

What Executives Really Think of MBAs

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Recruiters and managers long have touted MBA-holders as the panacea for business problems, but recently, the view within the executive ranks has become more nuanced. Here's what an assortment of experienced executives had to say about the prospect of adding an MBA to their team:

Value the Program, Not the Degree

"When I have hired young people from a great program like Babson, I often see that they have acquired a great tool kit that they are eager to apply to a real job. Unfortunately, too often when I have employed people from a top-ranked, high-end program, they spend a lot of energy wishing they could leap over the years of grinding experience and just get to the job they think they should have already — CEO. In those cases, MBAs can be a blight on the team, which needs to value diversity, experience, and the particularities of a business and an industry."

— *Frank Ingari, former CEO of Shiva Software and now Chairman of Purkinje, a provider of practice management services to physicians and hospitals.*

Hard-Working, High-Maintenance

"MBAs are often enthusiastic, smart, young people that bring some analysis rigor to an organization. However, you must keep them channeled and focused, or they may run down an analysis rat hole. They require time and energy and interesting projects. If you give them such assignments, they will work 80 hours a week. They also need perspective on the projects they are assigned: What is the desired outcome? What might be a good approach? Who are the project stakeholders? MBAs can be at the top of the tree looking out over the strategic horizon while the real workers in the organization are at the trunk of the tree firing up the chainsaw."

— *Ken Evans, former VP of sales and marketing at Waste Management, currently a management consultant at CP Strategies.*

Dropouts Make Better Entrepreneurs

"Nobody would argue that it makes more sense to hire a college dropout and former disk jockey like myself rather than a Harvard MBA. However, the high-tech world is full of college dropouts that have made good. And among that group which includes [Bill] Gates, [Larry] Ellison, [Michael] Dell and

[Steve] Jobs I am the underachiever. If you look at what we hold in common, it's that we're all too fiercely entrepreneurial to have the patience for going to classes and getting certified. There are just some people who are driven to start a business, and those are the ones who aren't likely to spend time earning an MBA."

— *Mitchell Kertzman, venture capitalist at Hummer Winblad and former CEO of Sybase, Powersoft, and Liberate Technologies. (Note: Kertzmann was formerly a member of the Board of Directors of CNET Networks, BNET's parent company)*

Practical Experience Is a Necessary Foundation for Theory

"We provide a great deal of training to our managers and prospective managers, much of which starts where their MBA training might have ended. We find that in order to understand and implement business strategy, you must first understand the practical business situations that give rise to theory, rather than the other way around. In addition, much of the management work that takes place here deals with groups of engineers who are very different to manage than other types of personnel. Unfortunately, a lot of the theoretical training in business schools simply doesn't address the requirements of a global engineering environment."

— *Fred Wise, director of staffing at National Semiconductor Corporation, a computer chip maker with \$2 billion in annual sales.*

Salespeople Don't Need MBAs

"If you're talking about a sales position, I'd have to say that the MBA is pretty much useless. If you're talking about an executive position, an MBA is useful, but only marginally. The sad truth is that the training is just too theoretical to make any difference."

— *Brad Finn, former top sales executive at Jones Apparel Group, the \$5 billion-a-year clothing giant, current president of Marlboro Corporation, a multi-million dollar shoe wholesaler.*

MBAs in IT

"MBAs are marvelous additions to an IT organization. They generally have the right business demeanor, as well as knowledge of economics, finance and accounting, as well as some theoretical understanding of how to manage people. And that's all to the good. Second, and more importantly and you have to have a lot of confidence as a CIO to do this if you bring MBAs into your IT organization and keep them in the organization for two to three years, you can then seed them into other user departments where they'll likely be accepted because they've got the MBA. They'll

naturally have a certain degree of loyalty to the IT group, which can significantly enhance your ability to work IT issues throughout the company.”

— *Jack Cooper, former CIO of Bristol Myers/Squibb and Seagram, and founder of JM Cooper & Associates, a provider of consulting to IT management.*

The Hard Truth

“You Harvard guys don’t know crap about the way businesses really run.”

— *Howard Woolf, then a director of marketing at DEC, to a trio of consultants with Harvard MBAs as overheard by the author. Woolf is now president of the Converged Billing Solution Group at Comverse, a \$1 billion-a-year provider of multimedia services.*