

MBA programs integrate students' schedules and careers



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Fresh from Texas A&M University in 1998, Bobby Mogford got a crash course in the capital marketplace. He worked as a commodities trader for Houston-based Cargill Inc., where he reveled in the adrenaline rush of the trading floor, and then spent a year building and developing Worldmerc Inc., a world wide internet trading platform for commodities, before the newbie company fell victim to the dot com bust in 2000.

In 2001, Mogford was ready for a big company experience and joined Enterprise Rent-A-Car as a management trainee, moving up quickly to manager of the largest area of San Antonio, which includes the airport.

Enterprise has a strong in-house talent management philosophy, and Mogford soon realized that an MBA would only help in his corporate climb. In 2006, at the urging of an Enterprise executive, Mogford applied for and was admitted to the Greehey Scholars program at St. Mary's University — meaning he could earn his MBA on a full scholarship.

Starting in the summer of 2006, Mogford worked at Enterprise during the day, and took business classes at night from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Enterprise was supportive, offering flexible schedules and time for projects and papers. Mogford received his MBA degree one year later, in August 2007.

"I had always been advised to gain real world experience before entering an MBA program," Mogford says. "I had seven years of management experience before I enrolled, and it was so beneficial. I could truly relate the knowledge shared by the professors to my previous experience and learn new concepts for the future. With an MBA, I definitely feel I will advance at an

accelerated pace, and I've gained a wealth of knowledge and improved my performance."

Ready to invest in the next level of your business career? Elissa Ellis, executive director of the Forté Foundation (www.fortefoundation.org), a consortium of business schools and global corporations that encourages women to pursue business careers, travels the world talking about how to choose an MBA program. Earlier in her career, she was the assistant director for the Texas A&M MBA program (of which she is an alumna) and assistant dean of the UT-Austin McCombs School of Business MBA program. She shares her tips with the Business Journal:

• Understand the ABCs of an MBA.

Make sure an MBA is what you're really after.

"An MBA prepares you for a general management role," Ellis says. "Most people who go back for an MBA are not looking to specialize in a field or drill down deep into one area. There are other degrees for that... master's degrees and Ph.Ds. People who earn an MBA are comfortable having some ambiguity in their career. They are visionary thinkers, and know that they'll always be dealing with people in team settings and perceived by others as creative problem solvers."

• Consider schedule and finances.

Today's business schools offer a wide range of specialized and custom-designed MBA programs to fit the needs of busy executives and working parents — at every stage of their career. Full-time MBA programs can be sewn up in one year; part-time programs can be completed in as little as 18 months or spread out over three years.

It's important to coordinate early how your MBA experience is going to fit into your work and family life. In addition, the cost of an MBA in 2007 ranges between



\$20,000 and \$40,000, including tuition, fees and books, so spend time analyzing your credit history, financial aid options and employer tuition remission programs.

• Full time, part time or online?

Collaboration with peers, team projects, group discussions — these exercises teach people how to think and strategize differently, which is the heart of the MBA experience. It is for that reason that Ellis is a big fan of the full-time program.

“The benefit of a full-time program is that you are wholly committed, and you have a very rich experience. You have regular and intense interaction with your instructors and your peers,” Ellis says. “Today, MBA programs include a lot of robust experiences outside the classroom — things like travel and ropes courses that allow you to bond and create a level of comfort with your classmates before you even sit next to each other in class.”

If part-time is your only option, pick a program that works hard to give you the full experience by offering mini-mesters that include travel and team projects.

“Part-time works best if your employer really supports you in the effort,” Ellis says. “The downside about part-time is that if you’re going to change careers, you don’t have a lot of time to analyze career choices or network with your peers, which is such a big part of an MBA program.”

The best online MBA programs are those that incorporate some on-campus classes and are extremely interactive.

“A full-time online program needs to be done really well by an established institution that has invested heavily in communication material and allows you to have the team experience virtually,” Ellis says. “This is my least favorite of the three because an MBA is not about isolation.”

• Begin your quest.

Conduct “informational interviews” with business professionals who have the type of job to which you aspire. Find out about their educational background and MBA experience. Decide whether you want a local, regional, national or Top 50 program. Search the B-school Web sites and other third-party MBA sources.

Ellis suggests BusinessWeek online (www.businessweek.com/bschools), which is filled with profiles, blogs, and student journals and www.mba.com, run by the organization that issues the GMAT. Once you’ve winnowed your list, make appointments to visit the campuses and talk with MBA admissions staff. Find a mentor to shepherd you through the application and essay process, Ellis suggests.

• Career goals take precedence.

“Make the commitment to go to the place that best fits your specific career goals,” Ellis says. “Don’t pick the one that sort of meets your needs, and then try to mold it to your liking. Choose the one that will give a true lift to your career.”

BUSINESS BASICS is a regular San Antonio Business Journal feature. Contact Donna Tuttle at 210-341-3202 or dtuttle1@bizjournals.com.

PART-TIME WORKS BEST

IF YOUR EMPLOYER REALLY SUPPORTS YOU IN THE EFFORT.

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