Volunteering counts**

Demonstrating your involvement in social welfare and volunteer work is also of special interest to the admission committees. Volunteering experience is a great way to establish a candidate as a responsible, aware individual who is up to taking challenges and helping others. But since a lot of people now volunteer, you need to make sure what you do sets you apart from other candidates. This works especially well for applicants who are living and serving outside their home countries. For example, an Asian applicant who works and volunteers in Africa will stand out as being well adapted to foreign environment; besides having all the above mentioned qualities.

## Top Business Schools - Importance of Academics

I often people ask how an academically strong candidate could have gotten rejected from a top business school. While applying for an MBA school, there are multiple criterions, based on which one's application and credibility as an applicant is verified and taken into consideration. While every applicant is aware of the fact that academics would play an important part in the application process, not everyone knows how much is the actual importance and weight age given to the various factors? We try to provide some quick & valuable answers here as to how admissions committees view your academic history:

### 1. 3 year vs. 4 year degrees

There is often a debate/doubt over the significance of and difference between a three or a four year undergrad degree when applying to a business school. Here is some clarification- international candidates must have a college-level education equivalent to a 4-year American undergraduate or baccalaureate degree (the same as a first university degree). There are a number of universities around the world, particularly in India that offer 3-year undergraduate programs. Keeping in mind this difference in education systems, many international universities have now started accepting the 3 year Indian degree as an equivalent to the 4-year American undergraduate or baccalaureate degree. A good example of this is that of Michigan University that recently joined a now growing list of institutions accepting the 3 year Indian undergraduate degree as being equivalent to a 4-year American undergraduate or baccalaureate degree for their MBA programs. We even made a small post about it at the time the news came out. You can read it here. However, there still remain a handful of B-Schools that do not accept the 3 year degree for their MBA admissions. A prime case in point here is the Berkley School of Business, which still requires a 4 years bachelor's degree. It's also important to note that the list of requirements clearly state that the applicant must not have obtained an MBA or comparable degree from another institution at the time of application. Therefore, an Indian applicant with a 3 year undergraduate degree aspiring for Berkley needs to add at least one more year of post high school education to their resume while ensuring that the qualification isn't an MBA or equivalent degree.

### 2. Brand name/strength of undergrad institution

It does help the cause if a person happens to be from a premium undergrad institution, because the reputation of the institution they are from strengthens their case. One must keep in mind though, that approaching the application process with over-confidence due to being from a top brand undergrad college may work adversely for the candidate. So, while the brand name helps, a lot also depends on how you did college and what activities you participated and excelled in. However, a candidate whose college name isn't such a well known brand can still does well if they showed how they went 'above and beyond' at college. They can also hope to leverage the brand of their employer in the work experience section. We will be talking about this more in one of the following blog posts.

### 3. GPA Score

GPA, or Grade Point Average, is the globally accepted score which is mandatory at all top B-schools, and is usually provided by your college if you studied in the U.S. However, in some countries, as is the case with some colleges in India, GPA scores are not provided to graduating students. However, in such cases B-schools will take the percentage provided in your mark sheets and then convert those into a GPA by taking into account the course, overall grades, average grades across the student body, and credit hours.

Traditionally, a good GPA score is around 3.5, so, once you do the conversion and realize you have something around this, you'd know that you are in the running for a good B-school. There are a few sources available online where you can get this conversion done yourself as well. For example, the WES GPA calculator; it's a simple and effective GPA score calculator provided by the World Education Society. Interested applicants may also order an online evaluation report and other transcripts from them by filling the report request form available on the WES website.

It is important to note that admissions committees will not only look at your GPA but also the strength of your institution and evaluate both together. Furthermore, a low GPA can be overcome and there are several strategies you can use to address this.

### 4. GMAT Score

Another essential for getting into a top grade B-school is cracking the GMAT. A decent GMAT score for an Ivy League or Ivy League equivalent school is about the 700 mark. Here's a look at the GMAT averages for some of the top B-schools –

Wharton Business School: 715

Sloan Business School: 706

University of Chicago: 714

Berkeley: 718

One must remember that this needs to be complimented with a good GPA score. Also, if you have taken the GMAT a number of times, make sure that you put in the scores of all your GMAT attempts. Schools are generally interested in knowing what is the highest that you can get, and often consider your best GMAT score from among the options. Therefore, whether you're someone who is preparing to give the GMAT for the first time, or if you have given it a few times but have not achieved your desired score- consulting a GMAT preparation professional service may be a good idea. However, a word of caution is required here too, as there are various GMAT preparation centres and consultants out there and not all of them are credible. So, if you plan on going for consulting/preparation services then do your research well and take inputs online from those who were able to ace the test after taking professional help.

## 5. Overcoming a low GMAT score

While a high GMAT score works in your advantage, a low score needn't necessarily be the end of your hopes. The GMAT exam is intended to measure the specific academic skills needed for business school and a low GMAT score will raise questions on whether or not you will be able to cope with the academic rigor required in an MBA program. However, if you can convince the admission authorities that have the qualities to help you excel in the MBA and tackle the challenges it presents then you can overcome this hurdle. For example, if you have a lower than desired GMAT score think about other things in your academic background or in your professional experience that can help to demonstrate the skills that the GMAT is trying to test.

Additionally, if your work experience is exemplary and your GPA and undergraduate institution is strong then even a low GMAT score can be overcome. Here are a few examples of average GPA scores in some top B-Schools.

Stanford: 3.6

Columbia: 3.5

University of Chicago: 3.52

Dartmouth: 3.5

So, a good GPA & GMAT combination along with stellar work experience & recommendations as well as a strong set of application essays is what an applicant needs to see his candidature through to the accepted list. While the academics are usually considered the easier part of the application process, they alone will not get you into a top Business School. Strong academics help assure the admissions committee that you will be able to handle the rigor of Business School, however it does not differentiate you from the thousands of other 'stars' applying to the top Business Schools from around the world.

## Handling Deadlines smartly

When you consider pursuing an MBA abroad, it is important to remember that the application process comes with a plethora of procedures and deadlines that you need to understand and track. After you thoroughly research the MBA options available and the universities offering them, you should start keeping a tab on the deadlines of the various schools which offer these programs. Here is a helpful 3 point checklist that you might want to consult while chasing MBA deadlines.

### 1. Application Deadline:

Which round should I aim for? Applying for the first deadline is considered to be the wisest approach, but that should only be the case if you are sure that you're a 100% ready. If you've had time to prepare the best application you could have, and are confident of your chances based on it, then go for it. However, don't compromise on the strength of your application just to meet the round 1 deadline; the priority should be to submit the very best and most polished application. As a case in point, the Harvard Business School had the following dates:

Round 1: 03 October 2011

Round 2: 10 January 2012

Round 3: 10 April 2012

So, a student who started preparing his application sometime in September 2011 would have been best advised to aim for the Round 2 deadline in January 2012. However, that being said, one should try to make the application within the Round 2 deadlines and avoid cutting it too close. Round 3 applicants may run into some additional challenges. For example, they are not eligible for the Lauder program; the first MBA/MA joint-degree program in international management provided by Wharton- due to the timeframes involved. They may also run into visa application timing issues if they are international applicants. This is why it is generally better to apply in R1 or R2, if you are ready.

When you talk about European schools, as discussed, the rounds are not as important as with US schools. For examples the acceptance rate at INSEAD and LBS are fairly even across rounds and they also tend to have more rounds than US schools.

### 2. Avoid Common Mistakes

Make sure, that in your rush to meet application deadlines, you don't end up making some elementary but common mistakes often made by students such as grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, mistyping the name of the school etc; also, remember to read & re-read the directions, see if you can get a friend or parent to proof read it to ensure you haven't missed or misinterpreted anything; refrain from repeating the same information at various places in the application; the word count is limited, so if you want the application to work for you, then make sure every word counts.

### 3. Acceptance Deadlines

Handling acceptance and expectations together: One might face a difficult situation when; on applying to two B-schools, you need to accept the offer from your second choice school first. You might be required to pay up a particular amount of fees by a stipulated date, which is earlier than the result date of the other school. So what does one do in such a situation? Well, you can ask the school which has made you the offer to extend the deadline; there have been cases wherein schools have done this.

## Before Starting the Application - 5 Things to do

**1. Spend time researching the schools and programs.** Give yourself the time to do this – at least two weeks – it is well worth the effort.

- a. Make sure you first spend time thinking about what is important to you in a business school
- b. Then spend time researching how these schools can meet your needs and goals. Dig deep into the website, talk to current students, alumni, faculty, admissions officers etc.

**2. Start thinking about your strengths and weaknesses.**

- a. Once you identify your weaknesses think about how you can address them prior to your application. For example, if your GMAT score is not within range, you may consider retaking it. If you have some weak grades in your previous academic records you may enroll in a specific course to demonstrate your skills in this area. You won't be able to address every weakness of course – though just being aware of what they are will help you think about how to strategically address them in your application.

**3. You can start working on specific aspects of your application**

- a. Resume: You will need to put together resume for every application. The guidelines may be slightly different from school to school; however you can create a strong resume that you can then adapt for each school.
- b. Letters of recommendation: You can start by thinking about who to select as your recommenders. Once you have a short-list, it will be important to approach each potential recommender individually and ask them if they would be comfortable writing a recommendation for you.
- c. Detailing out your academic, work and extracurricular activity: This will be required for every application so it's worth putting this all together so that you do not miss anything.

**4. You can start thinking about what examples you can use in your application**

- a. Map your academic, work and extracurricular activity against the areas that business schools will be assessing you on. This will help you start to think about which examples will be the strongest to use to demonstrate these skills.

**5. You can start thinking about how to differentiate yourself from other applicants**

- a. You will need to stand out from the crowd! So start think about what makes you unique – aside from assessing this yourself you can ask other people who know you to give you their take on it

## Importance of GMAT in MBA Admission

Most applicants I speak to spend a fair amount of time studying for the GMAT because they know it plays an important role in the admissions process. However, often applicants overestimate or underestimate the importance of the GMAT and the role it plays in the admissions process. Given this, I thought it would be helpful to examine what role the GMAT actually plays in the admissions process and what it indicates to the admissions committee.

The GMAT exam was created in 1954 because business schools did not think that existing tests gauged very precisely the academic skills that graduate business programs demanded. The GMAT exam is intended to measure the specific academic skills needed for business school. So a low GMAT score will raise questions on whether or not you will be able to cope with the academic rigor required in an MBA program.

Further, although the GMAT exam is conducted in English and requires basic math skills, its difficulty lies not in advanced vocabulary or math skills, but in the logic and analytical reasoning the test requires. Hence if you have a strong overall score but are much weaker in one section vs. another it may raise questions about the specific skills they are trying to test in that section.

The May 2010 issue states that “Data Sufficiency very succinctly measures your ability to sort through a lot of information and pick only what you need to solve a problem. It also tests your ability to think through solving a problem using different bits of data. Business schools demand both, as students are often presented with complicated case studies with lots of exhibits and financial statements and must figure out how to solve problems without getting bogged down in excessive detail.” The Graduate Management News also goes on to explain how critical reasoning questions help to identify “students with a raw ability to connect facts, to detect patterns, to discriminate true causation from spurious correlations”. The newsletter states that “In business school, as in the business world, you will be asked to collaborate on projects and evaluate the ideas and arguments of others, and the ability to do that succinctly is important.....The real world is such a messy place that it is often hard to spot the proper correlation among facts, let alone to pin down the right ‘cause-effect’ connections.”

So, if you have a lower than desired GMAT score think about other things in your academic background or in your professional experience that can help to demonstrate the skills that the GMAT is trying to test. Further, what is important to remember is that the GMAT is only testing these specific skills and there are a host of other skills that admissions committees evaluate you on, such as leadership. So if you spend too much time on the GMAT and not enough time on your application you will not be giving the admissions committee enough insight into how strong you are on those other non-academic skills.

## Choosing Recommenders

You know yourself better than anyone else, but in the eyes of MBA admission officers, some of the best experts on you are often those who have worked with you. Every one of your business school applications requires letters of recommendation. These letters build on your admissions story, providing additional evidence of leadership skills, analytical abilities, teamwork skills, and maturity that you have highlighted in the rest of your application. Thus, one should select recommenders very carefully. Today, we would cover some tips on choosing recommenders and recommendation guidelines from top B schools.

### Why do B schools ask for recommendations?

A business school wants to hear a complete picture of the applicant from someone who knows you well and has been in a position to evaluate you. They want the data provided by you in the essays to be validated and take an objective assessment of your abilities.

### Points to remember

- Choose recommenders very carefully as selecting a recommender whose letter is ineffective or who appears dubious about your qualifications may raise doubts about your ability to judge your interactions with others or to select the right person for a job.
- You should choose your recommenders who are very familiar with your work and with whom you interact on daily basis. Choosing a recommender based on their name or title alone may not be effective as they will not be able to talk in depth about you or provide specific feedback.
- The most persuasive recommendation letters are those which contain specific examples and anecdotes.
- Your recommenders should have greater seniority than you unless the school specifically asks for a peer recommendation. If one cannot get a recommendation from someone senior, then you need to find someone else who meets these criteria:
  - Do they know you well from a professional setting?
  - Have they worked with you recently?
  - Do they have experience evaluating others in a professional setting?
  - Do they have enough time and dedication to write you a great recommendation?

Ideally, you should also choose recommenders who can write well and have strong writing skills. In addition, recommenders should be receptive to inputs.

You should select recommenders who could not only talk about your professional abilities, but who would also “be happy to write favorably” for you. Recommenders need to be people who cared enough about your career aspirations and would therefore take the time to write thoughtfully and to get it done on time.

## What Business Schools are saying about recommendation letters?

### Harvard Business School

The Admissions Board suggests that of the three recommendations, two come from professional references. Of these two, one recommendation should come from a current or recent supervisor. You may even want to check the process for recommenders in the FAQ section of Harvard.

### Stanford Graduate School of Business

Stanford Business School requires 3 letters of reference in which 2 needs to be professional/workplace references and 1 need to be a peer reference. For the question asked by recommenders at Stanford, you may click [here](#).

### Columbia Business School

All applications at Columbia require two recommendations. As per the school website- If you have been working full-time for at least six months, one recommendation should be from your current supervisor. The second recommendation should be from either a former direct supervisor or from another professional associate, senior to you, who can add personal insight into your candidacy.

If you are a college senior or have worked full-time for less than six months, at least one, but preferably both, of your recommendations should be from a person who can comment on your managerial abilities. You may ask a summer employer or another person who you feel can objectively assess your professional promise. The second recommendation may be from a college professor.

### MIT Sloan

Applicants to the Sloan MBA Program should submit no more than two recommendations. Professional recommendations are preferred from individuals who are able to speak with certainty about your professional achievements and potential. For further information please visit the MIT website.

A good recommender would write about any shortcomings in a way that would only make a candidate look human, not weak or undesirable as an MBA candidate. They will offer an objective, yet supportive, viewpoint that will add depth and a new perspective to the candidate's abilities, skills and personal qualities.

## Recommendation Letter Tips

Every business school application requires you to submit at least one letter of recommendation, most schools ask you to submit two and some ask you to submit three. These letters corroborate your admissions story, providing additional evidence of the leadership skills, analytical abilities, teamwork skills, and maturity that you may have highlighted in the rest of your application. MBA students often ask their bosses, former bosses, senior colleagues, and sometimes even clients to write recommendations for them to business school.

Essays and recommendations give the admission council a pretty good idea of who the applicant is. The following are some key points that highlight the importance of a letter of recommendation:

- They affirm that the claims about you in your essays are true because they are written by a third-party.
- They provide you the valuable opportunity to showcase additional managerial or leadership experiences or exemplary characteristics that you may not have room to discuss in your essays.
- Since they offer an additional perspective about your leadership, integrity, and other characteristics, letters of recommendations also help the admission committee to develop a fuller picture of who you are.
- Further, letters of recommendations also often ask recommenders to compare you against equally qualified professionals. This too gives the admissions committee an additional perspective as to how you are doing in your environment and compared to those around you. Essentially it puts your recommendation in context, which is important.

### Identifying, Short listing and Communicating with potential Recommenders

Linda Baldwin, Director of Admissions at UCLA Anderson School of Management explains three easy steps for writing the letters of recommendation. She explains:

First of all, you need to identify people who know you well. And you also need to look at what a recommendation form looks like. What are the questions that are being asked on the recommendation form? There will be some people who cannot answer those questions. And every school is different. But our questions definitely would be targeted to the individuals who are supervisors, managers, and in some cases, if you're entrepreneurial, a client or someone who looks at the financial aspects of your business. So, there are some instances where the recommendation is not from somebody who is a supervisor or manager. But that person would be the person who is best able to answer the series of questions. So, that's the first thing.

And then, make a short list of who you think would be appropriate people who you know who could answer these questions.

And then, take time to put together a resume and set up a time where you might speak to the person either by phone or in person about writing a recommendation for you. Give them an idea of what the

time lines are. Give them an idea about why it is that you're pursuing an MBA. That should all be done, because it's managing this relationship and managing this project. If you can't manage it, then we know that there are some problems. There may be problems down the line in terms of your ability to do so.

## Selecting Your Recommenders

The biggest problem with recommendations is that, most often, individuals select people who can't respond fully. In order for your letters to be as effective as possible, you should look at engaging only effective recommenders. Selecting a recommender whose letter is ineffective or who appears dubious about your qualifications may raise doubts about your rest of your application. We shall provide a more detailed view of the same in a follow up post, next week.

## Harvard Business School's Advice on Recommendations

Harvard Business School Dean of Admissions Dee Leopold dispenses some good advice to HBS applicants regarding their MBA letters of recommendation. Dee says, "What we are hoping for, are brief recounts of specific situations and how you performed." Any recommendation written in general terms — 'He's a true leader... He exhibits teamwork all the time...' — will fail to leave a lasting impression on admission officers. Dee writes, "Note that we are not looking for a peer recommendation — we find it most helpful if there is some developmental distance between you and the recommender." That kind of person is typically best suited to comment on your strengths and development areas. Simply knowing an HBS student or grad doesn't give you any kind of leg up. She concludes: "Please don't ask current HBS students to write to us on your behalf outside of the formal recommendation process."

## Stanford Business School's Advice on Recommendations

A classic article on this subject can be found on the Stanford Graduate School of Business website. Kirsten Moss, the GSB's Director of MBA admissions, offers some clear advice for all applicants and not just Stanford. She makes it very clear that the recommendation is "about bringing this person alive. How, if they left tomorrow, would the organization have been touched in a unique way? Also note that the people reading your letters of recommendation don't want everything to be stellar. If all the recommenders say that the applicant is wonderful, or if the student looks like a demi-god, it loses its authenticity." she summarizes.

## MBA Application Essay Tips

The admissions council wants to know who you are now, what your academic standing is, what sets you apart from others, and who you'd like to become, what your career goals are and how you'd like to achieve them.

Your undergraduate record and your GMAT scores give an impression of your academic skills, and the work experience & recommendations reflect on you as a professional; but the essays are what reveal your true self as the person behind the application.

### Be Real

The main goal behind writing an essay is to give the admissions committee the dearest picture of who you are. The admissions committees at top business schools want to meet the real you; the man or woman behind your GMAT scores, transcripts, and résumé. The golden rule of essay writing is to be real and honest. Overstating & exaggerating is likely to be caught and is taken very seriously.

### Keep it relevant & recent

While being real in the application essay is important, that does not mean you should go on a tangent and write your whole life's story. Remember that you are applying to graduate school and admission committees are primarily interested in your experiences since the time you began college. There are of course some exceptions to this (such as questions that ask you to recap your life story or discuss what matters most to you), but as a general rule it's best to avoid writing at length about your high school accomplishments or your upbringing.

### Explain your career goals

The next important thing to mention in the essay is your career goals. Explaining these goals in a well thought-out and detailed manner could be the difference between getting accepted or not. For starters, you have to explain why you have chosen those goals, what make you think you will be suited to that career and how you hope to achieve these goals. Further, it helps to be detailed about your goals – both short-term and long-term goals. We often see essays that only indicate a general industry area a person is interested in or focus in on a particular job function – however stating that you wish to be a consultant is in itself not a long-term goal. Also do remember that your short-term goals are a stepping stone to your long-term goals so not only do they need to link to each other but you should also make sure that you do not end up focusing solely on your short-term goals. You must also explain how your experience up to that point has been acquired keeping in mind this career path.

## Why this business school?

In addition to highlighting your career goals in the application essay, you must demonstrate your knowledge of the school you are applying to and how you plan to fit in there. You must thoroughly research the schools, their programs and courses, and the campus culture.

Another way to show you would fit in well is by mentioning your campus visit and what you encountered, what your life would be like at this particular business school and that you'd be successful and happy on campus. You also need to relate the advantages the business school in question offers; which are likely to help you achieve your long term goals

**Here is a final quick tip;** the best way to determine if an essay is written well is to read it aloud, and hear it back how it sounds. The ears are sometimes better at picking up errors that the eyes miss.

## Reapplying to Business Schools

This year has been one of the toughest years to get in and the main reason is the number of increased applications this year. If more candidates are vying for the same number of seats at business schools it also means more applicants are unfortunately getting rejected. While being rejected by one of your target schools can be very disappointing, there is a lot you can learn from your experience if you plan to reapply for MBA and giving yourself another shot to achieve your goals of attending a top business school.

Below are some tips and tricks to be kept in mind while reapplying:

**Reviewing your application:** You may have a fair idea of how you could have put in a stronger application, however it is often hard to judge this all on your own, some B-schools, like Darden organize one-to-one feedback sessions for students who got rejected that year. The applicants should take advantage of these and should also incorporate the feedback into the following year's application. In the case of other schools such as Stanford and Harvard which do not provide individual feedback, students can turn to their websites for general advice for re-applicants.

**Read between the lines:** Once you know where your first application was lacking, you can create a strategy map to strengthen your chances. For example, if the extent of your business experience was a concern, then there are several ways you could address this; you could gain more experience and then wait to reapply or you could try to ensure that the depth of your experience is adequately reflected in your application. If you were considering a change in your role or job you may decide to more actively pursue that if you think it will help with your career growth and your application.

**Understand the schools policies and procedures:** The reapplication processes at various B-schools generally follow one of three basic approaches. A few, such as Harvard and New York University, require you to submit an entirely new application; they don't keep your previous year's application. Others, like Columbia, keep your previous application on file for one year and require you to submit a new essay explaining how you've strengthened your application.

**Showcase improvement:** While some schools, such as Wharton, are very re-applicant friendly (several re-applicants are accepted every year) while others, such as INSEAD, do not encourage reapplications unless your profile has changed quite significantly. While re-applying, students have to show they have grown and are better applicants than they were before. You should sit down and review each and every section of your application to examine where it needs improvement. While writing the essays, try to bring the essays up to date and try to slant it towards your life and career since you first applied. Lisa Giannangeli, Director of MBA admissions at Stanford and a 1999 alumna of the program says "Examining the essay questions to see if answers have changed or if there are new examples to demonstrate particular points is a smart move". You should also mention how you have grown as a person and how much you want to join their program.

## Bonus Materials

### Dual MBA – Experiences

#### I. Mallika Ahluwalia, New Delhi, India (MBA/MPA- Harvard Business School)

The following example is based on Mallika’s interview to the Harvard Business School website under the ‘Students perspective’ section. Please note that any added insights not originally stated explicitly in the interview are our own interpretations.

##### In the beginning

At the start of the interview, Mallika mentions that she went for her under graduate study to Princeton where realized she wanted a career in international development. “Having an impact on communities and the world motivates me to go to work every day,” she says in her interview to the Harvard Business School website.

She goes on to say that after a one-year stint at Catalyst in Chicago, creating a grant-funded report card on the city’s public school system, she accepted her first international development challenge. Mallika reveals that working in a small team, she helped run a United Nations World Food Program project in Namibia that fed 90,000 AIDS-affected orphans.

##### Integration of two interests

In reading her interview, to us, it seems like Mallika’s U.N. experience got her thinking about the intersection of private and social sectors. In the interview she says she wanted to learn how the private sector can contribute to the resolution of international development challenges and that Harvard’s graduate schools of business and government were among her favored choices. She shares that she eventually went for the MBA/MPA program from Harvard Business School which is a thoughtfully designed program precisely targeted at issues combining business and development.

##### Applying concepts of business to community service

She continues to talk about how she put her new business skills into practice through her internship with TechnoServe in Kampala, Uganda last summer. She says that “I used formal business models to create a business plan and a feasibility analysis, balancing costs and revenues, to help member’s access credit and reach bulk markets.” We would like to derive that the MBA part of the dual degree would have come in useful here.

As the interview reaches its final leg, Mallika reveals that for her next internship, with McKinsey in Washington, DC, she will be placed in a consulting role with a mix of private, public, and social sector work. “I see it as an extension of the joint degree program itself, a chance to apply lessons learned in one sector to the others” Mallika says. We think it’s interesting that a dual degree program could help a person like Mallika to apply her skills to address “businesses at the bottom of the pyramid.”- a term she herself uses. “Ultimately, I want to explore development that changes livelihoods for long-term impact.” says Mallika to conclude the interview.

## II. Walter Czarnecki, Abington, PA (MBA/ MA – Wharton University)

The following is based on Walter's interview to the Wharton University website under the 'Student Life' section. Any added insights not originally stated explicitly in the interview are our own interpretations.

### In the beginning

The interview starts with Walter revealing that before coming to Wharton, he lived in Beijing for a couple of years, working for a Chinese investment bank, leading the clean energy team. He says that up to this point, he had only seen business through a financial lens so he made the decision to come back to school for an MBA to hone his skills further. However, he also states that he wanted to develop other skills in different areas, like marketing and operations, areas which he hadn't seen much of in his career.

### Interest in Clean energy and the Lauder program

We think it's safe to assume that extensive thought and deliberation went into Walter's eventual decision to come to Wharton for the Lauder program- Wharton's first joint degree MBA/MA program in international management; Walter himself states that his decision was taken keeping in mind that his short and long term goals were focused on working in clean energy. He says he really wanted to do work that had some positive social impact. As the interview goes on, Walter says that to further his interest at Wharton, he got involved in the Energy Club from day one. He helped out with the conference and various events, and now he's an officer, focusing mainly on external relations with other schools and organizations. He shares that he is involved in building a network across Penn's campus and across the world to make clean energy a serious initiative.

### Combining passions with education

As the interview nears conclusion, Walter provides his insights on mixing an MBA degree with one's interests, he says, "What really exemplifies the best parts of Wharton is that I've been able to combine all of my interests and passions in one experience. After spending time in China and learning Mandarin, that's obviously a big part of me. I also have a passion for international business and clean energy. "

To sum it all up, he says "Wharton has allowed me to put all of those passions together, work on all of them at once, and move ahead with what I want to do with my career and my life."

So there you have it. It's clear that you need to have a very well planned approach as well as a long term career perspective before applying for a dual MBA program at a top Business School. However, once you're sure of it, the complement of MBA business knowledge with some other course can open doors for future advancement in a student's career and pave the way for a multi pronged career.

Based on the above, it also seems that a Dual MBA can be an interesting option looking at today's ever merging businesses and an increasing demand of professionals who are experts in specialized areas. On the other hand many applicants are solely focused to stay on their existing career paths and also have factors like higher costs and an extended time off work force due to longer duration of course, which come with a dual MBA program, to consider.

So whether it's a dual MBA or regular MBA that is in question, students are best advised to weigh all the pros & cons and do their research well before sending their applications.

## Women MBAs

### 1. Indra K. Nooyi



The example of PepsiCo's head will be of great interest to those keen in pursuing a career in the consumer packaged goods sector. Indra completed her Bachelor's degree in Physics, Chemistry and Maths from Madras Christian College in 1974 and after completing her MBA at the renowned Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Kolkata in 1976, Nooyi came to the United States to pursue further education at Yale, for an MBA in public and private management from the B-school in 1978. While at Yale, she also completed her summer internship with Booz & Company. Immediately post her Yale MBA in 1978,

Nooyi joined Boston Consulting Group (BCG); and then held the Vice President and Director of Corporate Strategy and Planning positions at Motorola; from where she went on to Asea Brown Boveri as the Senior Vice President of Strategy, Planning and Strategic Marketing. In 1994, Indra joined PepsiCo and became the President and Chief Financial Officer of the organization in 2001. In August 2006, she was named as the Chief Executive Officer of the company and in February 2007, as the Chairman of the board. She continues to hold the top office at PepsiCo till date while living in Greenwich, Connecticut with her husband and two daughters.

During her MBA days, Nooyi was a member of the school's Board of Advisers and in 2002, she even returned to campus to deliver a speech as part of the school's Leaders Forum. She is a Successor Fellow at Yale Corporation and sits on the Advisory Board of the Yale University President's Council of International Activities. Yale SOM Dean Joel M. Podolny commented on Nooyi's position at Pepsi with the following words: "There is no better example of the Yale School of Management's mission of developing leaders for business and society than Indra Nooyi. Everyone here at SOM is delighted by the news of her selection for the top position at PepsiCo."

Other than possessing a stellar career graph, Indra Nooyi also serves as an Honorary Co-Chair for the World Justice Project. She has also received Padma Bhushan from the government of India in 2007 and was named the 2009 CEO of the Year by Global Supply Chain Leaders Group.

## 2. Meg Whitman



Let's move to the technology sector now, where no list would be complete without Meg Whitman, the ex-CEO of eBay. Whitman found her niche at college when she took an advertising sales job for a student magazine. She switched her major to Economics after graduating from Princeton in 1977 and went on to another Ivy League school, Harvard, where she earned a Masters in Business Administration. Before coming to eBay, Whitman served as the Vice President of strategic planning at The Walt Disney Company

throughout the 1980s.

In the early 1990s, she served as an executive for DreamWorks, Playskool, and Hasbro. In 1998, Whitman joined eBay; the online auction site that went on to become one of the World Wide Web's biggest success stories in the years to come. At the time Meg came on board, eBay had a total of 30 employees; she stayed on with eBay as the CEO till 2008, and under her watch; the company underwent an expansion from 30 to more than 15,000 employees.

It won't be incorrect to interpret that Whitman learned many of her successful leadership skills during her stay at Harvard and on the subject of leadership she once famously said in an interview to Business week – "You need to be courageous, strategic, fast, and right." "Every week, there is a different set of issues, a different challenge, something new to think about," she told Business Week writer Robert D. Hof from eBay's headquarters; now called the Whitman Campus, in San Jose, California. Whitman has been attending various conventions and clubs since she has received her degree. In January this year, Meg was invited to speak at Harvard club of San Francisco; an event where she shared her MBA & career experiences with 20 young female MBA students.

Whitman is the world's first woman billionaire, and she freely admits that she learns as she goes.

### 3. Zoe Cruz



Let's look at an example from the banking & finance sector now. Our subject this time; Zoe Cruz is senior banking executive and former Co-President of Morgan Stanley. She is also the highest paid and most powerful woman on Wall Street.

Zoe received her bachelor's degree in Literature from Harvard University in 1977, and completed her MBA from Harvard Business School in 1982.

After graduating from business school, Cruz was recruited by Morgan Stanley and had a 25-year stint with the firm during which she went on to become a Vice President in 1986, a Principal in 1988 and a Managing Director in 1990. During her career at Morgan Stanley, Cruz also held the position of Global Head of Fixed Income, Commodities, and Foreign Exchange. Post her Morgan Stanley days, Zoe actively speaks at schools and students' clubs to share her insights with young students & help them in their careers. Last year, she spoke to an MBA group at Stanford GSB where she detailed how her experience at Harvard helped her grow as a person. She also said that she has faith that more women will ascend the Wall Street ranks in years to come. In 2006, Zoe Cruz was on the list of Forbes' 100 Most Powerful Women of the World ranked at the #10 spot.

So, those were 3 high profile women leaders in the professional world who have paved the way and opened doors for thousands of other women professionals and MBA aspirants to follow in their footsteps and aim for the top most positions and accolades in the business & management circles.

## Applying to Columbia Business School's January term program?

Not everyone knows that Columbia Business School offers a January term program. What is it? Essentially you join Columbia in January – so 1 semester after the September intake – and you start your first semester in January. Then during the summer you do your second semester – you do not do an internship. After the summer both the September intake and the January intake come back to school and complete their second year – at this point you are all doing electives and so the January term and September term are in the same classes.

### So why would someone consider the January term?

- 1. If you are not a career changer then you really do not need to do an internship** and it makes a lot of sense to consider this program. Some students are being sponsored by their companies and hence know that upon graduation they will be rejoining their company. Other may want to stay in the same industry, but want to do an MBA to accelerate their careers.
- 2. If you are an entrepreneur or plan to become an entrepreneur it's a great option for you.** Rather than using your time to look for an internship you can use your time to network, build contacts, create your business plan and get feedback on your business plan.
- 3. It's a smaller intake and the pressure of not having to look for an internship can be huge – assuming of course you use that additional time you get effectively.** When I joined the Columbia's January term, I noticed that the September term had about a month before they got into 'internship' mode – they had to start putting their resumes together, attending information sessions most evenings etc etc. The January term students could use that time to build strong friendships, work on business plans, figure out how to leverage all the resources the school had to offer etc.

### Myths about the J-term

- 1. I've heard some people say 'isn't it easier to get into the J-term?'** If you look at the admissions statistics you can see that the September term and January term are equally competitive to get into. That's not surprising since they are not completely separate programs – academically you are all in the same classes in the second year.
- 2. Shouldn't I do an internship no matter what I want to do afterwards?**

Not necessarily – if you do not need to do an internship it's much better to use your time more effectively. The type and quantity of resources you have while you are at Business School is phenomenal – it's much better to figure out how to leverage those than to do an internship you don't really need. As an international student I wanted to show some US work experience on my resume, so I did a consulting

project for Estee Lauder. I did this project along with my first semester and I found that it was an valuable as a summer internship.

### **3. 'I should not consider the January term if I am a career changer'.**

There were plenty of career changers in my class – they had spent time assessing their potential for making a career change and knew that it may be slightly harder to do so without an internship. They were successful in making a career change because they had a plan of how to do it and worked hard to make sure it happened.

So if you are thinking about applying to the January term, start exploring it now – the admissions process usually starts sometime in April. The January term also operates on a rolling admissions policy.

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