Handbook on Executive Education

for M.B.A Aspirants

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Preface

Executive education is undergoing a gradual but radical transformation. Programs operating today are far more innovative, learner centered, and relevant to immediate company needs than ever before. In the new century, executive education has the potential to play an even greater role as an essential lever to facilitate strategic transitions. No longer simply a reward for high potential executives or a chance to renew an individual's knowledge base, programs are increasingly harnessed as opportunities to recast the worldviews of executive teams and to align organizations to new directions. Through educational forums, CEOs are likely to discover that they often are better positioned to communicate and implement corporate strategy, to build strategic unity throughout the company, and to create a cadre of change agents. Executive education has the potential to become a truly strategic tool. The executive education programs in SCPGMS is designed to enhance overall leadership and change management effectiveness. SCPGMS is committed to provide a learning environment of a high order to its students in Business Management and qualify them to be competent, skillful, and professional in serving the industry worldwide. These shall be achieved by

(a) Ensuring availability of excellent faculty and modern infrastructure for learning.
(b) Establishing innovative teaching methods for enhancing the efficiencies of the learning process and
(c) Complying with the latest requirements of industry, and continuous improving the quality of education imparted.

This handbook on Executive Education is an attempt to provide the necessary requirements for prospective MBA students wanting to know more about what is involved, for students in a new intake at a business school and for those seeking to prepare themselves for the experience to come.

The topics covered include how to:

- work in teams

- communicate effectively in classrooms

- develop and manage personal networks

- read and prepare a case

- present written material

- design and carry out a project

- use library information sources

- look for a job at the end of the course.

The book shows students how to make the most of their MBA experience and how to make it work for them in the future. This book is collection of materials from different sources and the idea presented here may not be universal.

Dr. P.S. Aithal

SOMEDAY SON, AFTER YOUR MBA STUDIES, ALL THIS WILL BE YOURS

1. Introduction

The MBA (Master of Business Administration) degree is perhaps the worlds best known and most widely recognized post graduate degree. It is a professional degree - in that it is intended for those who work in business and management i.e., the intention of a program leading to an MBA is to prepare or further prepare individuals for responsible positions in business - usually managerial positions. Despite its venerable age (the first MBA degrees were awarded in the early twentieth century), MBA programmes remain both popular and relevant. MBA programs are run throughout the world, as they are seen to be relevant for the preparation of people for work in management irrespective of the industry, business sector, the nature of the economy, etc. Although critics of the programmes have been numerous, large companies and increasingly small ones as well continue to see real value in the MBA as the first stage in a professional career in management.

Though they often have very similar curricula and aims, MBA programmes are certainly not homogeneous. Many programmes differ in terms of aims, philosophies and teaching/delivery methods. Even more importantly, though, MBA students are a very diverse bunch. Walking through the campus of any leading business school, one will encounter people from many different countries, backgrounds and professions.

Gone are the days – if they ever existed – when the mere possession of an MBA degree was enough to secure for the degree holder a rosy future at the top level of a large corporation, complete with large salary and generous perks. Many MBA students, to be sure, *do* graduate into such jobs. Others don't. The initials MBA no longer have the pulling power they did thirty years ago. Corporate recruiters no longer take the MBA degree itself as a guarantee of quality. They look for many other factors, including:

• the school from which the degree was granted
• the programme which the graduate is attending or has attended
• what practical experience the graduate may have gained while on the programme and, most important of all,
• the personal qualities of the graduate, including evidence of personal development while on the programme

Increasingly, companies are looking generally, at the qualities of the institution, and specifically, at the individual graduate and his or her qualities. In other words, they are not looking for the MBA degree, but for the *quality of the person who has it.*

Getting an MBA degree, therefore, is ultimately about developing yourself, improving your own personal qualities and improving your ability to manage. This applies whether the student is looking to change jobs or career paths, seek advancement within a firm for which they already work, or start their own business.

The MBA is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It is, or can be, extremely expensive in terms of money and time. For most who go on such programmes, it is a life-changing

experience. In order to maximize the value of the MBA, students need to look beyond the basics of classroom learning, important though these are, and consider such issues as

• gaining practical experience
• developing networks and relationships
• developing communications and interpersonal skills
• broadening personal horizons
• learning how to learn

Now more than ever, it is important to get an MBA not just for the degree itself, but for the *experience*. The degree certificate hanging on your wall at the end of the programme is no more than a sheet of paper. What is important that comes out of the MBA is what is in your *mind*. The important benefits of the MBA include not just the knowledge that one absorbs while on the programme, but the necessary learning skills that accompany this. The two are combined in a single system referred as *knowledge management*.

The MBA only happens once. You will never be on this programme again. You may never again have this opportunity to learn – although, as is argued that the MBA is a first step in a process of lifelong learning, and this is a formulative learning experience. The ideas and skills you gain here will affect your personal and professional life forever after.

Many candidates go into an MBA program seeking a career change. During recruitment season they find that their skills are fairly valued only by businesses in the industry that they wanted to leave behind. To prevent joblessness, they end up taking the very job that they did not want.. MBA aspirants that it is popular to question the worth of an MBA program. Today there are so many jobless MBAs - even from top schools - that comparing salaries can seem meaningless. Forget the salary, what about the minimum requirement of getting a job in the first place? That itself seems to be at stake today.

Also, the golden days of MBA jobs are over. The stock market has burst, corporate scandal is the order of the day, companies are 'right sizing' at all levels... This brings us back to the discussion of return on investment.

I think it would be right to say that IF you get a job, you can generate a reasonable return on your investment. Sounds scary, doesn't it? So what is it about an MBA program that attracts so many? Is it that they are all mislead, or are there benefits that we have not talked about yet? Apart from salary aspect, let us see what else does MBA degree offer ? Some answers are :

• **Business Education** All said and done, we must appreciate that business schools do teach solid business concepts. One common criticism is that business education is out of synch with the real world. This is further compounded by the fact that a lot of PhD professors have no real-world experience in the topics that they teach.

• **Network** Some rate this as the most important contribution of the MBA

program. Lifelong association with classmates can be the greatest resource that an MBA can draw on.

• **Rigorous Training** For a period of 2 years, MBA students toil sleeplessly over assignments, presentations, projects, group exercises and reports. This gives them good grounding for the nature of work they will eventually perform. Of course, in some cases, it teaches them the unfortunate path of favoring busy work over real work.

So where does that leave us? We started with the question - 'Is an MBA worth it?' That question remains unanswered. In following chapters, I have touched upon some interesting issues :

1. Choosing an MBA Program

You begin by identifying those programs that fit your basic requirements. There are two aspects to this; Your Needs - i.e., what you want to learn and gain from the program, the type of experience you want to have, etc. Your Circumstances - i.e., the practical considerations.

As regards your needs, you will ask questions like -

- Is it the right program structure for me?
- Is the content what I want?
- Is the focus what I want?
- Are there electives that I will be interested in?

As regards you circumstances you will think about questions such as -

- Does the program run where I am or want to be?
- Is the duration right for me?
- Can I give it the time it will require?
- Is the start date right for me?
- Can I afford the fee, plus the other costs, e.g., living expenses, materials etc?

Then there are some other - more subtle - questions-

Will the program have people like you on it?

Particularly on 'taught' programs - full time, part time and modular - a lot of what you will gain will be from interaction with and learning from other participants so you need to ensure that, in some respects, they are not very different from you, in particular that they have a similar amount of experience to draw upon, have held jobs at similar levels to you, etc. You might not want to be on a program where most others were very much older or younger than you. In other respects you will want to ensure that there is some differences - e.g. that there will be people from a range of backgrounds, cultures etc. The twin issues therefore are - the level of the people and the diversity of the group

What learning or teaching methods will be used on the program?

People learn differently - so will the style of program suit you? For example will there be a lot of group working and if so is that something you will enjoy and be good at? Will there be a lot of case study work - and if so are you good at reading a lot, quickly and absorbing information in this way. Will there be an emphasis on lecturing - will this suit you? Perhaps project work will be important - so do you have much experience of investigating things, preparing reports and making presentations? Of course you will be going on a program to develop your skills - so you will not be good at everything - but overall you will want to ensure that the style of the program will suit you.

How will you be assessed?

The assessment methods used on programs differ - exams, of various types: assignments; presentations; individual and group based assessments, etc. What will suit you? Are you good at writing exams under controlled conditions, etc? Of course it may be some time since you had to submit to some form of assessment - so you may just want to think about the overall balance of the assessment in a program - e.g. the proportion represented by exams versus other forms of assessment. The point raised above about going on a program to get better at something doesn't really apply in this case - so try to be sure that the approaches used in the program will suit you

How much work will be required?

Naturally you will want a program which is demanding. - but nevertheless achievable. Typically how much time will you need to put in? How much time and how frequently will you need to be at the Business School? Can you cope with these requirements? Will it fit your domestic or job situation? That's not the same as asking if you can fit it in without any effect on anything else - such a program may not be worth very much to you.

How achievable is the MBA?

What is the success rate of the program - i.e. the pass rate? Do those that fail do so for academic reasons - or just because they drop out? What would either of these things indicate? Remember - whatever the situation of those who have done a program before you - your objective is to get an MBA - so you need to know why others didn't.

How easy is it to get onto the program?

Getting an MBA is one thing - getting one which is respected and recognized is sometimes another. The status of a program will often be reflected in the competition to get into it. So you may want to know about how many applications a program gets - and what proportion are admitted. Such figures can be deceptive - since the number of enquiries is not the same as the number of applications and the number of offers of admission made is not the same as the number which join a program. You can also compare the number of places available on a program - as identified in the entries in the database - with the actual number that entered the program last year. You will have to ask for the latter. If the actual is less than the number of places made available it may indicate that the demand for the program was not as high as had been hoped by the School. The data you get in either of these ways will probably mainly be of use in making comparisons of courses. You will want to assess the strength of your own candidacy for a program, since whilst it will be good to know that there is big demand to get into a program - you will only apply if you think that you might be one of those that succeed. So you will aim for a balance - i.e. a good entry competition in which you have a good chance of succeeding.

Will I get a good job?

If you are going to do an MBA in order to get a new job on completion, how much will the program help you? Is there an appointments service provided through which potential employers visit the School to interview candidates before they graduate? Will others on the program also be looking for a job - or will they be returning to the organization they came/come from? You don't want to be one in a few whose circumstances are different. How highly regarded is the program by the type of employer you might be interested in? Have they recruited from the program before? Is there an Alumni group/network which helps with placements/appointments?

What support will there be?

If you are planning to do a Distance Learning MBA what support - e.g. tutor contact, face to face contact, contact with other participants, etc. is provided? How important is this seen to be by the School - because it could make all the difference between a solitary life and one where you are able to work with others - even remotely.

Will you be expected/helped to make contact with others at your stage of the program? Will all those who start at the same time - or in the same area - be put together as a group to work together or are you going to be alone?

Is there electronic support - e.g. computer conferencing or video-conferencing - if so what proportion of participants use it and what technology do you need?

Some similar considerations will apply if you are planning to do a part time or modular program - eg what opportunity/expectation/requirement is there for contact between participants when they are not at the School? Will there be access to the Schools facilities, faculty etc when the program is not at the School - i.e. between sessions?

Is this an established program?

Age is not necessarily related to quality - but you might like to check how long the program has been running. If it is well established it is more likely to be well known. On the other hand if it has been running for some time you might like to find out when there were last any significant changes to the structure, content, syllabus etc since a program that does not change is soon likely to be out of date.

How is this program 'Ranked'?

Newspapers and magazines occasionally publish 'rankings'. Some relate to Schools and all that they do - whilst some relate specifically to MBA programs. Such rankings aim to give some indication of how well regarded certain programs are - relative to one another, but the information must be used with some caution. Some of the recent rankings are summarized on the 'Rankings of MBA Programs and Schools' page in the Advice section of the site - but also check out the comments on Rankings in the Glossary.

How important is this program to the School?

Is this a mainstream program for the School - or a fringe activity? If the former you can be reasonably sure the faculty etc will give their best. If the latter check more closely. In this case if it is well established then - good, but ask about intake numbers in previous years. Is the program growing, stable or declining? If the latter, ask why. All of these matters are to do with the significance of the program to the School and thus your significance as a member of that program - and thus not only the attention you might expect to get, but how it might feel in a School alongside the other things that are going on.

2. Choosing a Management Institute

Choosing a Business School and choosing an MBA program are two related matters. Remember that getting an MBA is one thing - getting one that is respected and recognized might be a different thing. The respect and recognition that a program has is obviously related to the status of the School that provides it.

How well known is the School?

You will probably need to check on this in several ways - rather than relying on one. Here are some of them -

o   Ask around - particularly in the communities that are of interest to you; so - if you are planning an MBA to get a job in a particular industry or sector of business - ask around in that sector.
o   Check the rankings of Schools that are sometimes published in business magazines.
o   How long has the School been established?
o   Check the press - most major papers and journals carry regular features/surveys of management education etc. See how frequently the School is mentioned. Perhaps you can also do searches for a School in the 'On Line' versions of major papers/journals to see how frequently it is mentioned
o   Check the quality of the School's 'brand name'. Check through 'On line' searches. Ask people and see how often they mention the Schools name.

How well respected is the School?

Prominence may not indicate respect - or vice versa, so check what people think about a School. The rankings will give you some indication - but remember that the criteria used in assessing Schools in this way may not be relevant to you. Also - does the School belong to the main representative/accreditation bodies - e.g. NAAC, NBC? Also - is the School a member of any grouping of Schools - e.g., running joint programs, arranging student exchanges, etc. - if so, what is the standing of the others in its group? (Good Schools tend to work with other good Schools).

Does the School have a good reputation in other things?

The obvious things to check are - research and publications. A major School will have a commitment to research, and research tends to result in publications. Be careful about both of these things - since a School which is primarily a research establishment may not give much attention to 'teaching' - but you will expect to find that at least some of the faculty are engaged in research in their subject area. You might also hope to find that at least some of the faculty have published books.

What does the School do?

This might seem a rather odd question - as obviously it runs an MBA. But does it just run one - or several? Does it also offer non qualification executive programs, short courses, etc? Check out the School's full prospectus - not only the MBA literature, for in general the broader the range of activities -the more established and the better known the School will be. Be particularly careful if the School only does one thing - e.g. a Distance program - as there is a general belief that a Distance program will be better if derived from or based on a 'conventional' program. The same might apply if the School only runs a specialist program - unless it is a very specialized institution.

The above relate to the status of the School - but there are other things which will be important to you -

Is the School a separate entity?

Does the School have its own separate and dedicated facilities or does it share facilities with other activities in its parent Institution (e.g., University)? This will have a significant influence on what it will 'feel like' to be a student in the School.

Will the School provide good service?

There are two aspects - the academic quality, and the customer orientation of the School. The first is difficult to check without asking others who have some experience of the School and its program. The latter is easier to get a view on, and remember if the School does not treat you well when you are a potential customer - will it improve if you go there?

How easy does the School make it for you to contact them? How do they respond when you do contact them? Write, fax, or E-Mail the School and see how long it takes to get a reply. Phone them and ask to speak to the program director or administrator - and see if they put you through. Ask some difficult and see what response you get. Ask if you can speak to some recent graduates - and will they give you names or contact details? Some may have a policy of not giving out names and addresses - but will they pass your name and details to one of their Graduates in your area and suggest that they might be willing to contact you? Ask if you can call in to see them - do they welcome this - will they arrange for you to see someone?

Will the School take an interest in your future?

If you are looking to change your job as a result of your MBA - you will want to know if the School will provide help to its students as they reach the end of their program - e.g., through placement opportunities, recruitment fairs, etc. Does the School make arrangements for recruiters to meet/get details on new graduates? Does the School maintain an active Allumni association? Does the Association provide support for graduates seeking new jobs?

What will the School expect of you?

Will you need a lap top computer? If you do not have one, does the School provide adequate facilities? Will you need to find accommodation - if so to what extent will the School help you? Will the School advise you on potential loans or scholarship funds?

3. Getting Started on MBA

After getting in to, it is important to approach the MBA methodically and with some pre-planning. Getting the right systems in place before and during the first week or so of the programme can make a big difference, and can reduce the pressure and make learning easier during the later stages.

Some of the essential aspects of getting started on an MBA programme, including:

- pre-programme preparation
- induction
- learning the ropes
- meeting colleagues
- forming work/study groups
- assessing resources
- setting up systems
- tuning your mind

Pre-programme preparation

There is usually a gap of some months between the final acceptance and the start of the programme, and during this period there is usually quite a lot to do in terms of putting one's house in order. For full-timers, who are giving up their jobs, there will be a lot of loose ends to tie up at work; it is quite likely that a physical move will be required, possibly even to another country, with consequent problems to solve concerning accommodation and so on. For married MBAs, especially ones with families, there can be further issues concerning spouse/partner's career, schools and the like. All these need to be thought about well in advance and solutions worked out; don't assume these can be dealt with on arrival for the first week of classes.

Part-time MBA students, those on executive programmes and on distance learning programmes, for example, may have different issues to address. Here the key task is to ensure that the study required for the MBA can be fitted into both professional and personal life. If this has not been done already, get a copy of the programme schedule, with dates and times for modules and classes, deadlines for projects and so on, and go through this with colleagues and managers at work and spouse/partner at home. Look out for any likely conflicts and try to resolve them in advance. If insuperable difficulties arise, try contacting the MBA programme office or relevant faculty to see if they can help; don't suffer in silence.

Induction

Most business schools will offer some sort of induction programme for incoming students. On full-time programmes this can be several days of sessions allowing them to become familiar with the school, its staff and resources and so on. Often these sessions

are arranged a few days before the official start of the programme. If such sessions are on offer, do not miss them; they offer a number of benefits including:

• a crash course in knowing what resources the school has to offer and where they can be found.
• a chance to meet for the first time your colleagues and some of the school's staff and faculty, and form some first impressions.

Whatever the programme or the circumstances, use whatever induction sessions or material are available, to the fullest extent. If there is information you feel is lacking, ask questions early. Don't be tempted to skip over this part of the programme on the basis that you can 'pick it up as you go along'. You can, but it will usually cost you in terms of time and attention which could be better spent on other activities.

Learning the ropes

The first few days both before and after the start of the programme are usually spent learning the ropes. This includes

• learning factual information, like the location of the library/information centre, its opening hours and so on;
• getting to know key people, such as the faculty who are teaching the first courses you will take, where their offices are and what their e-mail address are;
• setting up systems, like getting any tickets or passes required for the library/information centre, establishing e-mail accounts and so on;
• generally getting a feel of the ethos or atmosphere of the programme.

Not neglecting the first three points is, again, simple common sense. The latter you may already have begun to do, based on information provided to you by the business school, visits to the school during the application process, previous encounters with students and faculty and so on. Every business school has its own particular atmosphere. This atmosphere comes in part from the location and nature of the physical facilities, and partly from the people, staff, faculty and students, who inhabit the place and make it come alive. Look at things like classrooms and meeting rooms before you start to use them. Look at any canteens, cafes, bars or pubs that may be on campus, and see who uses them.

Some schools' induction programmes including a mentoring process whereby, say, a student in the second year of the programme or further along in the programme more generally mentors an incoming student and helps them get started. This can be really valuable, and your mentor can help in ways that go far beyond the provision of simple factual information. Most mentors are keen to help, but remember they have their own work to be getting on with as well; be friendly and pump them for information (it's what they are there for), but don't overdo it.

Work/study groups

Some MBA programmes like to establish work teams or study groups very early on in the process. Even if the programme as a whole does not establish such groups, individual courses often will. Students may find themselves members of several such groups, depending on the programme and courses. Sometimes people are assigned to a group, others leave students to sort themselves out.

In the initial stages of the programme, the main thing is to get to know your work group members and try to assess their capabilities. Suggest meeting socially: nothing fancy is required, a cup of coffee or a drink will do. Get the group involved in general conversation, not necessarily about the programme, and observe each member, listen to their opinions and watch their reactions. (They will be doing this to you, too.) Build up a mental picture of each of your colleagues, their strengths and their sensitivities, before you begin working together.

Meeting colleagues

Beyond the narrower confines of the work team or study group, there is the broader group of colleagues on the MBA programme. Take advantage of opportunities to mingle and meet. Find out what you can about their backgrounds, and begin the process of building networks and relationships.

Most business schools have a number of social clubs and groups, and in the first week of the programme, e-mails and notices on bulletin boards begin to advertise their presence. Consider joining some of these (don't spread yourself too thin), and go along to some of their initial meetings to see if you like the atmosphere and the people. If there is no club or society which fits with your interests, consider starting one. These societies and clubs have two useful purposes:

- they offer good opportunities to meet people and build networks
- they offer even better opportunities to relax and unwind

For reasons discussed in the previous chapter, your colleagues are important to you. You will be working closely with some of them, in study groups and on projects. You will be interacting with them in the classroom, and they will probably play a large part in your social life. Get to know them, and assess their capabilities. Learn strengths, sensitivies and susceptibilities. Get the networking process going; be low key at first, as it will take time to get to know people well, but start establishing links. These are people whom you will rely on, certainly on the programme, possibly in your later career as well.

It may sound cold-blooded to treat people as a resource in quite this way. Indeed, if you see people *only* as a resource, then quite possibly you are being cold-blooded. But there is nothing inherently wrong with assessing people on the basis of their own attributes – interests, capabilities, personality and so on – and making an inventory of those attributes for later use, so long as you respect the dignity and humanity of the people with whom you are dealing. Remember to respect everyone you meet. Remember too that they are

probably assessing you at the same time, and anti-social behaviour on your part will probably be entered into the database.

The key thing at this stage is, *don't try too hard.* Relax. Have fun. Get to know people and enjoy them for themselves, but watch, listen and remember. The rest will follow naturally.

Assessing resources

In Chapter 1 we offered a resource-based model of the MBA. As soon as possible in the programme, it is a good idea to do an inventory of the available resources. This need not take long, and is probably best done informally. But you should be aware of the nature and location of the following:

• the library/information centre, where it is, its opening hours and conditions of access, and what facilities it offers;
• the names of the faculty who will be teaching you in the first instance, where they are located, their office hours and their e-mail addresses;
• which fellow students you will be working most closely with in the first instance (see above), and their contact addresses;
• your own capabilities, including any strengths or weaknesses you feel you have, any specialist knowledge you can bring to the table and discussions, and, of course, another look at your personal and career goals so that these are kept firmly in sight.

Some of these points will need to be repeated at intervals in the programme, for example, should you change or move on to new study groups or project teams, or when you finish one course or module and move on to another.

For students on part-time or Executive MBAs and distance learning MBAs, the same points need to be assessed, but the issue of remote access needs to be factored in. Getting e-mail contacts for all the relevant people is of first-water importance. Usually the programme office will provide these, but if any are missing, now is the time to track them down. Remote access to information sources is also something to be considered. As well as the sources your business school recommends, it is probably worth spending an evening, or several, surfing the Web and looking for sites with information relevant to the courses you are taking in the first instance. Again, this process should be repeated when you finish one course or module and move on to another.

Setting up

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of getting physically set up and ready to work before you begin doing so. Make sure you have a study or work space set aside at home, with a computer of adequate standard and good IT connections. Do not skimp on these; the computer may become the most important thing in your life over the course of the programme (if your 'significant other' begins showing signs of jealousy, you know you are working too hard). Set up mailing lists or other e-mail management tools you are

likely to need, and make sure that any required software has been tested and is running smoothly.

Also recommended is a filing system for hard copy material. The paperless office may be just around the corner but today's MBA programmes generate a veritable blizzard of paper. Some of it is actually important, possibly even essential. Make sure you can find it when you need to.

Full-time students will probably find that they are dividing much of their work between home and the business school's campus. Identifying useful working spaces there should also be a priority.

Tuning your mind

Possibly the biggest adjustment of all which is required at the outset of an MBA programme is tuning in to a new way of thinking. MBA programmes often offer benefits like 'global vision' and 'broader thinking' or a 'broad experience', but these things do not come automatically. They have to be worked for.

An MBA dean of my acquaintance told me that the first thing incoming students at his school had to do was 'unlearn in order to learn'. Students had to lose some of their previous preconceptions, and open their minds to new ideas and to new ways of analysing and thinking. A good MBA programme will in itself offer many challenges to preconceived ideas, but getting shed of these yourself before beginning the programme will reduce the level of friction as you go along.

The importance of an open mind

Norman Dixon, in his classic book *The Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London: Pimlico, 1976) cites the lack of an open mind – the lack of ability to comprehend or act on information which conflicts with preconceived views – as one of the key factors in poor decision making. He cites the example of Field Marshal Montgomery and his staff before the Battle of Arnhem in 1944. Intelligence reports had suggested that there were few German troops in the area around Arnhem, where the Allies planned to drop a division of British paratroopers. When, at a later stage, reports indicated that there were in fact elements of two tank divisions in and around Arnhem, Monty and his staff refused to believe the reports *because the latter conflicted with the staff's own assessment of the situation.* The division was dropped, and the better part of 10,000 British soldiers were killed, wounded or captured.

The relevance of this sort of thinking to business and management is so obvious that it does not really need stating. But it seems a golden rule, in management as elsewhere, that behind every disaster there is a person, or a team, who refused to listen.

The MBA programme will almost certainly develop these attributes and more. (Also, many MBA programmes select on the basis, at least in part, of potential students' abilities and capabilities in these areas.) But again, it is useful to be as prepared as possible before embarking on the programme. The MBA will have its own traps in terms of knowledge management. It is easy for full-time students to become so engrossed in the mechanics of course work that they forget the big picture, even though most courses and programmes are designed specifically to avoid this.

How to avoid this? A few students try yoga or Zen meditiation, or other consciousness-focusing techniques. But the best way is to opt for a balanced life, with a deliberate emphasis on taking an interest in subjects outside one's ordinary experience. Stay physically healthy and mentally alert. Ensure your schedule has time built in for socializing, with or without colleagues (but preferably at least some of the former). Take advantages of any opportunities the MBA offers to broaden your experience and thinking.

4. Types of Courses

There is so much variety in business school courses in terms of type, subject matter and delivery system that at first glance it might seem difficult to generalize about them. However, there is one obvious and important feature which courses have in common, and all are channels by which knowledge is acquired. As the backbone structure of the MBA programme, they define and shape the learning experience. It follows, then, that what courses a student takes will have a very considerable impact on the nature of that experience.

This may seem simple, or at least simplistic. But there are several key points which are not so obvious, and which need reinforcing:

• in order to maximize value, courses should be selected which fit in with the student's personal and career goals, and
• in order to manage knowledge efficiently, it is a good idea to understand some of the philosophy and thinking behind this kind of knowledge channel.

One of the dictionary definitions of a 'course' generally is 'onward movement or intended direction'. This should be born in mind when considering business school courses. They are not random assemblages of knowledge, nor are they (by any means) vessels containing the total sum of knowledge on any subject. Any well-designed course has a purpose and a theme, and generally starts from an introductory position, moves through a gradual unveiling of its theme, and at the end invites conclusions.

Courses thus tend to be didactic in nature. Their theme is set, sometimes seemingly arbitrarily, by the faculty and programme managers who design them. The input of these individuals is usually crucial in determining course design. Especially at advanced levels, no two courses will be the same, even if they are covering what is broadly the same subject.

This is not a bad thing, though there is one important proviso which we will come back to in a moment. Learning, and especially learning about business and management, should not be standardized. There are no simple, rote solutions to managing business and organizations in complex environments such as exist today. Diversity in approach represents one way of mastering rich and complex subjects. The proviso is simply this: to be any good, a course has to recognize that it cannot provide complete and total knowledge of its subject. What a course should aim to do instead is position itself as a framework or skeleton, outlining the *shape* and *nature* of the subject, and giving students a basis from which to advance to further knowledge.

Most courses do three things:

• they provide some fundamental knowledge about the subject;
• they broaden the mind, by posing questions students might not have thought of and encouraging them to seek out and develop answers;

• they provide a framework for further knowledge, which can be derived either through further study (formal or undertaken by oneself) or personal experience, and which can be learned during the course or long after.

The Marketing 1 course you take in first term cannot possibly tell you everything you need to know about marketing. What it will (or should) do, though, is start to explain the basics of what marketing is about. In doing so, it challenges your preconceptions of what marketing is, and encourages you to redefine the subject. It provokes questions which stimulate you to do things such as undertake further reading so as to add to your stock of knowledge, take elective courses in marketing later in the programme to help define particular areas of interest, and finally, in your career after the programme, to have an understanding of and sympathy with marketing issues even if your work does not directly involve you in marketing. A really good course is one where, five years later, you receive a piece of information and are able to make sense of it (convert it into knowledge) because of what you remember from the course.

The debate about courses

Education has its fashions and trends like everything else, and in the 1980s the idea of business school 'courses' *per se* came under attack. The prevailing model whereby a faculty member lectured to the class was attacked as being 'chalk and talk', lacking in practical experience or application. The idea of lecturers imparting knowledge to students was seen as 'elitist'. Finally, the classroom was seen as being an artificial world, divorced from real business situations.

There was some truth in all these accusations, and most business schools responded by changing their pedagogical methods, with the result that most are rather better at teaching than they were two or three decades ago. But the basic course structure of MBA programmes worldwide has largely survived, basically because no one has been able to come up with any substitute for them. Practical experience is wonderful and there is no substitute for it but it is now generally recognized that practical experience requires context and background, and that can be learned in the classroom just as well as anywhere else.

Lecturers and professors are no longer remote, godlike figures (okay, some of them think they are, and it is probably best not to disillusion them), but they *are* specialists and they do have unique levels of knowledge. One should not learn *from* faculty so much as learn *through* them.

In most MBA programme syllabus, courses fall into two, or sometimes three, different types. Although various names are used, I am sticking here with the most common: *core courses, integrative courses* and *elective courses.*

Core courses are offered in the first term(s) of the programme. They are usually based on specific functions (marketing, finance, accounting, etc.) or on specific areas of

background knowledge such as business economics. They are nearly always mandatory for all students. (Some schools make a distinction between functional and background courses, but in practice both usually have the features of core courses.)

Core courses are often the Cinderellas of the MBA programme. Students (and faculty) are usually much more interested in electives, which are considered to be more exciting and fun to take (and teach). But do not neglect the core courses. They have their name for a reason: they are the basic building blocks on which all further knowledge about management must rest: the fundamentals without which it is not possible to proceed much further. One of the finest features of the MBA is the all-round nature of the knowledge and experience it offers, and how it meshes different areas of knowledge together; but to get to this stage, you have to have the core knowledge in the first place.

Elective courses, as the name implies, are chosen by students themselves, and usually come in the final year or terms of the programme. Many business schools pride themselves on the range and choice of elective courses they can offer. Electives are popular because (1) they are chosen by the individual (let's face it, it is always more fun to do something you have chosen to do rather than something that is assigned for you) but more importantly (2) because they allow students to tailor their MBA experience by either specializing in a particular field or acquiring a broader range of background knowledge, or both.

When choosing elective courses, don't just pick the ones that look like 'fun'. Keep personal and career goals firmly in mind. Use the selection of electives to maximize the knowledge you acquire from the MBA programme. Focus on your chosen special area (if you have one) by all means, but try also to take courses that will broaden the mind and open up new horizons. If possible, think about taking one or two electives well outside your chosen area. Marketing specialists might consider doing a couple of courses that focus on technology management, or on number-crunching disciplines such as quantitative analysis. Those heading for a career in corporate finance might consider electives in communications or cross-cultural management as possibly adding important new dimensions to their skills, and so on. Using electives in this way gives the student a way of tailoring his or her own skills profile, and this should both score points with recruiters *and* be of valuable benefit in one's own work and career.

The third category, *integrative courses,* is something of a mixed bag. Different business schools have different definitions and sometimes use different names. Integrative courses tend to be cross-functional in nature, focusing on issues such as strategy, interpersonal skills and so on. They contain necessary knowledge, and as such are usually mandatory, but they do not fit neatly into the boxes of functions or background knowledge. These courses are among the hardest to design and deliver, but they can be very rewarding. Often 'fuzzy' in nature, they home in on some of the real-life problems and dilemmas which managers must face.

5. Delivery Methods

There are many methods for delivering knowledge through the structure of a course. Just some of them include conventional classroom lectures, case studies, written projects, classroom discussions, workshops, sensitivity training, business games, role playing, feedback, syndicate method, videos, computer-assisted learning packages, simulations and microworlds. Many business schools and faculty members prefer a mix of different methods, as the different and often interactive delivery systems provide more mental stimulation for students. Each method requires different responses and analysis, thus providing the potential for a broader look at the subject and a greater depth of learning.

In practice, the variety of delivery systems is limited only by available technical resources and the imaginations of the lecturers and programme designers. There are obvious benefit from these exercises, but the novelty of it also stimulated students and drew more imagination and creativity from them in response.

1. Lecture Method :

Lecture method is the classical methods of teaching. It is also the most widely used in all forms of education, including management education. It is also the most widely criticized. It can be most effective, or least effective. It can be wearying; it can be boring or it can be exciting depending on the speaker. But the subject matter can also be a factor, particularly in lecturing to med-carrier executives and administrators who have knowledge and educated in their fields.

Many schools report lectures to be more effective in offering information than in presenting understanding; i.e., more suited to the presentation of techniques than theory.

Management education programmes that feature guest lectures suffer two potential drawback : first, the quality of the speaker may be poor. This, of Course, would be less likely to be true of guest speakers who appear regularly at a course. Second, there may be a lack of integration of such lectures with the overall training programme. The faculty of a course draws up a curriculum, it sorts out shares of that curriculum to fellow members, it receives feedback on the whole of the curriculaum from students in ever so many ways. As a result, the faculty becomes a gem, and the curriculum their ball game. Guest lectures can add exciting dimensions to information, but they are not a substitute for the team activity so essential and vital to the great teaching institutions of management education around the world.

2. Group Discussions :

Group discussions are structured instructional meetings. They are held for the purposes of increasing general knowledge, of influencing attitudes (although their effectiveness in this is disputed by some experts), and of solving problems. They differ from lectures in that the audience now become active participants with leader, whose responsibility is to guide the discussion and prevent it from straying from the topic at hand.

The discussion may either follow a lecture, in which case it is called a Lecture-Discussion, of it may be introduced by remarks by the leader, or a series of speakers; or it may be based on working papers distributed in advance. Discussions of the last kind are known as Seminars and Conferences. Seminars are usually more in nature than are conferences.

All forms of group discussion require a leader, often designated as moderator or chairman. The leader prepares an agenda in advances so that the discussion will proceed along a desired path leading to a predetermined objective. At the conclusion, he usually provides a summary. The leader also has the responsibility of eliciting participation from all (or as many as possible) members of the group, as well as of preventing one or more members from nominating the session.

Discussions, as a teaching method, have the advantage of providing constant feedback to the leader, lecturer, or teacher about how much the students or participants have learned. By actual participation, it is believed, members are more likely to retain the knowledge transmitted than they would be lecture. They also receive practice in communication, and are provoked into thinking.

However, to be of value, discussion required three ingredients: are agendas, a skilled, leader, and able participants. If any one of three is lacking, a discussion is apt to laps into conversation.

Conference and seminars are fashionable in administrative circles in both public and private sectors. They are widely used in management education and have been found particularly effective in attracting senior administrators in developing countries and thereby introducing them to and involving them in training programme.

3. Case Method :

The case method, or case study method, depends on group discussions and group analysis, as well as individual study and analysis of an unfolding business situation. The emphasis is more on the analysis than on the decisions reached as a result. The method points up the fact that there is more than one possible decision for any situation. There are several types of teaching methods employing case studies.

The " classical" method, developed at the Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration, involves complex case situations. The problem is to find and identify the problems involved, determine which are the more important ones, and see what can be done. The student first studies the case alone during the afternoon. In the evening, he studies the material in a small group session. The following morning, each of the small groups presents its analysis and decisions to the entire group. The participants are challenged to present and defend their analyses against the total experience of the class. Under the direction of the faculty, these various solutions are discussed and again analyzed. Since there is no "right" answer to a case study, the class discussion does not

have to be directed to any one point, but can range over the whole area of possibilities available for decision making.

This action-oriented curriculum is especially effective in developing analytical thinking in a competitive milieu. It helps managers understand the complexity of business and its many functions. The method can be frustrating to students in the beginning, in that there is never any solid substance for *a* solution; also in that it forces them to realize that their past thinking has been affected by emotion and prejudice. It's objective is for the participants to realize that their past thinking has been affected by emotion and prejudice. The objective is for the participants to realize that the analysis is more important than the solution and that all participants are in the same boat. After the initial adjustment, the method has proved quite successful.

Because the instructor does not posses an authority role, because the right question is more important than the right answer, this method of teaching has proved quit valuable in developing countries by forcing the participants to shed the "authority- subject" relationship that is so characteristic of the traditional societies. Thus the method has helped to promote changes in traditional attitudes, which are of such vital importance to the industrialization of a society.

The incident process is a variation of the case method developed by Paul and Faith Pigors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In this, only one simple incident taken from an actual situation in business is given to the participants. Only the instructor knows the other pertinent data about the incident. The participants must ask questions to get the other relevant information at a fact-finding session. Each member then analyses the problem and writes his own solution. This is followed by general session where those with similar solutions join together and select a spokesman to debate their viewpoint with the others. Finally, the instructor reports the actual solution reached out the ultimate decision, sometimes by a vote.

This teaching method was developed to train managers to seek the information that will permit diagnosis of a problem. Thus the emphasis Is more on the search for information that on the analysis, as in the classical case method. Another variation of this method is to use very short cases, perhaps two or three paragraphs in length, to describe a simple problem in human adjustment. It is often used in lower- level training programs, such as human relations for supervisors and foremen. But it is also used at executive management training levels.

Recordings and motion pictures have been used to present a case. Since very little background information can be given in these presentations, and the problem is simple rather than complex, they resemble the short version of the case method. This form is very useful in problems of human relations also. The tool of case studies is further discussed in chapter 7.

4. Workshops :

Workshops are group discussions, but they are not tightly organized instructional meetings, Rather, they are quit unstructured, being conversational In character. Workshops are used for the purpose of exchanging operational experience in a particular area or field of management by specialists in that area or field of management by specialists in that area or field. They are not used of the presentation of general knowledge, but rather are usually concerned with the application of techniques and procedures.

Usually the leader of a workshop session has an agenda or plan, but the discussions necessarily follow the information that the participants offer.

5. Sensitivity or T-Group Training :

Sensitivity training, as the name implies, seeks to make men more sensitive to others and to make them aware of how, consciously or unconsciously, they themselves in turn affect others.

It provides a laboratory setting in human relations where individuals can study and increase their understanding of individuals can study and increase their understanding of the forces which influence the behavior of individual and of groups and organizations. Skills and insights into methods of collaboration and motivation between individuals and groups are also explored. In small group- dynamic settings, individuals are encouraged to examine together their experiences with each other in enough details so that generalizations can be drawn and conceptualized.

The purpose of sensitivity training, then it s to help men achieve a greater awareness of how human beings relate to one another. It accomplishes that by bringing to the surface, for conscious examination, the normally unquestioned assumptions about human relations. Each participant in sensitivity training is responsible for his *own* learning.

A typical session is conducted by a skilled leader and a small group of participants. In certain cases, some structuring of the program is done. In T-groups, the sessions are completely unstructured except to the way the group is working, the style of an individual's participation, and the issues that the group faces. Sensitivity training can be offered by itself in either block sessions or in part-time sessions over a period of time. It can also be part of a large laboratory-training program which includes other participatory methods, such as role-playing, business games, or case studies, it is often part of an advanced or general management program.

Although it has been used in the United States for some years, it is new to many countries of the world. Because personal values and concepts are so deeply rooted in the society and culture which fosters them, this teaching method has met with difficulty at times when the participants have not had a common culture and language.

The use of sensitivity training in management education is based on the theory that an executive will be more efficient and more effective in motivating and leading others, in vrorking with and through others, by an increased sensitivity to human or interpersonal relations.

Sensitivity training is also known as "human relations laboratories", group dynamics laboratories," and "management training laboratories." The managerial Grid is a form of sensitivity training that employs a grid theory for examining managerial styles. The objective is to expand the professional development of the executive and the organizational development of his enterprise.

The participants learn alternative strategies of management in relation to planning, execution, supervision, and follow-up through lectures, precise experiments, and group studies. The effects of conflict, creativity, commitment, and communication are emphasized. Throughout the programme participants identify an alternative managerial styles with reference to a theoretical model, which is known as "the grid" and for which the method is named.

It is suggested that at least two, and preferably three, members from the same level of an organisation attend the program at the same time.

6. Simulation :

Simulation is a teaching method that has been used for years in many other fields of education-law, medicine, aeroplane piloting, and even war. It is a newcomer to management education.

Simulation is one of the most versatile tools of operations research.   Using mathematical models, and a computer when available, the operations of an enterprise can be plotted to show the results of any given decision.

The Special Exercises developed by Bernard M Bass of the University of Rochester, New York, U.S.A., are another form of simulation of a variety of organizational issues requiring managers to respond as they might in real life. Through the use of self-study exercises administered in small groups, the organizational goals and constraints on achieving them.

After individual study, each small group meets and must arrive at a consensus decision. The members of each group look back at their experience thus far and do a process analysis of the problem solving behavior both as individuals and as a group. Thereafter, there is a "community" assembly of all study groups at which the group decisions are discussed and experiences shared with the faculty.

Another form of simulation training focused on decision making, using a complex set of exercises, is offered by kepner-Tregoes. Participants are assigned roles in real-life situations and given only the information that they might ordinarily have. They must then discover for themselves what the real problems are, how to analyse and solve them. Each exercise is followed by a critique session in which the management process of each participant is analysed. The program seeks to develop a systematic approach and focuses on problem analysis, situation analysis, and decision analysis.

7. Business Games :

Business games employ simulation to teach the us of analytical tools. The National Industrial Conference Board in the United States has described them as case studies in motion, in that they require an intensive search for the factors underlying the surface situation, an analysis of those factors, the making and implementing of decisions, and further analysis and divisions as the result of first are made known.

In a business game, the participants are split into competing groups, each of which sets up an imaginary company. Some-times the organizational structure is known and the men are assigned to certain roles; other times they assign themselves. In still other games, the organizational structure is part of the game and can even be the most important decision to be made by the group.

When the dramatize personae has been divided within each group, the actors then act out their roles; This differs from role playing the teaching method, in that role paying is designed to develop human relations skills, whereas in business games both rational and emotional behavior is involved i.e., to gain the largest share of a market or to determine whether to invest in plant expansion. They must do this within the economic laws and boundaries prescribed and in competition with other groups seeking the same objective in the same market.

As each group acts out its imaginary situation, it makers decisions based on information fed to it as the action develops. This requires constant analysis and evaluation of the situation and the making of decisions based thereon.

When each group has completed its game, the results are compared, usually on a mathematical basis, although occasionally by a panel of judges and one group is seen to have done better that the others.

After the game is finished, there is an evaluation session when the game is rerun with all the information available to all players, as well as their actions, competitors etc. This critique of their decisions is considered by many to be a most valuable part of the game for participants.

Some games are more structured than others, inversely proportional to the level of management involved; i.e. the higher the executive level, the less structuring. Some games cover only on functional area of an enterprise, others the entire corporate scene. Some are complex, some more simple. Some use computers.

Business games, as noted, were designed to teach the use of analytical tools. However, a business game must be of sufficient duration that the actors can seen the actual results (even if simulated) of the decisions then make-usually four or five years of the working-model company's life.

The games also point up the value of long-range planning and of the "corporate team". Interpersonal relations, which can become volatile during a game, can also be included in the critique session, thus adding qualitative as well as quantitative factors.

There are many forms of business games; one of the better known is called in-basket. This is an individual form of game, and net interactive, as are the competing teams on each other. Business games are expensive to create and require time and skill. Despite their title – "business games " of "management games" – they are a serious and successful method of teaching management.

8. Role Playing :

Role playing, as the name implies, requires the participants to act out or play the roles in a given situation in business. Its prime benefit is the development of human relations skills by interactions between people. It also offers insights into the emotions and thinking of others is various positions and situations. By practising the behaviour of others, not only the actors but also the members of the audience become emotionally involved, and the analyses and evaluations which follow can be as informative as the actual role-playing. In this teaching method, the situation that is to be enacted is structured in detail, including the position, feelings, thinking, and beliefs of each character. The purpose for *which* the scene is to be played must be clearly stated at the beginning: it may be designed to demonstrate the use of a technique or it may be played to dramatise a character or a situation. When the scene has been set, the characters act out their assigned roles, making us their lines as the play proceeds.

The involvement of the audience sometimes is enlisted, also by assigning them tasks such as being understudy for a role, or studying one character's interpretation in particular for significant or teletelling remarks. In some cases, the audiences is allowed to interrupt a scene or to prompt characters. This emotional involvement, both by the characters in the scene and by the audience, is called "role reversal." Other forms of inciting role reversal include a switching of roles, different sets of actors playing the same scene, or playing the same scene for different purposes.

After the dramatisation, There is a session for analysing, evaluating, and suggesting improvements in the skills of the actors in interpersonal relations. This is done under the guidance' of an instructor.

Sometimes role-playing 'is comparatively unstructured and is used for practice in human relations, in which case the follow-up analysis minimal.

9. Feedback :

Feedback is the return, partial or complete, of a process to its source. In management education, this involves the results of an action taken-whether in business simulation or in other learning process being relayed back to the participant for his evaluation and further learning.

10. Syndicate Method :

The syndicate method is a combination of lectures and group projects. The group projects are assigned to small groups of participants, called syndicates, on subjects that follow from and are supported by the lectures. Each syndicate select a chairman and a secretary (or other may be appointed). The Chairman conducts the discussions and leads his syndicate in its work and in the preparation of report on its assigned task, tool, or case study. The secretary prepares the report. All members of the syndicate participant in the work and aid in the preparation of the report. The report is then presented to the entire class, all syndicates and all members being present, as well as the faculty, and it is discussed in an open forum.

At the administrative staff college at Honley-on-Thames, England, where the technique was developed originally, the composition of the syndicates is changed from time to time to provide stimulus and the opportunity to work with different persons; also to bring together or rotate those with specialist knowledge or experience. Chairmanships and secretaryships are rotated so that all members have the responsibility of leadership.

There are many variations of this method of teaching and many titles are used for syndicate leaders. The advantages of the syndicate method that have been cited are (1) it promotes better comprehension of the substance of the lectures: (2) it helps develop co-operative thinking and co-operative working; (3) it duplicates the real-life Situation of a management team: (4) it provides each participant with a perspective on himself and his job: (5) it provides understanding and appreciation of the value of specialists in are as therefore unknown; (6) it develops ability for self- expression; (7) it develops an over-all point of view: (8) it provides practice in handling new techniques and procedures: (9) it develops better understanding of people; and (10) it increase ability for decision-making.

There are two requirements for success in the use of this teaching method; the task assigned must be relevant and the members of a syndicate must have sufficient experience to handle the task.

The syndicate method of teaching is employed under differing names in different parts of the world, for various reasons, one of which is that the term has an unpleasant connotation in certain areas.

Most courses proceed through a fairly simple set of stages. They begin by offering foundational knowledge, build on that with more complex terms and ideas which lead the students to analyse and in some cases challenge what they have learned, and finally draw conclusions about what is/can be known about the subject. All are thus didactic to some extent, although there are variations on this theme: the Canadian management guru Henry Mintzberg once wrote that he preferred to simply place information/knowledge before students and let them analyse it and draw their own conclusions, but most others prefer a more active relationship between faculty and student, with the students eventually being shown a picture of some aspect of management as the faculty has conceived it.

This last point is quite important. A course does not represent 'truth' about its particular aspect of management, it represents its designer and presenter's idea of what 'truth' is (perhaps the two are practically indistinguishable, but the possibility that they are not should always be borne in mind). As such, no course is a perfect picture; it is– or should be – as we said above, a framework rather than a snapshot.

A second point, related to the first, is that the MBA course has not yet been designed (though a few have tried) which encompasses *all* of management. Holism is found in the full complement of courses, not any one course itself. Courses relate to one another, in the same way that the functional disciplines of management relate to one another or a company relates to its customers, employees, and so on. There is always a whole that is bigger than the sum of the parts. Look for linkages between courses as you go along. Sometimes they will be pointed out to you, others you will have to find for yourself.

6. Role of Faculty :

A faculty is a resource, is the repositories of certain kinds of specialist knowledge and is designers and deliverers of courses. The usual way of looking at the relationship between students and faculty is a straightforward dyad.

As the figure below shows, however, there is another approach, one which requires viewing faculty as guides or signposts towards further information. Faculty don't know everything about their subject, and hardly any claim to do so. Nearly all, however, have a pretty shrewd idea of where to go to find more knowledge. They can direct the student to written or on-line sources, suggest colleagues who may have more knowledge, make introductions to people in industry who may have access to further specialist knowledge, help design programmes of inquiry which will allow the student to learn more about the issues that interest him or her, and so on.
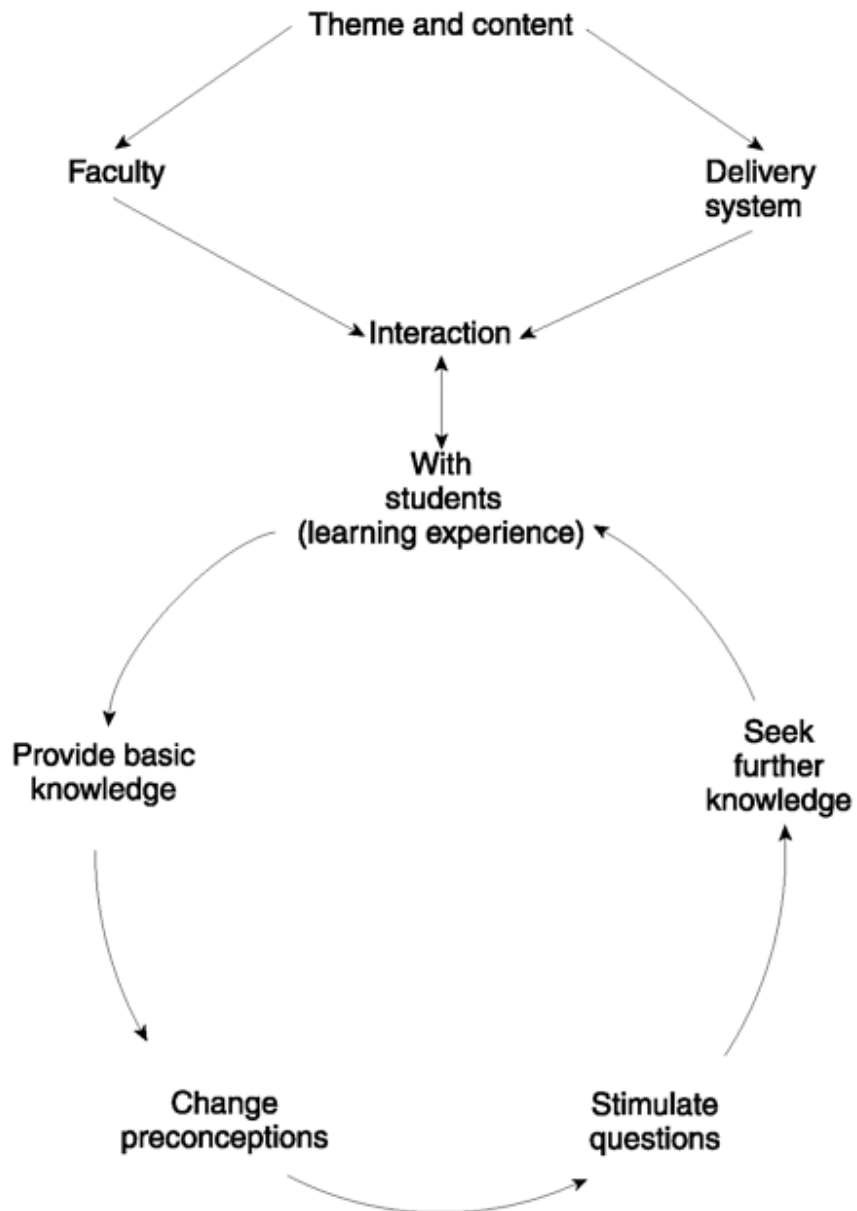
Figure 1: How business school courses work

Most faculty are happy to be used in this way. Intelligent and interesting inquiries from students are always welcome. Faculty are busy people, with their own career goals, research interests and so on, but they respect intelligence and ability when they see it. For a faculty, it is far more interesting to work with students who are demanding and challenging, interested in seeking further knowledge and developing their own skills, than it is to work with those who sit passively waiting for information to be delivered to them.

Faculty design courses based around subjects and areas of personal interest to them. Their careers and to some extent their egos are involved in the subject matter, and vice versa.

Working with students who show a lively interest in their subject and are seeking to expand the boundaries of what the course provides is usually a rewarding experience for them as well for the students. Developing a good working relationship with course faculty should be an important asset in managing knowledge.

7. Case Studies

The case study is one of the most common teaching tools encountered by most MBA students. It has a venerable history, being first developed and used at Harvard Business School in the 1920s. Case studies had been used in legal teaching for some time before and the founders of Harvard Business School, looking for tools they could adapt rather than develop from scratch, hit upon the case method as the right way of teaching management.

The idea quickly took off, and some American business schools became infamous for the number of cases they assigned during each term or course. Today, there is somewhat less reliance on case studies, partly because they are seen to have certain and partly because other more sophisticated teaching tools are now available. However, the case study remains important. A well-produced case study remains a good concise way of conveying a lot of information and, at the same time, prompting students to undertake analysis of problems and use their knowledge to come up with solutions. Cases are cheap and cheerful forms of learning, in many ways better adapted to providing core or foundational learning than their more complex successors such as simulations and microworlds.

A case study, then, is a description of a (usually) real-life situation in which a company, team or manager found themselves. Usually there is a problem or crisis of some sort which requires a solution. The case study presents background information about the company, its products, customers, employees, financial situation and so on, and immediate information about the problem needing to be solved. Most end with a question or a 'hook' designed to stimulate a response from the reader, phrased in varying ways but all essentially meaning 'How would you go about solving this problem?' In MBA programmes, students will then be asked to present the answers to this question in either written form, verbal discussion in class, or both.

There is considerable variety in terms of length and style. Harvard Business School cases, which are widely used around the world, tend to be long and formal and often provide immense quantities of complex financial data. Other scenarios can be less formal, often taking the form of transcripts of conversations, or including copies of correspondence between the principals involved. Long, intricate cases are common, but many faculty also make use of short 'mini-cases' or 'scenarios', often developed by themselves or close colleagues, or derived from textbooks; these may be only a few pages, or even a few paragraphs.

The case study method is used in nearly every discipline taught in business schools, and so there are finance cases, marketing cases, operations management cases and so on. In these instances, it is usually fairly clear that the student(s) are expected to resolve a finance, marketing, ops management, etc. problem. More tricky to deal with are cases which call for a cross-functional approach to their resolution. These describe a general business problem, and leave it up to students to work out what kind of action will be required to resolve it; often a combination of methods and techniques is required.

Cases are great for foundational learning in particular because they are quick and easy. Short mini-cases or scenarios can be read and digested in a few minutes. Longer Harvard-style cases will take longer, but rarely more than an hour, if that, for a preliminary read through. Though the situations they describe are complex, the learning they provide (once you get to it) is often simple and easy to digest and manage. Particularly if they are taught in an open-ended manner (that is, not focusing on a single 'right' solution), they offer chances to approach the problem from a number of different ways and so add real learning value.

Classroom discussion of cases is a particularly useful learning tool. Offering the same case study at the same time to twenty or thirty MBA students may seem as if teaching faculty are asking for all to give the same answer. In fact, the greater the number of different answers that comes back the better, particularly if most or all seem to 'work' and look like genuine resolutions. Discussing, and arguing over, these apparently competing solutions opens up the possibility of multiple roads to success, showing a wider vision of both problem and resolution.

There are disadvantages to the case study method, and three in particular have come under attack. The first is that case studies are static: they offer a single issue or set of issues which need to be resolved. Students may come up with solutions, but they have no way of knowing whether their idea would have worked. Faculty often conclude discussions of case studies by explaining 'what the company did next', but this does not necessarily provide reassurance (unless, of course, your method of resolution was identical to that chosen by the company).

Second, case studies are perforce written about events in the past. Because they are real life studies, by the time the research has been done and the case study written, the events described will inevitably have receded and, so critics say, be less relevant (one academic describes case studies as 'the best way to solve the business problems of twenty years ago'). Against this, though, it should be pointed out that certain fundamental problems and issues in business are pretty well timeless, and so long as cases are kept reasonably up to date and describe common issues, then there is no harm in using them. The point of a case study is not to solve the problems of IBM *per se,* it is to resolve the particular set of issues and problems described (which just happen to have occurred at IBM).

Third, nearly all cases describe companies that ultimately succeeded; very few use examples of failure. Despite several decades of observing how Japanese business culture, for example, exploits and learns from failure in a systematic way, most Western business academics have a horror of describing failure. They see using cases of failure as too pessimistic, too downbeat, arguing that one should not teach students how to fail. This ignores the deep learning that can be drawn from case studies of failures and errors.

Despite these caveats, however, the advantages of the case study method remain strong. It is important to recognize the limitations of this method, and it is particularly important not to get too wrapped up in the individual company or people being described.

Ultimately, cases are about abstract learning. Look beyond the situation and find the knowledge buried deeper within.

How a case should be tackled in practice depends to some extent on how one is working. Some case study assignments are on an individual basis, while others assign teams or study groups of students to come up with a joint solution. The other important distinction here is between cases which are presented in text (usually on paper), and those that appear visually on CDs or videos.

No matter what the format, the first step is usually to have a first read through (or watch, if this a video case), preferably on your own. This should be fairly quick, with the emphasis on getting a first look at the bigger picture. What is the firm being described? What business is it in? What are its core products, markets, customers? What is its basic financial position (healthy, unhealthy, teetering on the brink, etc.)? By the time this stage is over, you will have an outline understanding of the problem.

Then go through the case again. This time, look for the details. Pull out any points of information that provide background and/or illuminate the problem. If you are working on paper, underlining or highlighting text can be useful way of identifying these points, so that when referring back to the case you can pull out information points easily, without needing to re-read large chunks of text. With video cases, or if reading a text case on screen, it will be necessary to take notes, but again these can be structured so as to summarize the key points. This is also the stage when you can attempt to find and dispose of any red herrings which the case's writers may thoughtfully have provided for you to stumble across.

By now the reader will be fully familiar with the case. Using the information gathered in the previous stages, build up a detailed picture of what you know about the company, its markets, products, environment, financial situation, employees, the quality of its management and any other information provided, and also the problem the company is facing. If there is time, write down a short summary of all this information in your own words. This is not a wasted step, you can adapt and re-use this material when developing your final presentation.

Next, focus on the problem. Does this appear to be a functional problem, that is, one relating specifically to some business function such as marketing, finance or human resources management? Or is this a strategic issue, concerning not how the company operates but its goals and directions? Or is this a complex issue, requiring a broad-based approach? It is at this
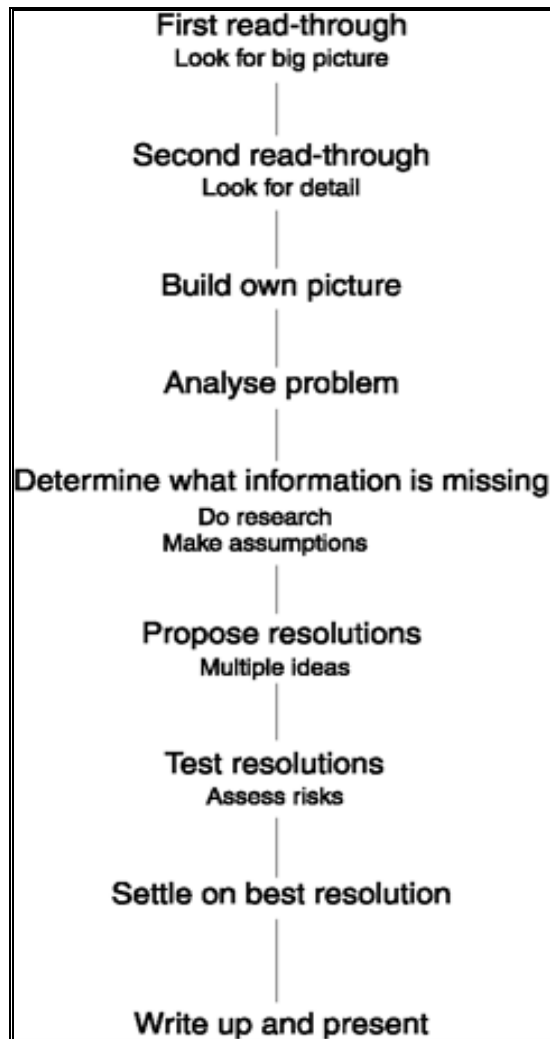
```
                    First read-through
                    Look for big picture
                            |
                  Second read-through
                      Look for detail
                            |
                   Build own picture
                            |
                    Analyse problem
                            |
        Determine what information is missing
                      Do research
                    Make assumptions
                            |
                   Propose resolutions
                      Multiple ideas
                            |
                    Test resolutions
                      Assess risks
                            |
                Settle on best resolution
                            |
                  Write up and present
```

Figure : Steps in case study analysis

point that, if you are working in a team or study group, the group should come together for discussion (group work in earlier stages is possible too, but here it becomes essential). Spend some time over this, and be sure that the problem is fully defined and understood before looking at resolutions.

At this point, if not before, it may seem that some of the information you need to develop resolutions is missing. This may be due to the constraints of the case itself (there was not enough space to fit the information in) or this may be deliberate on the part of the writers (after all, managers in real business situations seldom have complete sets of information either). There are two ways to approach this problem. First, if there is time, supplementary research can be undertaken. If you know the company and the sector, it may be possible to generate additional information from readings, journals, databases or websites. This is particularly useful when building up background information.

The second option is to make assumptions about missing information: that is, effectively 'fill in the blanks' with educated guesswork and then treat that guesswork as if it was part of the scenario. For example, a marketing case may talk about the company's gross sales of a particular product and give current market share, but may not tell you how fast the market is growing. If you feel this is important, and there is not time to research the real figure, arrive at an estimate of what you feel is likely, and then treat that estimate as part of the information set you work from to solve the case. Two cautions, though: first, always check that your assumptions are realistic and reasonable (i.e., run them by someone else who might know better than you), and second, always check that the faculty teaching the course are amenable to this method; some do not like assumptions, and prefer students to work only from verifiable information. Note too that providing reliable assumptions may in itself involve further research.

When all available information has been gathered, now is the time to begin developing resolutions. For groups, there are various possible techniques. Members can be asked to come up with potential resolutions on their own, which are then put forward for discussion. (It is usually a good idea to get all the proposals on the table before beginning to discuss the relative merits of each.) The resolution eventually agreed on will be that which members think is best or, more commonly, a jointly agreed on resolution which combines features of several proposals. Alternatively, the entire process can be thrashed out in the course of a group discussion.

At all costs, avoid the temptation to come up with one resolution and then stick to that. Go through all the information and look at the problem again. Come up with as many different realistic resolutions as possible, then look at them all. Quite often, you will find that several have good features and that it may be possible to combine them. Don't be afraid to question your previous views of the case. This looks like a marketing problem, but is it really? If the issue concerns product, might not operations and human resource management also be involved? What inputs from those directions could resolve the case?

When a full list of potential resolutions has been compiled, begin testing them. Again, this can be done alone or in the context of a group discussion. There are various ways of testing, but the easiest is probably to ask of each resolution, 'Why wouldn't thiswork?' If there is information in the case study which suggests a high probability of failure, you may need to junk the idea. If you can see no clear reason why the resolution would not work, put it forward. Ultimately, you should come down to a handful of ideas, of which you or the group can pick and choose which is most appropriate and likely to work.

It may well happen that *none* of the proposed solutions looks likely to work, or that there is a high probability of failure in any case. (Don't worry too much if you do arrive at this point; this is highly realistic.) At this point the assessment of risks needs to take a slightly different turn. Having established various proximate causes of failure, it now remains to be seen whether and how these causes can be guarded against. What steps can be taken to lay off risk? The resolution which allows for the best and most realistic measures in this direction may begin to emerge as your preferred option.

Or will it? You may decide to go for a bolder approach, if the reward seems worth it. In the military, it is always argued that there is a fine line between bravery and insanity (or, more unkindly, stupidity). The same line exists in management, and should not be crossed if possible. Remember that, in real life, you would have to answer to top management and the shareholders for your behaviour.

The resolution on which you or your group ultimately settle is down to yourselves. Ultimately, it will depend in part on your own nature and characters, and so it should. There is still room for individual style in management, and vision and the ability to carry it out will in most cases come good over more rigid, do-it-by-numbers thinking. Be creative in your approach, but do not lose touch with the fundamentals.

The final step is the presentation. Presentations should always be carefully planned and drafted. Ideally, a case write-up or presentation should include the following:

• a description of the company and its situation (including any assumptions which have been made, clearly defined as such)
• an analysis of the problem or problems the company faces
• a quick discussion of the most important potential resolutions and the problems and risks associated with each
• the resolution ultimately adopted, with reasons why, and a full and frank assessment of the risks and rewards attendant on it

Lengths will vary according to the nature of the case and the preference of teaching faculty, but 2–3 pages is usually a good length to aim at for written presentations; verbal ones should rarely take more than five minutes. Be professional in your approach. Explain your conclusions clearly, and be sure that your reasoning is also clearly explained. Don't try to hide or explain away facts that contradict your reasoning; be frank and realistic about problems and risks. Finally, be clear what result you expect to accrue if your recommendations are implemented.

There are, in general terms, three different ways to approach case study resolution. Which approach is chosen will depend in part on the case itself, but I argue that the best method of all is to try a synthesis of all three. This can be tricky to design, and the results can be even more difficult to write up or present, but the value added in terms of additional learning is considerable.

The first and most basic method is the *problem-solving approach.* In this approach, students concentrate on the situation and issues described in the case study. The first and foremost aim is to find a resolution which appears to work and would, if implemented in a real-life situation, offer the company a good chance of success. In terms of learning, the main aim is to learn how problems of a similar type can be resolved; possibly it is felt this information will come in useful in either later cases or after the programme.

Attention to this issue is obviously necessary, if only for practical reasons. The problem *must* be resolved; if it is not, then the company might fail. Faculty and colleagues on the

course will want to know what resolution has been reached, and marks or grades may depend on this. On the other hand, attention to this issue alone risks missing out on opportunities for further learning.

The *further learning* approach treats the case study not as a problem in itself, but as an opportunity to learn further and expand knowledge of issues related to the case. For example, a case about human resource management may raise issues concerning training and recruitment. Taking these issues as a starting point, the student might become involved in deeper reading and research on these issues, both in relation to the case and more generally.

Using the questions provoked by case studies in this way can be a very valuable way of opening up new learning directions, and will certainly increase the student's stock of knowledge. However, this alone will not usually suffice to provide a resolution to the problem, which is after all what faculty and fellow students (and the mythical board of directors in the company described in the case) are waiting anxiously to hear.

Finally, there is the *value-adding approach,* which seeks to go beyond a simple resolution of the problem and find ways and means of growing or advancing the company. An example might be recommending the adoption of a radically new market, product or strategy. The name means that the student is attempting not just to resolve the issue described but to use background information and his or her own analysis to come up with new ideas that will improve the company's situation still further.

This is the most difficult approach, and should probably not be attempted until one is familiar with the basics of the course in question. In other words, don't try to run before you can walk. But if you feel confident, by all means attempt this approach. Again, though, it is important not lose sight of the basic problems and issues of the case. It may do little good to recommend the introduction of a marvellous new product if the production system is incapable of making even the existing one.

In order to carry this approach off successfully, recommendations must *realistic* and *feasible.* Pie-in-the-sky approaches will win neither the plaudits of colleagues nor good marks from faculty.

Although there are three separate approaches, in practice the best idea may be to attempt a synthetic approach which combines features of all three. Clearly, as noted above, it is nearly always necessary to adopt a problem-solving approach in the first instance, to deal with the immediate issues confronting the company. But in terms of learning, the best value may be in going beyond the basic issues. Adopting a further learning approach can give opportunities for knowledge acquisition, while looking for ways to add value can be a useful exercise in knowledge use.

One of the great assets of case studies is that they are in effect small, largely discrete exercises in knowledge management. The stages described above correspond to three

stages of knowledge management. In the course of a case analysis, the student will go through this cycle of knowledge management several times.

The first two stages, the read-throughs or first and second viewings, are knowledge acquisition activities. The knowledge acquired thus is first organized and structured through the process of building up the picture of what the case presents, and is then put to use along with other, previously acquired knowledge in analysing the problem.

Then comes another round of knowledge acquisition and creation: when the available information is assessed any blanks are filled in through further research or assumptions. This knowledge is structured again, and is put to use a second time when first defining potential resolutions. Testing resolutions involves returning to one's stocks of knowledge again, and can even involve still further knowledge acquisition or creation. Finally, knowledge of the situation is used in arriving at a judgment as to which resolution is the best or most workable.

Case studies, then, are first and foremost mental exercises for the student. Although the most obvious aim, required by the situation, is to find a resolution to the problem posed by the case study, the real value comes through the exercise, through the acquisition, organization and use of knowledge. As preparation for real life analysis and decision making, they thus have great value.

8. Working in Teams

Team working was one of the business mantras of the 1990s. All sorts of new phrases were added to the management lexicon, like group working, team management and group decision making. Prompted by a somewhat overdue revelation that large modern businesses were becoming too complex for one person to control, theorists began working on how to manage the transition from an old-style autocratic form of organization to one where responsibility was devolved to more people.

That being said, team working is not as easy as it seems. Businesses are essentially groups of people, and people are individual and unique, each with their own foibles, quirks and idiosyncracies as well as talents, skills and competences. Some people naturally work well together, others have to make more of an effort. An understanding of the basics of group dynamics is probably the first essential when undertaking team work.

Basically, there are three good reasons for undertaking MBA course work in teams, and it is for a combination of these reasons that most business schools are so keen on it:

- to achieve more inputs in terms of knowledge and ideas
- to achieve synergy through combining the talents of several people
- to replicate more accurately the real life management environment

The first point is often described as 'two heads are better than one'. If this is so, then three are usually better still, and so on. Actually, it is not quite as simple as that. Simply adding more people regardless of whether they are suited for the team in question does not necessarily add more value, and if too many people are involved the team is likely to sink under its own weight. Four to six people is the ideal size for a team (anything bigger is a committee). Ideally, too, everyone on the team should have something to contribute to it. In the environment of an MBA programme this is seldom a problem, as everyone is there for the same purpose.

The concept of team synergy is harder to explain, although the point made above, that only by combining their efforts can team members achieve their goals, is one aspect of the issue. But if the team is working efficiently – and this is a big *if* – the quality of decision making and implementation that comes out of it will be of significantly better quality than the individual efforts of even its most talented members. The football team's star striker may be a player of great skill, but unless he has a similarly talented midfielder feeding him the ball, he will not realize his own potential. The conductor of the orchestra may be a leading expert on Beethoven, but without effective support from an excellent first violinist she will not be able to produce the best possible performance from the orchestra.

In effect, team working demonstrates that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Or at least, it has the potential to be.

The third point, that team working on the MBA is good preparation for later managerial work, is a valid one and worth bearing in mind. The simple position is that 'this is how managers work so we may as well start practising now'. But teams are also great generators of knowledge, as we shall discuss below, and developing team management skills more fully is a crucial part of the MBA experience.

In some courses and programmes team members are assigned automatically, but in other cases students will be able to choose their own teams. Where the option exists, look where possible to include people from a number of different backgrounds into the team, to get a variety of perspectives on whatever problems and issues the team will be tackling. There will always be a temptation to pick team members on the basis of whether you get along with them personally. This is important – good personal relationships usually make for easy working relationships – but it should not be the only or even the primary factor.

Once the team members have been assigned or selected, it is recommended that they get to know one another before settling down to work. If time is short, just get together for a drink or a cup of coffee. Introduce yourselves, talk about your backgrounds and interests, learn what points you have in common. You do not need to become lifelong friends, but friendly personal relations will reduce some of the frictions that may result when the team begins to work in earnest.

Once the team is ready to begin working, the first step should always be to agree on a common purpose. Every member of the team needs to understand and buy into this goal. If you think some members are merely passively following the lead set by more dominant members, halt the process for a moment, go back and ensure the quieter members really are on side. They may just be reticent; or they may have real disagreements but be reluctant to mention them. If so, the latter need to be sorted out.

Next, it is recommended that any necessary tasks and roles be assigned. If the project is going to be a long or complex one, one member of the group should volunteer to act as a *rapporteur.*

He or she should take rough notes of the meeting, including any decisions made, action points set, tasks assigned and deadlines. These notes should be circulated as rough minutes after each meeting. This can be a very useful device for reminding team members of what has been agreed and where responsibilities lie.

It is important that groups should be allowed to develop their own style and do things their own way. Achieving the goal is what is important; how you get there is of second-most importance, at best. As long as the team keeps focused on the goal and its members work efficiently together, then it should achieve its aims.

There are however two guiding principles which are important. The first is to make sure that every member of the team makes a contribution. If individual team members are allotted tasks, these should be spread as evenly as possible. In discussions of case studies,

projects and soon, make sure everyone's voice is heard. In this way, you will get the best out of the team as a whole, and the individuals will be satisfied that they have made their contribution to the final result.

The second, related point is that everyone should have an equal chance for learning. When new concepts or ideas are introduced, make sure the whole team understands them and their implications. It may be necessary to carry some members along at first. Avoid the temptation to simply convince them of the rightness of your argument; rhetorical brilliance will do no one any favours at this point. If the ideas are good ones, they will do their work for you.

Ultimately, whether teams function successfully is down to (a) the personalities of the individuals in the team and (b) whether those personalities can work efficiently together.

One of the most common mistakes made by neoclassical economists is to assume that all people are rational maximizers. That is, in any given situation, people will work to achieve the greatest possible good for themselves. This view ignores the fact that people are often irrational according to various motives. Altruism and generosity lead to apparent irrationality, as do errors resulting from faulty information, fatigue, compromises and 'fudging', or just plain stupidity.

The problem is that in any given situation we tend to work not just to maximize utility but also to gratify our own egos, and sometimes the latter wins out over the former. This is particularly common in social situations, where ingrained patterns of behaviour can cause otherwise rational people to exhibit some quite ridiculous behaviours. Fatigue, too much caffeine and other background factors can further cloud judgement.

People react to social pressures – such as those imposed by working in teams – in different ways, and their responses to these situations will differ. Personalities and behaviours exhibited in social situations are not always the same as those exhibited in professional situations. People assume different things are being expected of them, and change their behaviours accordingly.

The ten archetypes which follow relate to team working personalities or workplace behaviours; they do not relate to overall personality. There is nothing terribly scientific about them; they are, frankly, a bit of fun. They illustrate the kinds of diverse personalities that one can find in a team. The chances are that when you sit down with your colleagues you will be able to identify some of these in the group.

Ten archetypes :

Bull. Bulls are strong and impetuous, and tend to attack problems frontally. Their assets are great energy and a refusal to be daunted by the task that lies ahead. All problems have a solution, and usually all you have to do is throw enough time, energy, resources, etc. at the issue to see it through. They tend to lack finesse, and overlook some of the more subtle issues, which means they can be tripped up. Their energy and enthusiasm can be

infectious, but equally can be annoying if unconstrained. In their headlong rush at the problem, they tend to pull weaker members of the team along with them.

Bulls are fond of saying: 'No problem. We can sort this out. All we have to do is...'

Potential future career: corporate raider

Mouse. Mice are industrious and hard workers, but in group situations they tend to sit quietly and say nothing. They are often exacting and professional in their approach to a task, and when set a task they deliver the appropriate results on time. In group discussions, however, they tend to sit back and let the conversation flow around them, not speaking even if they might have something valuable to contribute. Mice need to be brought out of themselves and into the discussion, and given time to organize their thoughts and speak; many do not handle pressure well. A great asset to a team, they need careful handling.

Mice are fond of saying: 'Oh, I'm sorry. Were you asking me?'

Potential future career: Internet millionaire

Rooster. The rooster likes to be visible and in a position of authority. They are usually good communicators and make excellent presenters; if you have a rooster in your team, consider using him or her to take the lead in classroom presentations. Roosters are also usually clever and have valuable opinions to contribute, particularly when it comes to how ideas will be received by their target audience. They can cause difficulties; some are genuine show-offs, which can irritate other members of the team, and they can be somewhat domineering. Properly managed, though, a rooster can be a valuable asset, especially when your team is competing with others.

Roosters are fond of saying: 'Let me do the talking.'

Potential future career: chairman of a multinational advertising firm

Tiger. Tigers are highly intelligent and good analysts. They tend to sit watchfully while others take their turn and present their ideas; then, when they see a mistake, they pounce suddenly, crushing their opposition (bulls and roosters are their favourite targets). Although this can be useful in that it can save the team from making its mistakes publicly, it can still be irritating. Nevertheless, tigers are great value. Their analytical abilities are important, and they tend to be good strategists. The real trick to managing them is to get them to say what *they* are thinking, not their views on other people's ideas.

Tigers are fond of saying: 'I think you'll find you've overlooked one small but important detail...'

Potential future career: management consultant

Monkey. Monkeys are clever and energetic and are often good intuitive thinkers, a trait which sometimes allows them to jump ahead of the rest of the team. They come up with a variety of original ideas (not all of which are always very practical, it must be said). They also tend to generate these ideas in a seemingly random order, which can be confusing for anyone trying to work through a project methodically. Monkeys can be a tremendous asset to a work team through the sheer volume and creativity of their thinking, but they need to work with the team, not outside it.

Monkeys are fond of saying: 'I've just come up with a better idea...'

Potential future career: director of research and development

Bee. Bees are diligent workers, industrious as one would expect, and are productive and good analysts. They tend to leave leadership to others, however, and are sometimes less than assertive in group discussions. Although capable of great focus and concentration, they can also lose focus and dissipate their efforts, and often rely on the support of a group to keep them going in the right direction. Bees are generally group-oriented and make excellent members of any team.

Bees are fond of saying: 'I've been working on this, and here are the notes I've made.'

Potential future career: senior analyst

Rabbit. Rabbits are very productive (no jokes, please) but tend to haste and disorganization. Once they focus on a subject, rabbits can do a lot of work quickly, and will come up with many good ideas and pieces of information. There is a tendency to do things at the last minute, and poor organizational skills mean many rabbits don't achieve as much as they might. Most are always trying to do better, however, and on the plus side they are enthusiastic and full of energy.

Rabbits are fond of saying: 'I'm late, I'm late, I'm very very late'

Potential future career: director of human resource management

Squirrel. Squirrels are collectors and hoarders of information. They are the people who can seemingly produce any required piece of information at the drop of a hat, or at least know where to get it at short notice. Quick and industrious, squirrels can be an asset to any team. Their main drawback is their tendency to take on too much work; incapable of saying no when asked to do a job, they also volunteer for things which they probably won't be able to complete on time. In team situations, they need to be nudged into making sure they are working within their own limits.

Squirrels are fond of saying: 'Yes, I'll do that.'

Potential future career: fund manager

Sloth. Sloths are the opposite of rabbits; they are 'last-minuters', who never do anything until it is beyond urgent. Incapable of understanding the need for haste, they can be maddening to work with. This said, when they *do* get down to work, they usually produce what is required quickly and to a high quality standard; their lack of surface activity often conceals a very active brain. Other members of the team can try to convert sloths to a different way of thinking, or it might be best to let them work in their own way and make allowances in the team's schedule.

Sloths are fond of saying: 'What's the rush? The deadline isn't until tomorrow.'

Potential future career: director of strategic planning

Dodo. Dodos are, fortunately, very rare in most MBA programmes, as selection processes have become good at weeding them out, but a few still slip through. Dodos are not stupid, but like their namesake they are simply incapable of evolution (and probably in danger of extinction). Rigid thinkers, they find it difficult to accept new ideas, and they do so only slowly. Dodos can work hard and be industrious, but they need a lot of support and encouragement from the rest of the team.

Dodos are fond of saying: 'That's impossible.'

Potential career: politician

As the archetypes presented above show, any group is likely to have a mix of personalities and talents. Each member will have his or her individual strengths; nearly all will also have their individual weaknesses. At first sight, the members of the group may even appear incompatible.

There are, however, some guidelines for making sure that teams work *efficiently*. The three most important of these are as follows.

1 Stay focused on the goal. It is very easy for group discussions to wander off topic. If the group is headed in that direction, someone needs to gently nudge them back on course. Sometimes a little leeway can be given; if someone feels strongly about something and wants to get it off his or her chest, let him or her have his or her way for a bit. But remember that the group's energies and resources are finite, and the goal is what matters. Concentrate, and don't lose track of the objective.

2 Communicate clearly. In group discussions, say what you mean concisely and without rhetorical flourishes. Ensure that your colleagues understand you and follow your ideas. If one or more members of the team speak English as a second language, stick to plain English; avoid elaborate metaphors or local slang which can confuse. In written communications, be concise and stick to the point. At all costs, be sure that everyone in the group is working from the same information. If one member learns something that is useful to the group's objective, he or she should let the others know.

3   Show respect for all members of the group at all times. Be careful about matters such as timekeeping; do not be late for meetings and do not waste your colleagues' time. Do not talk down to people just because they may seem slow in following your ideas (they may not be able to follow because you may in fact be wrong). Be inclusive, and bring people into the discussion if they appear to be getting lost. Let everyone have his or her say, taking it in turns if necessary. Above all, never lose your temper.

Showing respect for other members of the group may just seem like good manners, but in fact, self-interest is also involved. Mutual respect between members of the group serves to oil the wheels of its internal machinery; the group will work more smoothly and be more productive. Better results will be achieved, and more learning and greater benefits will accrue to all parties.

Most groups that fail to achieve their objective do so because members are unable to agree on some key issue. Deadlock is quite likely to occur at some point in any group's activities, and it is well to be prepared for this beforehand. When deadlock does occur, the first rule is to keep calm. It is at this point that, depending on the nature of the people involved, tempers may flare. Keep them in check; be prepared to act as peacemaker if necessary. Make sure everyone is calm and ready to discuss the matter before proceeding.

Get both sides to explain their thinking clearly. Ensure that they can support their own position as well as critique the opposition. One useful tactic is to get each side to critique their own position; look at the ideas they are defending and describe what may be wrong with them. Under this kind of self-examination, apparently inflexible positions tend to crumble. But if people are changing their views, they must do so because they genuinely believe change is possible; compromise, as discussed below, is usually the wrong move.

If deadlock persists, review the options. Most deadlocks occur in what look like black and white situations; one side has taken one view, the other side has taken the opposing view, and neither will shift. Now is the time to review other positions and look for a third option.

It is always tempting in such situations to compromise, to look for a 'grey' position between the two and find something that both parties can live with. Think hard before doing this. Compromises are often unsatisfactory in terms of results; they tend to be inefficient and weak solutions, largely because they are cobbled together out of parts of two apparently conflicting ideas. Compromise is often worse than no decision at all, and it is amazing how many bad business decisions have been made down the years (centuries?) by people looking for compromise solutions. Also, compromises also often result in one side, or both, giving up some deeply held principle, and this can cause bad feeling, now or later.

A better way is to *innovate an entirely new solution.* That is, when faced with a deadlock, find a third option which is better than the two currently on the table. (If deadlock has ensued, it is entirely likely that neither proposed solution is a good one; otherwise, why would the other party be so opposed?) This is, of course, easier said than done. On the

other hand, the prospect of deadlock and failure should prove a spur to more creative thinking. Look for a breakthrough. Turn around, examine the problem again, and come at it from a different angle. If that fails, keep trying.

Last of all, if other measures have failed, consider allowing the dissenters to write or present their own ideas as a minority view (the dissenters will, obviously, be in a minority; otherwise they would not be dissenters). If this is necessary, do it with dignity and respect for both parties. If the team is presenting in class, make it clear that there is no bad feeling between the parties (lie if you have to). There are few things worse than seeing a team presenting a report when clearly some members disagree with the results and are angry and upset about it. This is embarrassing and distracting for everyone.

Some dos and don'ts for working in teams

do:

- get to know your colleagues personally and develop good relationships with them
- ensure that all members of the team contribute equally
- keep records of discussions, even just in point form
- stay focused on the team's goals
- show respect for your colleagues
- communicate your views and ideas clearly and directly

don't:

- hold back information if it will be useful to the group
- talk down to others if they appear not to be following you
- be late for meetings or miss meetings without giving notice
- lose your temper, especially not in front of people from outside the group

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Working in a team has following additional features :

The experience of working in teams is excellent preparation for future careers in management. Anybody can be a member of a team. Getting that team to function as efficiently and effectively as possible is another matter. Use the experience of team working on the MBA not only to produce the required results, but to study group dynamics in action and work on ways of improving your own team management skills. Don't take teams for granted; study them as they work, and think of ways in which they could improve their working methods.

Second, and related to the above, the experience of working in teams will strengthen your communications skills. The need to express yourself clearly and concisely to a varied audience is one aspect of this; so too is the need to listen, absorb and respond to the views of others. Doing all this with respect, allowing others to have their say and creating a climate of fairness is important. So is creating a climate in which everyone feels comfortable about expressing their views. There is much more to communication than just speaking or writing.

Third, working with fellow students in teams should begin to show how teams function in terms of generating knowledge and creating synergy. A good team is much greater than just the sum of its parts; it can achieve things that no individual could dream of (or at least, do much more than dream of). Understanding a little of how this process works is a major benefit to be derived from the MBA experience.

Teams are essentially tools for generating and using knowledge. Like networked computers, or like a sort of collective 'superbrain', they take in knowledge inputs from all members of the team, analyse them, and make the results available to all members to use, individually or collectively.

Team members acquire knowledge and feed it into the team, but through mutual discussion and analysis, teams also create knowledge; indeed, this is one of their greatest strengths. Teams do not have collective memories as such, only the memories of their individual members, and this is a potential weakness. However, this weakness can be overcome if the team members store knowledge they have acquired and generated in notes and databases (it is for this reason that I reiterate the need for teams to keep records). Finally, when using knowledge, teams working together have a longer reach and greater capability than any individual member, provided always that the team is working smoothly and harmoniously. To go back to the head of the chapter, a football team, an infantry platoon and a symphony orchestra all function because they are combining the knowledge and use outputs of all members of the team.

9. Written Communication

An odd thing happened in the 1990s: writing came back into fashion. The agent responsible for this trend was e-mail, which suddenly exploded onto the scene as a complement to, and increasingly a substitute for, the telephone. Requests for face-to-face meetings or telephone conversations to explain an idea to a superior increasingly draw the answer: 'Send me an e-mail.'

MBA programmes often don't stress the importance of written communication as much as they might. Some faculty are prepared to accept written reports and case study write-ups no matter how many grammatical and spelling errors they may contain. Fair enough, you may say; if the professor will accept it as it is, why should you waste your time doing more?

The answer is simple but important: writing is a form of interpersonal communication, and learning to write effectively is an important part of the whole package of communications skills. Just because faculty at your business school are prepared to accept written work of a quality that would probably make your high school English teacher feel faint is no reason to sell yourself short in this department.

Good writing is important for its discipline, and sloppy writing is sometimes a sign of sloppy thinking. But much more important is the impact that good writing can have on an audience. 'Selling' your ideas to colleagues and senior managers, or to customers, is critical to career success, and often that selling has to be done in writing. To repeat, writing is one form of interpersonal communication. And in an economy that is increasingly becoming dominated by knowledge, the ability to communicate knowledge is only barely of secondary importance to knowledge itself. In the twenty-first century, victory goes to the communicators.

One way and another, MBA students have to do quite a lot of writing. There are case write-ups and reports, project reports and other assigned work. There is e-mail contact with fellow students and faculty. There are notes taken in class and while doing desk or field research that have to be structured and ordered, and there are notes from meetings referred to in the previous chapter. There are written outlines for oral presentations.

MBAs will probably be involved in writing a wide variety of communications; for reasons of space I will concentrate here on five of the most common:

E-mail messages: Although we now depend it on like we depend on oxygen, e-mail has to be one of the ugliest forms of communication known to humanity. No one enjoys reading e-mail (well, all right, but if you do, keep it quiet). E-mail messages need to be as brief as possible, with no wasted words or space. Introduction and conclusion are important for longer mails, but should probably be a single sentence at most. Attach graphics or longer attachments if you must, but clearly state what is attached and what the reader is supposed to do with it. Remember, your e-mail is one in what may be a queue of

fifty or a hundred which has built up since the reader last logged on; short, simple e-mails which are easy to understand and respond to will create more of an effect.

Case writeups: Case write-ups should normally be 2-3 pages, although some faculty will have other preferences; always find out before beginning your first write-up. If the specified preference is 2-3 pages, stick to those parameters; write-ups of two paragraphs or twenty pages will be equally unwelcome. Don't use illustrative material unless you absolutely must or the case instructions call for it, though tables with figures are acceptable (especially, obviously, in finance or accounting cases). Use short paragraphs with simple sentences. Bullet points and lists are good ways of summarizing key issues quickly, but don't overdo it.

Project reports: These of course are much longer, and are probably the most complex form or writing most MBAs will undertake, whether referring to in-class projects or real projects with companies (see Chapter 9). Think carefully about the structure of these before beginning. Arrange your information and notes beforehand, and making a detailed outline is recommended. For each point in the outline, consider whether illustrative material or tables could be used and where. Make sure the introduction and conclusion follow the guidelines given above; consider the option of writing both these last, once the body of the report is finished. Remember that much of your audience is likely to be less familiar with the subject matter of your report, and structure it so the material is easy to follow.

Minutes and notes: These should be as short as possible, conveying the maximum infomation in the minimum number of words. Use some sort of list structure, such as legal format for longer documents, or lists or even bullet points for shorter ones. The reader will want to be able to read these in a very few minutes, and brevity is the most important structural feature. Introduction and conclusion are useful as statements of purpose, but should rarely be longer than a sentence.

Personal research notes: As you are the audience as well as the communicator for these, it is important to write/compile them in a way which you will find easy to read and digest later. These are contributions to your own personal stock of knowledge; organize the knowledge thus acquired in a way which will make it easy to use later.

A lot of people talk a lot about style for written communication in management, and most of it is not very helpful. In fact, the rules for style are exactly the same as for structure: fitness for purpose. First, write in a style with which you are comfortable and in which you are capable; don't reach for rhetorical flourishes which are beyond your ability, but don't dumb down your text either. Second, as the examples below will show, the style may need to vary depending on the type of communication and the intended audience. Write to your audience; write in such a way so that they will understand and respond.

Many people may attempt to give you advice about what style to adopt, and most of them should be ignored. Particularly, ignore the language fascists, who tell you not to split infinitives or end sentences with prepositions. Violating both these rules is perfectly

possible and in some cases may be desirable, so long as this is the best possible way to convey meaning and message. Second, ignore the current trend, which is for short sentences. 'Sentences should be as short as possible', one authority on this subject has declared.

As noted above, find a style with which you are comfortable and which you like writing. Stay focused on the needs of the audience; do the words which you have used adequately convey your meaning? Pretend you are a complete stranger, entirely ignorant of the subject under discussion; would you be able to understand what is being written? If not, perhaps it is time to consider some revision.

Long sentences and words *in general* are not a good idea, because usually there is a shorter and clearer way of expressing the same idea. William Faulkner was famous for writing sentences that would go on for a page or more, but most of us are not Faulkner; usually, we can say what we mean rather more concisely. But if the idea is a complex one, it may need a longer sentence.

Many people are afraid of writing because they believe they are writing in the 'wrong' way, and silly rules about style only complicate the matter. When engaging in written communication, you should be free to adopt whatever devices you know and can use, *provided* they achieve the ultimate aim of effective communication with the reader. Writing is one of the few places where you can actually be yourself. Develop your own effective style, and enjoy using it. By expressing yourself *as yourself,* you will probably make more of an impact.

Writing Style for MBAs :

E-mail messages: style may not seem important here, but as the example given early in the chapter shows, style can play a role in getting a response to your e-mail. The best option is terse, to the point, with no wasted words or excess verbiage. This hint is for e-mails sent on a professional basis; this exclude e-mails to friends and family, where you can of course waste as much of their time as you wish.

Case write-ups: because they are short and there is usually a lot of information to get through, case studies again need a fairly terse style. Concentrate on the message; the audience is likely to be limited to a few faculty and colleagues, and you will usually have a good idea of their requirements. The focus here should be on getting the message across clearly.

Project reports: longer and more complex, project reports allow more freedom to develop style; but again, remember to concentrate on the audience and the message. As we noted above, the style usually has to be sufficiently clear to explain complicated concepts to an audience that may be less familiar with them than you are yourself. Don't talk down to your audience, but beware of being too technical as well. Define and explain technical terms and be sure any tables or illustrative material are clearly explained as well.

Minutes and notes: style here should be as concise as possible. For informal notes, full sentences may not even be necessary; make your points one by one without flourish.

Personal notes: up to the individual, but in the interests of saving time, these should again be brief. They do have to be clear, though; remember, you will have to read them yourself later and be able to understand what they mean.

Communication Content :

It is impossible to generalize about content even to the extent we have about structure and style, as content must obviously be specific to the aim, audience, message and response desired. The following, though, can be used as general guidelines, especially for longer documents like case write-ups and reports.

1. Pay attention to the level of background material you include. 'Enough to be clear to the reader, but not so much as to bore them' is the best rule of thumb. Once you have written out the background section, read it through again. Does every detail you have included actually matter to the issue at hand? Does the fact that the marketing director is 54 years old have any relevance to the firm's present marketing problems? If you feel it does, keep it in; if it does not, delete the passage in question. Use background sections to build up a clear picture for the reader, who you must always assume knows less than you do (or at the very least, needs reminding).

2 Always back up your ideas with evidence, reference, facts. If the evidence seems doubtful in any way, say so plainly and indicate why you have chosen to use it. If you must speculate, indicate clearly where you are doing so, and why.

3 If you need to make assumptions due to missing information, do so clearly and at the outset.

4 If you have done a lot of research, resist the temptation to show off. Illuminate your writing with such results of the research as are relevant, and do not take the reader on a Cook's tour of your research programme. (Some academic journals could profit by this policy as well.)

5 Always check facts and names. If references are required, give them in full and be sure they are accurate.

6 Always assume that your report or work may be challenged by the reader, who will want to know why you have (or have not) included certain ideas or reached certain conclusions. *Be prepared to defend and discuss every word you have written.*

10. Working in the Classroom

In most MBA programmes (apart, obviously, from distance learning programmes) the classroom is the crucible. Information is exchanged, analysed, synthesized and discussed. Questions are asked and opinions are challenged. A classroom which does all these things is one which is well managed by the teaching faculty, but it is also one where every student plays his or her part in the information exchange process. When this happens, when thirty to sixty people concentrate, focus, bend their knowledge and mental energies towards a problem, discuss it, argue over it, and finally develop an answer, the atmosphere can be stimulating and electrifying.

Oddly, though, the concept of the classroom as a focal point of learning has often been criticized. It is seen as being 'not practice-oriented', too remote from the 'real' world of business. Critics who voice these opinions are missing the point. It is the very separateness of the classroom which makes it so important. Away from the concerns and inhibitions of the workplace, students can be free to innovate and create, to work out solutions, to come up with new concepts; and yes, to fail from time to time. Getting it wrong in the classroom hurts no one and costs no one money, and it is all part of the learning process.

The interchange of knowledge between students, and particularly between students and faculty, is the central channel through which learning takes place. Nearly all faculty prefer it this way. There is nothing more dispiriting than trying to teach people who simply sit and look silently back with blank faces, apparently unable to respond to what one is saying.

The classroom *is* an artificial environment, and we can say that without any apology. To understand its dynamics, consider another artificial environment, the theatre. In effect, the classroom is a stage; the desks, lecterns, blackboards/whiteboards and computers and monitors are the props. The faculty and students are the players, improvising their own production as they go through each session. Teaching faculty additionally serve as directors, prompting when the production starts to slow down, providing the framework and the theme to which everyone works.

In the classroom the faculty have four important roles in terms of their relationships with students:

- intelligent agents, experts in the processing and use of knowledge;
- guides, whose function is to help students learn;
- possessors of specialist expertise and knowledge, the product of their own research and interests;
- independent minds, unbiased and judging what they see and hear impartially.

On the classroom 'stage', faculty will be exercising all four of these roles, usually simultaneously. Their job is not so much to teach as to *facilitate learning*. They do this by structuring and guiding classroom sessions, drawing on their own resources as intelligent

agents and from their specialist expertise. When they ask questions or give opinions, it is with the goal of encouraging learning.

Important to the concept of active learning in the classroom is the realization that there is not just one intelligent agent in the room, but twenty or thirty. Students will also have some specialist knowledge or experience, even if in some cases this is limited in scope. They thus possess two of the four qualities described to faculty.

Of the other two, independence of mind is something that can and should be cultivated. It is directly related to the opening up and broadening of personal horizons. By being receptive to new ideas, you are at the same time acquiring an independence of mind, as you are no longer relying on your preconceptions. In the classroom, independence of mind is vital because it will lead you to analyse, question and challenge, not just passively accept. And later in the business world, this same trait will be invaluable in analysing situations and making decisions.

The role of guide is primarily the province of teaching faculty; primarily, but not entirely. Faculty devise the course and set the framework for learning, but within that framework each student will have plenty of room for personal learning. Most obviously, students can take away what they hear and learn and explore further through independent research. But in the classroom, by analysing what is being said (or shown on screen), taking views, making points in discussion and asking questions, students are also guiding their own learning.

Presentations are another important aspects of classroom. Because the active classroom depends on interaction between the players, students and faculty, there are two aspects to this discussion: how to give presentations, and how to listen to them.

Presentations are normally given to other students and faculty. They can be simple, as in the presentation of a case write-up, or complex, as some project presentations may be. In most cases, the student will be asked to stay within a certain time limit – for example, presentations should not be more than five minutes long – and may also be advised to use a particular format for the presentation.

It is strongly advised that all presentations, even quite similar ones, should be written out before being delivered in class. Very few students are confident enough or good enough at rhetoric to be able to deliver an important presentation solely from memory. Some people prefer to speak from fairly simple, point form notes, while others prefer to write their presentations out in full; if you have not done many presentations before and do not know which will be best, experiment and determine which works best for you. Which is most comfortable to deliver, and seems to get your message across best?

If there is a time limit on the presentation, run through it before delivery and time yourself. If the presentation looks like running over length, prune it back (and conversely, if it is too short, consider adding to it; it may be possible to include that important bit of background information which you had earlier discarded). Remember to read or deliver

the presentation at the same speed as you will be presenting it live. If you have difficulty with this, try reading the presentation into a tape recorder, then playing it back and timing the tape. This can sometimes be useful for picking out rough spots in the presentation as well.

If you are using illustrated material, rehearse this before the presentation as well. Ensure all slides, exhibits and so on are correct, clear and make sense. Check before going to give the presentation that all these are correct and in the right order. Even the best presenters sometimes get their slides mixed up, and it is not usually a major problem if it happens once. If mixups occur repeatedly, though, this can be distracting for the audience. For oral presentations, consider the following points:

- *aims*: what is the purpose of the presentation? What are its primary ideas, and why should your audience be interested in them?
- *audience*: all presentations have an audience, and how effective they are can only really be measured by their impact on that audience. Who are they, and why are they listening to your presentation? What are they likely to want to take away from it? What level of background knowledge are they likely to have? (In the classroom, answering these questions will be fairly easy; but treat the questions seriously anyway. They will be important in structuring other presentations later.)
- *message*: what message are you trying to get across? How much background information will you need to provide to fill in necessary gaps in what the audience knows? How can your ideas be best expressed? What supporting material (handouts, audio-visual material) would reinforce your case?
- *response*: what response do you want from the audience? Are you asking them questions, or looking to stimulate discussion? If so, pitch your presentation so that they are required to make some response.

As with written presentations too, use a style that is appropriate to the setting. When writing the presentation out beforehand, structure it so that your ideas come in logical order and so that your sentences are easy to follow. Be wary of loading too much information onto the audience too fast. Most people can comprehend information in written form faster than they can orally, so if ideas are really complex, illustrate them with slides, flowcharts, spreadsheets or whatever tools are to hand. Paper handouts to take away and digest later can also be valuable.

Again, though, keep this all in proportion. A complex set of spreadsheets and a five page handout giving background information is appropriate for a serious research project; it isn't for a two-minute presentation of a case write-up. Bigger is not always better.

Above all, be familiar with the material you are presenting. The key to good presenting lies not just in having a stylish presentation, but also in an easy familiarity with the subject which allows the presenter to vary the text, if necessary, should the presentation demand it. Ideally, you should know much more than you are going to say. Resist the temptation to pack everything into the presentation itself; slip the extra material in during the discussion afterwards.

When standing in front of the class and delivering the presentation, be as natural as you can, but remember to speak clearly and slowly. Vary the pitch of your voice; be emphatic on those points that matter. Especially if reading a presentation, do not read it in a dull flat monotone; speak directly to your audience. Make eye contact with members of the audience occasionally (especially those who do not appear to be paying attention).

If using audio-visual material, remember to refer to this; if you need to turn to point to something on the screen, stand with your back to the audience for as little time as possible. If something goes wrong with the audio-visual presentation, sort it out quickly without getting flustered; if the fault is serious, it is often best to bring the presentation to a halt, and if the fault cannot be quickly fixed, you will need to work from the text as best you can. (Most audiences are quite forgiving in such circumstances; if a similar disaster has not happened to them in the past, it probably will soon.)

Above all, watch the audience. If they look uninterested, change what you are doing; change your stance or the tone of your voice, or turn to the next slide in the presentation. If this doesn't work, consider summarizing quickly what you are saying and get on to the next section of the presentation. (If you cannot rouse them at all, then something has gone wrong; devote some time after the presentation to going through it to find out what. This is valuable learning, at least if it helps you not to make the same mistake twice.)

As with writing, there is really no way to get better at making presentations except by practice. When the opportunity to make presentations comes up, take it if you can. Use the experience to develop your own skills. Plan carefully, and critique your own efforts afterwards. If possible, seek feedback from colleagues and faculty. The standard response from fellow students may well be 'Yeah, yeah, that was fine', regardless of whether the computer froze and the blackboard fell off the wall, but prod them to make sure they are telling the truth. Faculty are usually more impartial.

Listening to presentations :

Getting involved in the presentation means listening carefully, asking intelligent questions, criticizing where necessary and also giving praise and/or expressing agreement when appropriate. In the discussion or question-and-answer session, each student has the opportunity to analyse and synthesize the information that has been presented, and thus help create further knowledge for the whole group, including themselves.

When engaged in these activities, however, it is important to remember the dignity of those who are speaking. Listen politely and attentively, and give encouragement if the speaker looks like getting stuck. Ask simple, clear questions; be polite, even when criticizing, and be sure to give praise where praise is due. Never be personal in your comments, at least not in class (if you have personal remarks you absolutely must make, save them for a private situation, later). Don't take over the discussion; let others have their turn. Extend to your colleagues the same courtesy you would like extended to you.

Discussions :

The same comments apply to general discussions, question-and-answer sessions and so on. I give no rules for these, because there are none; every discussion is unique, its nature wholly dependent on the mix of the subject(s) being discussed and the participants, their views, ideas and knowledge.

The two general principles to be adhered to in such discussions are inclusiveness and respect. Just as in team working, try to ensure that the whole group is involved and has something to contribute. This is one of the roles of teaching faculty, of course, but students can assist in this, indirectly by not 'hogging the ball' or attempting to dominate the room, and directly by yielding the floor to colleagues or even asking questions themselves of fellow students who do not appear to be taking part in the discussion. Just as with team working, a good general discussion is greater than the sum of its parts in terms of learning and knowledge. Knowledge and ideas are not just passed back and forth, they are actually generated through the processes of analysis and synthesis. Good discussion is one of the best incubators for innovation and creativity. Being able to manage and take part effectively in such a discussion is yet another vitally important communications skill.

The element of respect is also important. Often, people are unnecessarily abrasive or aggressive in classroom situations, seeing this as a way to make their mark on the group and impress faculty. In fact, the quieter person who perhaps makes only half a dozen comments may be more impressive, especially if those comments are particularly perceptive or acute. Adopt the old military principle of 'economy of force': do as much as is needed, but no more. Express your ideas clearly and concisely, but do not overplay your hand. There is no need to ask every question or say out loud every comment that comes to mind.

In general, it is better to work with people rather than against them. Showing respect for others even when you disagree with them usually results in reciprocity. Healthy friendly disagreement can even be a source of creative tension.

11. Research

There are other aspects for MBA programme along with the classroom study. One such topic is research. The importance of research has been touched on already, for instance when discussing case studies when it may be desirable or even necessary to do further background work. Research of this kind is often fairly basic and limited to a relatively small number of sources. Other parts of the programme, such as projects, require more complex research. Research is an important part of knowledge management, one which focuses on acquiring and organizing knowledge. As well as knowledge *acquisition* (obtaining knowledge from another source), knowledge *organization,* the storage and management of the acquired knowledge, and knowledge *creation,* as most research necessarily has some creative element.

One way to look at business schools, is to see them as highly concentrated collections of resources. These resources can be exploited in order to acquire or create knowledge for the individual student. In terms of benefit maximization, knowledge needs to be seen as the other side of communication, the 'input' to communication's 'output'. One cannot speak or write effectively without the benefit of knowledge; at the same time, knowledge which cannot be communicated is ineffective, at least in terms of the needs of modern management. Learning to manage knowledge resources, then, is a necessary complement to learning to manage communication.

Data, information and knowledge, however, can all be the subjects of research. Data are on the simplest level of the hierarchy. Examples of data which MBA students might run across include:

• economic data for a particular country or market, such as gross domestic product, balance of trade and so on
• financial data, concerning a company, such as the amount of its profit (or loss) in the last financial year
• market data, such as the number of consumers in a market segment, per capita spending on a certain class of product and so on
• production data, such as the number of units a production line is capable of making in a given period of time
• employment data, such as total wage bill, number of employees and so on

These are 'simple' facts or figures which, taken by themselves, mean very little and are capable of many different uses or interpretations. Data could be the naturally occurring elements, chemicals, compounds and so on which are found in bread.

Information is on the next most complex level. Examples of data which business school students may find include:

• economic information, whether a particular country or market is booming, is depressed and so on

• financial information, such as a company's performance over time or against expectations
• marketing information, such as the frequency with which consumers buy a particular product, their needs for and expectations of a product, and so on
• production information, such as the efficiency of a production system, its ability to meet quality standards and so on
• employment information, such as the level of training current among employees or factors which might give rise to health and safety problems

Information is usually created by synthesizing different sets of data; for example, financial information is generated by comparing different sets of financial data such as time series, real against planned and so on.

The purpose of doing research is to acquire and/or create knowledge. The process itself will probably require looking at all three levels of the hierarchy described above, as each has its own role to play. The process of doing research can be broken down into five components, as follows:

• aims, what is the final intended outcome of the research
• plans, how the research will be carried out and on what timetable
• carrying out the research plan, the actual process of researching
• analysis, the considering of data and information gathered in order to create knowledge
• presentation, the final statement of the research in accordance with the aims

Aims :

The first step, of course, is to decide what it is you need to know. Try framing this as a question. What is the market potential for widgets in Thailand? What capital investment is likely to be needed by company A's expansion programme in the coming year? Then, when doing this research, try to stick closely to these aims. Use the aims as a standard against which to measure the utility of a potential research source. Can it give you information about the question you have asked? If so, check it out; if not, save your valuable time for other more promising sources.

Nearly all research which MBAs undertake will require some sort of output, either directly in the form of a written paper or report, or indirectly as background knowledge, etc. for another project or a discussion session. Either way, consider the nature of the presentation when establishing your aims. This in turn will help define the scope of the research programme, how many sources must be consulted and so on.

Plans :

Having asked the question, the next step is to determine how it will be answered. First, break the question down into its component parts. When answering the question 'what is the market potential for widgets in Thailand', it will usually be necessary to know about

widgets themselves, their uses and consumption, and the sectors of the Thai economy/market that might use or consume them. This process will thus give several different sub-categories of knowledge which need to be acquired. The next step is usually to determine what information and knowledge resources exist and where they are located. Can they be accessed easily and quickly and at a reasonable cost? How much information is each source likely to have and how reliable is it? In order to answer the last you will have to either fall back on your own experience or ask someone who is familiar with such sources; faculty and fellow students might both be able to contribute to the answer.

Work out a research strategy, prioritizing the most valuable and most accessible sources. It is usually best when dealing with complex research programmes to set a timetable as well, although this should be flexible. If the research is being carried out by a team, assign different classes of sources to different people; thus in the example above, one person would look up the technical information on widgets, while another would gather background information on Thailand, and so on. .

For most research projects, including any where a team is involved, the research plan and timetable should be written down and circulated to all members. Any subsequent amendments need to be agreed and incorporated into the written document

Most desk research, however, requires the researcher to sit patiently flipping through pages of material on paper or on screen, making notes. The process is laborious, time-consuming, and often deadly dull. Here are some tips which, if you are not familiar with desk research, might be helpful.

• Don't try to read everything. Develop the ability to 'gut' a document, that is, going through it and quickly pulling out the sections that are relevant to you. Use indexes, word searching facilities and any other tools that will take you to where you want to go. This is not perfect, but it will get you most of the information you need most of the time.
• Always read the introduction first; this alone may tell you whether the document will be relevant at all. If the introduction looks unpromising, too technical or off-topic, consider moving on to another source.
• Make notes of short points, but don't waste time copying or cutting and pasting long passages. Download or photocopy documents which have particular value. Take them away and read them again, highlighting important points.
• Never accept anything you read uncritically. Try to validate data by either ensuring the reliability of the source you are using, or checking against other sources. Solving a problem using the wrong data almost invariably leads to the wrong answer.
• Try to form a judgement as you read as to what is the author's opinion and what can be verified as (relatively) factual. Look at the sources he/she/they are using and consider looking at some of these yourself if there is time. How the author interprets a source and how you interpret it might be quite different.

Analysis is a critical stage in any research, since at this point you are not so much getting data, information or knowledge as looking at what you have acquired and trying to decide

on its meaning, worth or value. This is difficult, because in order to do this you already have to have some background knowledge; otherwise you would not be able to form a judgement at all. If, for example, you have zero knowledge of accounting and financial management, a profit and loss account is just a meaningless jumble of figures. On the other hand, *some* of what lies behind the material you have gathered is likely to always be hidden. For example, even if you were fully expert in all aspects of accounting and financial management, the accounts of a particular company would still require some explanation, unless you were fully familiar with that company and all its circumstances (and maybe not even then).

To make sense of the material that has been researched, then, it is necessary to apply one's own mind and knowledge to the material itself and then ask two questions:

•   How sensible is it?
•   How likely is it to be correct?

To answer the first question, it is necessary to apply logic, common sense, intuition or any mixture of the three you care to use. Consider whether any given statement or piece of information seems sensible in its context. If a market intelligence report suggests there is a likely market for widgets in India, this may well seem sensible, if the other material you have gathered confirms this. If you have other statements or material casting doubt on the statement of the widget market, though, then you are justified in questioning the first author's wisdom.

Determining the likelihood of a statement's being correct can be dealt with through analysis and verification. Verification, or checking whether statements are true, is usually best done by checking other authorities on the same subject and seeing whether they bear one another out. Where information cannot be verified, its likelihood of truth can be determined through analysis or *critical reasoning.*

Once the student knows how to design and manage a research programme, using the classes of resource mentioned at the start of this chapter becomes comparatively simple. Each category has its strengths, and also its weaknesses.

Data and information repositories are the first tool of the desk researcher, and it is from these that nearly all data and information will be gleaned. CD-ROMs and the Internet have made a great impact in this area, but the good old-fashioned book continues to have its uses. Books continue to be the places to go for what one call 'considered knowledge'; detailed expositions, long views, considered opinions. The academic system is structured so that most faculty ultimately aim to produce their major work in book form. Books are thus very valuable if you need background information, but they are also detailed expositions of the knowledge of experts on particular topics. Journals proliferate in management and business, and no matter what subject you are trying to research, there is probably at least one journal that covers it. The problem with journals is finding the material. Fortunately, CD-ROM and online indexes are now available which allow topic and name searches, and this simplifies things greatly. Then, many journals have very

small circulations, and the journal you want may not be available in your library, or in any library nearby. Familiarity will also tell you which journals are useful for which purposes; some are very technical, others are very focused on hands-on management, still others appear to have no discernable purpose. These are a valuable specialist resource, but can be time-consuming to use.

Electronic and on-line information are other major sources of research. But the two major problems with this type of resource are volume and quality control. Search engines are getting better, but one can still spend a long time trying to find the one useful website in the list of ten thousand or so that the search throws up. If you have not already done so, spend some time using search engines and getting familiar with them, learning the techniques that will allow you to refine your searches in the shortest possible time.

As any one can post anything on the World Wide Web, there is absolutely no guarantee of the information's quality or truth. The only defence is to apply rigorously methods of analysis and verification. Some information is published electronically by reliable sources; a lot isn't. There is a lot of potentially valuable material out there, but it is up to you to determine what is gold and what is iron pyrites (fool's gold).

Data and information come primarily from repositories, but knowledge is likely to come in large part from teaching faculty. Faculty also are useful as guides to information and data sources. If you are stuck for ideas about what to read next, try approaching a member of faculty whose interests accord with the topic being researched. The chances are they will be able to direct you to a source, or at least provide some leads.

Colleagues on the programme are likely to have less specialist knowledge than faculty, but they will have valuable views and ideas to input nonetheless. Use them to check the results of your analysis and ideas. Do your own interpretations of the facts stand up? Are your conclusions logical? Is there anything you have missed? Also, most of your colleagues will also be involved in research of their own, in different fields. If you are running out of sources, ask around if anyone knows where to find information on your subject. If your network is good enough, the chances are someone will have run across a similar source and be able to direct you to it.

Gathering information requires few special skills or abilities; anyone with the right training can do it. Gathering *knowledge* is rather different; it is a proactive process which requires you to actively go out and seek knowledge. It follows from this that in the research process, you yourself are a resource. Your cognitive abilities and previous knowledge are the critical tools in the research process. If one or both is not functioning as it should, then the task will become more difficult.

Organize and store knowledge already acquired so it is ready for use in future research projects, to help analyse and verify new material. Practise the techniques of critical reasoning; make yourself familiar with the basics of logic, if you are not already so; and above all, apply common sense. With these abilities, it is possible to manage most research programmes.

External resources like libraries, data centres, companies, experts and other people located outside the business school, and who cannot be reached directly from within the school (as, say, websites can). Using external resources is pretty much like using the categories above. The real trick is in finding them and getting access to them.

One early step in the MBA programme is to find out what other institutions will allow you library access, and make sure you are registered with these. If you know a piece of information you want is in a certain library but do not have access, try using whatever influence you have through your business school to get in. Most government and corporate libraries will, if approached often enough, grant temporary passes.

Using external resources can be time-consuming and frustrating, but it is good practice. When you ultimately leave the business school and return to the world of business, many of the resources the business school offers will be left behind; you will need to discover, or rediscover, your own sources, and most of these will be external to your own.

12. Projects

Project work is an essential part of the MBA programme. It includes following steps :
- identifying a project
- establishing the aims of a project
- developing relationships with the client
- setting up a research programme
- carrying out field research
- analysis of data gathered
- written and oral presentation
- following up the project with the client

The first stage is, of course, to identify a suitable project. How this happens will vary between business schools. Some have lists of projects which have been supplied to the school by corporate contacts, and the school then plays a role in matching students with projects. Others encourage students to go out, make contacts and identify their own projects; still others use a combination of methods, encouraging entrepreneurship but providing lists of previously identified projects to those who need them.

Regardless of the method, the initial identification of a project will usually be in fairly vague terms. That is, there will be a topic of mutual interest, but without clearly defined aims. Most projects come about as a result of a company's 'need to know more' about a given subject. These topics can be very diverse, ranging from technology to markets, employees to customers, strategy to operations.

By the time it becomes necessary to identify a project, most students should be well along the MBA programme, and a clearer picture will be emerging of their interests and knowledge needs. Where possible, try to identify a project which fits in with your own goals. Projects offer the opportunity for practical experience and contacts in fields or sectors in which you may already have an interest. If you wish to pursue a career in corporate finance, look for a project which has finance-based issues at its heart.

Recruiting companies are often keenly interested in project experience, and will probably ask questions about it. If, as in the example above, you are interested in a career in corporate finance but do a project on marketing fast-moving consumer goods, you will need to be able to show the experience of the latter was relevant to your expectations of the former. What did you learn from the project that would help you in corporate finance?

If you think that on the conclusions of the project you can demonstrate such value, well and good; go ahead and do it. If you cannot, then think again. There are other ways of adding extra value, of course. Pick a project with care, one that is feasible in the time allowed and one which adds value to the MBA experience and your career.

Unlike most management situations, where a project is identified and a team is assembled to deal with it, in most MBA projects the team is assembled first and then picks a project. This can lead to difficulties in project identification if team members have very diverse

goals. When putting together a project team, then, it is best to try to pick members who are broadly focused on the same kinds of goals.

Broadly: but not entirely. There is value too in having a diversity of backgrounds, especially as some projects will require a cross-functional approach. The need, then, is to ensure sufficient diversity to provide a range of skills and background knowledge, but also a similarity of interests so that team members are not in conflict and can all derive benefit from the the project.

Establishing aims :

Once the project team are together and a suitable project has been identified, the team should begin working to narrow down the topic and establish the exact aim of the project. As noted in Chapter 8, this can be done by stating the end goal of the project as the answer to a question. For example, what will be the impact of the introduction of a new technology?

However, unlike the kinds of research projects described in Chapter 8, where the researchers are free to decide on their own aims, in in-company projects the aims must ultimately be decided by the client. Essentially, the student teams are acting as consultants to the company, their client. What the client wants is what matters; whether the project is ultimately defined as a success will depend on whether the client company is satisfied.

Developing relationships with the client :

Accordingly, one of the first steps in a successful project is to develop relationships with the client. Spend some time with your contact managers; build up a general picture of the situation. Do some background reading on the company in general. Try putting yourself in the position of the client and understanding the pressures they may be facing and the targets they are trying to meet. Then try to direct the project so that it fits in with this bigger picture.

Initially, there may be a need for some negotiation. What the client initially asks for may be more than the team can give, depending on their time and other commitments. An important concept at this point is *managing expectations.* Be careful not to promise anything which the team cannot do, or may not be able to do in the time allowed. Make sure the client is clear as to what his or her company will get at the end of the project. At the same time, be positive about the value the team can deliver.

Many in-company projects offer some sort of fee to the student team. If this is the case, it is well to have a contract or letter of agreement, as in any other form of consultancy. Check with your business school on this point; student teams should always have a member of faculty as a supervisor, who should be able to answer questions on this issue.

As well as the aims of the project, the team and client should also agree on a schedule for the work. The most important date is the delivery of the final report, but intermediate stages should be agreed as well. Schedule any necessary meetings well in advance, as the client managers are likely to be busy and this project will be just one of their many priorities.

Above all, be fair and honest in dealings with the client. If the schedule looks like slipping, let them know, giving reasons (but not excuses); at the same time, give them a realistic revised schedule. If some part of the project cannot be completed in the time allowed, because of lack of resources or other problems that have arisen, again, let the client know. Try to offer them some additional benefit in exchange if possible, but above all, be straightforward with them. Some consultants are of course anything but straightforward with clients, but these consultants don't tend to get repeat business.

The in-company report is a service, which your team is providing to the client and which in many cases they are paying for. It is up to them to define needs; it is up to your team to manage expectations and ensure delivery. These goals can best be achieved by maintaining good relations with the client, to make sure that information about the project is always available to them. You are in effect selling your skills and talents; possibly not for the first time, and most definitely not for the last time in your career in management. Again, this experience should be made to count.

Setting up the research programme :

The first stage, once the programme's aims have been agreed, is to plan how the research will be carried out and to set a timetable. The first step is to go back to the aims, and look at the kinds of knowledge which are going to be required. Break the acquisition of these down into separate tasks. If desk research is going to be required on several subjects, treat the research on each subject as a separate task. If field work is needed, break this down as well into separate tasks such as designing the questionnaire or interview questions, carrying out the work, tabulating the results and so on.

Among other tasks, assign someone the responsibility of taking notes of meetings and circulating these to other members of the team, on paper or by e-mail. Someone should also have prime responsibility for client contact, and be the first phone number or e-mail address which the client can contact if need be. (If the contact person is away for any length of time, advise the client and give a substitute address for the period of absence.)

Once a list of necessary tasks has been compiled, prioritize and determine the order in which they should be carried out. If working in a team, of course several tasks can be carried out simultaneously, with one or more team members looking after each. This is by far the best approach; doing tasks in strict order one after another is more time-consuming and generally less satisfying.

Then begin sharing the tasks out among group members. Try to apportion these according to the group's own talents, background knowledge and experience, and interests. Ensure

an even division of labour if possible. Project work is *learning by doing,* and members of the team who do not fully take part will have fewer chances for. All this – what the tasks are, the order in which they are to be carried out and by whom – should be written down and every member of the team should have a copy. If clients show an interest in the research plan, give them a copy too.

By now the team should know what they need to do, when and in what order, and who will be doing the work. The ultimate aim of the plan is to answer the question posed in the project aims. The next stage is to do the research.

Carrying out field research :

In addition to desk research, though, in-company projects may require *field research,* or research which aims to generate quite new data. Field research is generally more difficult and more problematic than desk research, and doing it is a skill in its own right.

There are three general sources of information on field research for business school students:

• courses: some schools have elective courses on research methods, and a few even include it as part of the core curriculum
• faculty: supervising faculty will be experienced at field research and can give advice on setting up a research programme
• textbooks: most business school libraries will contain books on research methods, though some of these may be too complex for what your team requires

All three should be considered, although the first option may not be practical or possible and the third, as mentioned, may be too technical. Faculty, though, should always be consulted on the best ways of setting up a research programme.

Another general rule to follow when doing field research is to ensure a professional approach. Make sure questionnaires are neatly presented and easy to read. Adopt a professional demeanour when doing interviews; you may be 'only' an MBA student, but you are also a consultant doing an important job. Phone ahead to make arrangements for meetings and interviews. Be punctual. In other words, treat your subjects as you yourself would like to be treated were you in their shoes. The two kinds of field research: *questionnaires* and *interviews.*

Questionnaires :

Questionnaires are ideally used when a fairly large group of people are to be surveyed, but where the amount of data required from each is fairly small. They can be administered in two ways. The first method is *assisted,* where the survey administrators and the people being surveyed complete the questionnaire together; the annoying people who stop you in the street and ask you about your favourite films or where you take your holidays are doing assisted questionnaires. The other method is *unassisted,* in which the

questionnaire is sent to the people being surveyed by post or e-mail, and the latter are asked to complete the form and send it back. The annoying forms that your insurance company or your car dealership sometimes send you are unassisted questionnaires.

When designing a questionnaire, keep the following points in mind:

• Most of the people you send the questionnaire to will probably not answer (unless directly ordered to do so by a senior manager, and probably not even then), so make sure your sample size – the number of people to whom the questionnaire is sent – is big enough to allow a reasonable amount of data to come back.
• The questionnaire should be as short as possible; one side of a sheet of paper if possible, and two at most. Telephone questionnaires should take no more than five minutes to go through. Shorter questionnaires are more likely to be answered than are long ones.
• Make responding to the questionnaire as easy as possible. If sending it by post, include return postage. If administering an assisted questionnaire by telephone, never cold-call a manager who is to be surveyed; write or e-mail beforehand and arrange a time when they can be at the phone. Let them know in advance how long it will all take.
• Remember that the more questions you ask, the more data you will have to compile afterwards. Ask yourself again whether the data you are seeking are all strictly necessary. Pare the questionnaire down as much as you can.

These are general rules which need to be observed when formulating *any* questionnaire. There are many other rules concerning sampling, control groups, statistical significance and so on which we will not go into here; consult an expert (usually a member of faculty) about how to observe and deal with these. These are the sorts of rules you need to follow to ensure the results of the questionnaire are valid and properly analysed. The rules I have given above are ones you need to follow to get the questionnaire answered in the first place; which, in most daily management situations, is a lot more important.

Interviews :

Interviews are longer and more complex, and are best used when the number of people to be surveyed is quite small but where relatively large amounts of data are required. Interview techniques follow two types. *Structured interviews* are ones where the interviewer follows a set lists of questions and records the answers given. Basically, these are a form of extended questionnaire. *Unstructured interviews* are ones where the interviewer sets a topic but lets the interviewee describe it in his or her own words.

Both types have their uses. Structured interviews are preferred where the interviewee is required to give views on a fairly broad range of topics. Should the research programme require interviews with twenty managers about the operation of European financial markets in general, a structured interview will almost certainly be required; in an unstructured situation, the twenty will almost certainly talk on vastly different subjects and it will be difficult to obtain comparable data. Structured interviews generate more

uniform results and, if the questions are properly designed, generate less unusable data. However, they can lack flexibility.

Unstructured interviews work best when the sample are describing a fairly specific idea, concept or event. They work well, for example, in the research method known as *critical incident technique,* where a number of people who have been involved in an event (such as the delivery of service to a client) are asked to describe the event from their own perspective. They generate masses of data in the form of both facts and opinions, and require some sifting to get at the data that are wanted. They are, however, easier to administer than structured interviews; in most cases, a few questions will suffice to get the interviewee going, and only a few more are needed to keep them on topic. Let's face it: most managers love to talk about themselves and their work. Their colleagues, spouses, children and pets have all heard their stories a hundred times and refuse to listen any longer. Any interviewer who ventures within range is likely to be made warmly welcome.

Like questionnaires, interviews need a finite length. An hour is usually enough for most people; half an hour is better still. Work out how long you expect the interview to be, and inform the interviewee of this when first making the appointment to see them; this is helpful as it allows them plan their own schedules.

Analysis of data gathered :

When all the required data, information and knowledge have been gathered, then comes the most critical process: analysing and producing a result. Don't answer questions that have not been asked (unless you are convinced that they *should* have been asked and are of vital importance).

As with in-school research, go over the material you have gathered and analyse it closely. Consider going back and doing supplementary research if gaps appear in your knowledge. If you must make assumptions at this stage, present these clearly as such, with your reasoning plain behind them. Make sure all the data and information which support your conclusion can be validated. Examine your own reasoning, using the techniques of critical reasoning, for possible flaws. Test every conclusions you reach; if you don't spot the weaknesses, the client will.

Presentation :

Finally comes the stage of presenting the results of the work to the client. Most clients will ask for both a written report, which can be circulated, and an oral presentation to the relevant managers. If they ask for a written report only, volunteer to give a presentation as well; it is good practice.

Written reports need to be clear and well-presented. Oral presentations likewise need to be polished; do at least one 'dress rehearsal' of the full presentation before giving it to the client, and work out the kinks. If a team is presenting, work out clearly who will do what

during the presentation; try to make sure everyone has a chance to speak and be heard, but make sure the transition between speakers is smooth and does not distract the audience.

Following up ：

After the presentation has been given and/or the written report circulated, give the client company time to digest the results. Then contact the client again, by telephone, letter or in person as seems most appropriate. You do not have to do this; it will probably not be expected, and you will almost certainly not get marks or grades for doing so. But it is good professional practice, and it will be appreciated.

Follow-ups need not be formal, but they should do the following:

• ask if the client has had a chance to look at the full report, and if so, if the company has any comments.
• ask is there any area of the report which the client found unsatisfactory.
• ask what parts of the report the client found most valuable, and what if any value it has added for the company.
• ask if the client has given any thought to whether any aspects of the report will be implemented.

Following up can be valuable in helping to determine whether the client was satisfied with the report, and also in determining what if anything went wrong; it can thus be a very useful aspect of learning. Also, it will help to make the client feel good. A follow-up call or visit will help the client to think that you care about them and are committed to their company's well-being, even though perhaps, strictly speaking, you no longer are. It might even help stimulate them to act on your report, by reminding them of its good points.

Knowledge management and projects :

In-company projects require the full range of knowledge management:

• knowledge acquisition is required to work out the background to the problem and acquire supporting information and data, including through field research;
• knowledge organization is essential to manage this flow of data and information and make sure it is used properly when analysing the problem and formulating solutions;
• knowledge use is required when analysing the problem, deciding on the solution and presenting this to the client. More, the team is also involved here in *creating* new knowledge which is then passed on to the client.

As such, in-company projects require a synthesis of the various individual knowledge management skills the student has been acquiring in earlier stages of the MBA programme, particularly those relating to research, analysis and communication.

In the medieval and early modern periods, a craftsman could only graduate from journeyman status to that of master by creating a special work, one which both summed up and showed off the full range of the craftsman's skills. The MBA project is a little like that, in that (ideally, at least) it requires the team to use to the full the skills they have learned on the programme. Seeing projects as a masterclass in knowledge management is probably quite a good way of approaching them.

Benefit maximization :

Projects should not be treated in the same way as classroom work. You will be working with professionals, and you will be expected to be professional. And professionalism is not just a way of behaving around other people; it is a state of mind.

By the point in an MBA programme where you begin to do a project, you should already be well advanced in the learning experience. You will have worked on your skills in terms of both research and communication, and you will have experience of managing team work and organizing for effective knowledge management. The in-company project puts these skills to the test in a real-life situation, with real consequences for failure but also real rewards for success.

One of those rewards for a successful project is the chance to add value for the client. In other words, the success of the project could make a real difference to the company that sponsors it, in terms of improving communication, making production more efficient, developing better systems for managing people, selling more product and so on. Even if the report does not have this *direct* effect in and of itself, it can still make a valuable contribution to such improvements.

A good report answers the questions a client has asked, and therefore creates satisfaction. A very good report does something more. Marketers often speak of two terms, *customer satisfaction* and *customer delight.* The former is when customers' needs and expectations have been met; they have got exactly what they wanted. The latter occurs when needs and expectations have been *exceeded* and customers get even more value than they had asked for.

Though the aim of the project is to create customer satisfaction, be on the lookout for opportunities to create customer delight. If you can find some aspect of the problem the client had not considered, develop this more fully. If you have a suggestion for changes or innovations that would exceed the targets the client has set, consider bringing it into the report. Do this in consultation with the client beforehand, though; at all costs, resist the temptation to 'surprise' them in the final report or presentation. Few managers like bombshells, even friendly ones.

Finally, in-company projects are terrific opportunities for expanding your network of contacts, especially if you have managed to get a project close to your own are as of interest. It is not unknown for satisfied clients to offer jobs to members of successful

project teams. Even if they do not, the people you meet and make contact with in the course of the project can become valuable members of your personal network.

13. Networking

Networking is one of the most important benefits which the MBA programme provides. Graduates should ideally leave the programme with both the beginnings of a network (or alternatively, valuable additions to pre-existing networks) and, perhaps more critically, with an enhanced ability to network. The reason for this is simple: the structure of most MBA programmes means that students *must* work together and perforce get to know one another. There is, therefore, an opportunity to use the MBA experience to develop networking abilities.

The advantages of a good network of business contacts are numerous. Just a few of them are stated here:

• exchanging news and information; a good network allows you to gather news and hear information, sometimes before rivals or competitors do.
• knowledge resources; when acquiring new knowledge, your contacts can be an important additional source on whom you can draw formally or informally.
• professional assistance and advice; this kind of professional support can be valuable at almost anytime.
• personal support; often important when undertaking big steps such as changing jobs, relocation or overseas placements.
• support for career advancement; friends and colleagues in your network can for example advise on new job or promotion opportunites.

The ability to network is being seen as a critical attribute in a manager by many companies today, and success in many jobs is often contingent on a manager's ability to make his or her networks perform.

A good network has two aspects: *breadth* and *depth.* A broad network includes a lot of different people, in different professions and walks of life, from different educational and cultural backgrounds, and possessing different kinds and degrees of knowledge. How *deep* a network is refers to the intensity of the relationships between members, and this in turn reflects on how often and to what extent members can call on one another. It is quite possible to be a member of several different networks – indeed, most of us are – and some of these will be broader and deeper than others.

Networks are important for exactly the same reason that teams are: they extend the scope and reach of each individual in the network. A manager who is part of a good functioning network will have access to much more, and probably much better, information and knowledge than one who works in isolation.

There is a further point to consider: organizations themselves are basically networks, with horizontal and vertical lines of communication connecting individuals, teams and departments. Business organizations function by coordinating the activities of their members. It follows that if you understand networking, you are enhancing your skills and

abilities as a manager. (It also follows that if you *don't* understand networking, you may have a problem, as you don't know how your organization actually works!)

In MBA programme, Networking will probably begin on or about the first day of the programme. The incoming student will meet and be introduced to colleagues in various courses and also to the faculty who teach on them. Some of the names won't stick in the memory, but never mind; the foundations have been laid.

Next steps come as the first few sessions of each course go on. Gradually you will get to know your colleagues, especially those with whom you are assigned to work or study in groups. Here are a few suggestions for enhancing the process:

• Concentrate on memorizing names or faces when you are introduced. Pick out some feature of the person that will remind you of who they are when next you meet. Be sure to acknowledge people you have met in class when you see them outside. Neither of you may remember who the other is, but a brief and tactful self-introduction can get over this.
• Be a good listener; get people to talk about themselves and their interests, even if only superficially. Build up a little bank of information about each person.
• Establish an address book early on, and keep people's names and contact details handy. Make little notes about them as aides-memoire, if it will help.
• Collect business cards, and always carry a few with you so you can reciprocate if someone gives you a card. If you have run out or left yours at home, give them a card when next you meet, or put one in their mailbox with a note reminding them of who you are. This is especially important for part-time and Executive MBAs who will have their own professional cards as well as those supplied by the business school.

By the end of the first few weeks, the incoming student will have establish tentative links with a fair number of colleagues through the formal settings of the course. These can be enhanced through informal social contacts. The next step will inevitably come when, at some point, the student needs help or assistance.

Now the network becomes active. The first step is to initiate the contact. Here the term *depth,* referred to above, becomes important. How well do you know the person? Can you simply telephone them at home and ask, or would an e-mail be better? Should you ask the question outright over the phone or e-mail, or suggest a meeting to discuss it face-to-face? The answer depends in part on the complexity of the question asked or the favour needed, but also on the nature of the personal relationship. Close friends are less likely to be offended by a telephone call in the middle of supper than are formal professional acquaintances such as faculty supervisors.

Once the contact is initiated, state the request. The best policy then is usually to let the contact handle it in his or her own way. Remember, this person is doing you a favour, and you may not offering much by way of return. Respect his or her right to help you (or not) as he or she sees fit.

This exchange will be followed by other such. Meanwhile, other colleagues will also turn to you for help. Gradually, the interchange of information and ideas will begin to pick up speed. You will begin to know who you can rely on and feel closest to in professional and even personal terms. You will learn which of your colleagues have most to offer you, and which ones you can be most helpful to. Imperceptibly, a network will emerge.

The primary vehicle for after MBA programme is the alumni association. Every business school worth the money has one of these, and alumni associations have the potential, at least, to be bluechip networks, spanning the globe and including people in all sorts of companies and at every level up to and including chairman.

14. Exchange Programme

Exchange programmes are devices whereby students can spend a period of time, often one term, at another business school. The aim is to allow them to experience education and life in another culture. Most business schools have links with a number of other business schools around the world. Details of how to apply for the exchange programme are available from your own MBA programme office. In most cases you will be invited to apply for an exchange place, stating your preferred exchange school; as places may be limited, you may need to consider second and third preferences as well.

It follows that in choosing an exchange programme, it is important to pick one where the cultural experience will be quite different from where you are currently studying. When choosing from the menu of available schools, look for ones in regions where you have an interest, or where you think you will be able to acquire valuable cultural and language skills. The most popular exchanges are between Europe and America, or between schools in Northern and Southern Europe. Students at Asian business schools often choose to come to Europe or America, while a few adventurous Westerners go on exchange to Japan, Singapore or China.

Study target schools carefully before making your final choice. Look at the quality of the education on offer, and consider schools with courses which would add to your current stock of knowledge and complement courses you have already taken. Many schools will offer courses with a specialist local flavour, and these can be valuable. It is important too to maintain an educational standard which suits your own learning needs. Look at the schools' brochures and programme syllabus; if possible, talk to students who have been to the schools in question. Your own MBA programme office can usually give advice as well.

But the quality of the education received on an exchange programme is usually of secondary importance to the quality of the broader experience. Going on exchange to schools located in cultures with which you are not familiar will maximize the learning experience; but only if you are capable of fitting in. Be aware of your own abilities and limitations in areas such as language, for example. Try to find an exchange school where you think you will be able to fit in and meet people. A lot of this depends on your own personality and tastes, of course.

In practical terms, look for things like quality of accommodation (does the school provide this, or will you need to arrange your own?) and facilities. Look also for accessibility; a foreign business school stuck in the middle of nowhere will offer fewer chances for learning about local culture than one which is close to the centre of a major metropolis. At least part of your time on the exchange programme should be spent in exploring your environment, so make sure travelling around is feasible.

A few other considerations might also apply. Does the school have any noted academics whose opinions you might want to gather and listen to? Is it close to the headquarters of a major company in which you have a special interest? Are there opportunities to do more

project work of a kind which you want to be involved in? All these can be important, and taken together the arguments might indeed provide a compelling case for moving from New York to Philadelphia. But the cross-cultural experience is still the most valuable aspect of exchange programmes, and should be sought whenever possible.

While on the exchange programme, you will usually be expected to take a full load of courses and participate fully in the life of the host business school. Some schools are tougher on this than others; some accept that exchange students will spend a fair amount of time exploring and learning on their own, while others insist that the educational aspects of the experience should take priority.

The final great benefit of exchange programmes is the opportunity they offer for further extending your network. Exchange programmes last only a few months or weeks, so time will be short. But by energetically cultivating the networking abilities you have already been developing in your home school (see Chapter 10), you can develop potentially very valuable contacts in your new milieu. This is particularly important if you are planning to live and work in this culture at some point in the future; keeping in touch with your new contacts in the intervening period means you will have a support network in place when you arrive back on the scene.

15. Getting a job

One of the ultimate aims which nearly all MBA students have in mind when they embark on the programme is career enhancement. This is of course a general term, which can mean many things. Most full-time MBA students are looking for a career change and a chance to put themselves in the running for more senior positions; they are usually looking to be recruited by a new firm. Part-time and executive MBA students, on the other hand, may be looking for advancement within their own firm, or they may be motivated by the idea of changing employers and jobs at some point in the future.

Either way, the end of the programme means that students now have to market themselves and the knowledge they have acquired to prospective or current employers. MBA programme managers are aware of this, and provide a range of tools and resources for the use of graduating students. All, or nearly all, programme offices maintain a career resource centre or career advice centre which provides a range of facilities, from how to write a CV to tips and prospects for students seeking employment. These centres are among the most valuable resources an MBA programme has to offer, most are of very high quality with good links to recruiting companies, and they are free. Students should use them as fully as possible.

The MBA programme provides a wide range of skills and knowledge to its graduates, and recruiters are properly appreciative of these. But ultimately, recruiters are looking at two things: the *person* and the *potential.*

Companies are a little like vampires. They constantly need fresh blood. More importantly, they need people who they think may be capable of leading them into the future. They want fresh intellects, new ideas, new perspectives. Any MBA graduate who comes into a company will be entered into its human resources database as a possible future leader.

Fifty years ago, recruitment was simple. A graduate was matched with a recruiting company and, if the terms were acceptable, joined up. Most then spent their remaining careers with the same firm, retiring at 60 having reached the board or come very near it, with the standard pension and gold watch or carriage clock.

Careers do not work that way these days. There is little or no job security, and the senior manager is as likely to be downsized as the shopfloor worker. This is the age of 'portfolio career', when managers jump from job to job seeking to move up the ladder with each move, and when companies pick and choose in the job market in an effort to secure the best available talent for the job in hand.

In other words, graduates seeking jobs are no longer looking for jobs for life; they are looking for the next step in their career progression. The step after that may be with the same firm, or it may be somewhere else. Likewise, companies are not looking at MBAs as automatic candidates for the main board of directors. They are looking for people who have the *potential* to succeed. There will be many more tests in the future, and those who

did not fit exactly with the company's needs will find at some point in the future that there is no call for their services.

So, recruiting companies are looking for potential. You, as an MBA graduate, will definitely have potential. How do you go about communicating this and attracting the attention, not just of any company, but the one you want to work for?

As with every aspect of the MBA programme, the first principle when searching for a job or seeking promotion within an existing career structure is to focus on personal and professional aims. Where does the graduate want to be in five, ten, fifteen, twenty years? What sort of job does he or she want to be doing? What is the ultimate career aim?

These are questions that should be asked even before the programme begins – ideally even before the decision to seek an MBA is finally taken. However, the answers to these questions should not be regarded as fixed or set. One of the purposes of the MBA should be to broaden horizons, and it is almost inevitable that personal and career goals will change and evolve under the impact of the new learning that the programme brings. Not directly discussed in this book but probably important is a very special kind of knowledge which comes out of the MBA: self-knowledge.

Near the end of the programme, these goals should reviewed. For the full-time MBA or other student seeking a new job, this review process should aim to both rehearse the goals themselves and concentrate the mind on the job search ahead. For part-timers and others planning to stay within an existing career structure, this review is less necessary but nonetheless valuable. Examining one's goals again in the light of new knowledge may well serve to confirm previous views; or it may suggest new directions.

Recruitment is not a one-way street, and when searching for a job students should try to match up with companies whose profiles match their own interests as closely as possible. There are some obvious things to watch out for. What is the company's reputation like? Do they treat their staff and managers well? Are the pay and bonus structures in line with the rest of the industry? What are the promotion prospects? Does the company support further education and training for managers? Is the company likely to remain solvent in the near future?

The answers to some of these questions (though not usually the last) can be gained through direct inquiry of recruiters and other company representatives. For others, you might have to ask around. Use your network to find contacts who work or have worked for the firm. Try to find out things like the rate of managerial turnover and the length of time managers can expect to stay in one job before receiving promotion. In other words, it is not just the job on offer that matters; it is future prospects.

Look too at what the company does, and especially its track record in terms of performance and innovation. When in five or six years' time you consider making a move to another firm, how will the first company's name look on your CV? Will further recruiters consider you as a talented manager on the make, or as a refugee from a bad

situation? This attitude will affect your value in the job market, including the kinds of jobs and the salaries you will be offered.

Finally, and this may be personal prejudice of my own, but don't focus too strongly on companies in 'trendy' industries. At time of writing, MBAs are queuing up to join e-commerce companies, largely on account of the mega-bucks allegedly to be made in this world. If, as is quite possible, 90 per cent of these firms go belly-up in the next few years, there are going to be a lot of unemployed MBAs washing around the system, while meanwhile new crops of graduates with even more up-do-date skills will be creaming off the best jobs. If e-commerce really interests you, then go ahead and good luck. But don't dive into untried or untested businesses without considering the likelihood and consequences of failure.

You are a professional, going into a professional's world. You have an impressive battery of skills and knowledge at your command. As a graduate from an MBA programme, you are capable of meeting many managerial challenges. Do not sell yourself short, in terms of the job you take or the firm you go to work for. Demand the best, and expect to get it. If you settle for a dead-end job, then much of the MBA experience may be wasted.

The main principle behind any sort of job seeking or career planning is to adopt a professional approach. This is particularly the case when seeking to present oneself to a company, either in writing through an application letter or curriculum vitae (CV), or in person at an interview.

CVs :

There are various ways of structuring a CV, but the classic method – personal details, followed by details of education, followed by relevant work experience – is still the best. It has the advantage of familiarity – recruiters know how to read this format and extract the information they need – and brevity. A good CV is nearly always as short as possible; unless you have a long list of professional accomplishments or publications, 3-4 pages should be the absolute maximum.

CVs should be brief and terse, conveying the maximumin formation in the minimum space. They should also look professional, being properly laid out on the page and easy to read, but with a minimum of flourish. Coloured inks and paper should be avoided; give recruiters your life details in, literally, black and white. When constructing the CV itself, give the details in the format suggested by the guidebooks; nearly all say the same thing, and there is no point in repeating it here.

As with all forms of written communication, remember to put yourself in the mind of the reader. Once you have drafted the CV, read through it again, pretending you are a complete stranger reading this document for the first time. What does this say about the person being described? Is it fair and accurate? Does it fully describe that person's potential? In general, where CVs tend to go wrong is in underselling rather than

overselling the candidate. Be brief but fair and confident about your own abilities. Most of all, make sure that the CV shows your capabilities and your *potential* as a manager.

Interviews and testing :

Many of the same principles apply to job interviews and other selection procedures and tests. If you go for many of these, you will find they are something of a mixed bag. Some companies approach interviewing and other selection procedures with a very professional attitude and focus on the candidate. Others have some distinctly odd notions.

More commonly, one finds one is being interviewed by someone who does not really appear to know what interviewing is about. Be patient, though, and play along. There is always the chance that this is a bluff. More seriously, losing patience with the person from HR who has come along to see you could put in jeopardy an otherwise good job with an otherwise good company. Never judge a recruiter on the basis of first impressions.

Be aware too that the process going on in an interview is not just a case of you selling yourself to the recruiter. The chances are that the company is also trying to sell itself to you. By the time you get to the interview, you will have already been through several stages of the selection process, and will have been identified as having at least some potential; therefore, the company already has an interest in you. This is flattering, or can be, but one must remain realistic. Joining a company just because they are nice to you is not necessarily the best thing; it can easily lead to the wrong job with the wrong firm at the wrong time. Once again, stay focused on your goals.

Recruiters are looking for a commodity. They want to buy management potential, for use in both the short-term and the long-term. Any presentation, be it a CV, interview or other test, must focus on selling that potential. Stress your own unique qualities and abilities. Make it clear that you cannot only do what the company asks of you, but much more; you can add value for them, and cannot only justify the money they spend recruiting and paying you, but make that back for the firm many times over. Confidence in your ability to do these things is the starting point for successful marketing of yourself as an MBA graduate to top firms.

Giving the right impression :

Much of the process of seeking a job at the end of the MBA programme is about projecting the right attitude. A projection of confidence, intelligence and ability is required. However, these must also be expressed in moderation: confidence must stop short of arrogance, intelligence must not be seen as showing off.

The actual nature of this projection must of course depend on the character and personality of the individual graduate, but there are four key rules that should be followed at all times. The purpose of these to avoid underselling, which as mentioned above is far more common than overselling. These rules are the four 'don'ts' which follow below.

1   Don't appear as a supplicant. Never convey to a recruiter that you really *need* a job (even if you do). Make it clear that you are interested in the job on its merits because it fits your profile, and that you see interviews and selection panels as a meeting of equals.

2   Don't settle for second best unless you must. Getting trapped in the wrong job at the wrong time can set your career back years. Hold out for what you want. If you are good, you will get it; given time, your potential will be recognized.

3   Don't worry if your colleagues land jobs before you do. It doesn't matter. They might have got lucky; or, *they* might have settled for second best. Never mind peer pressure, there are no prizes for getting a job first. Wait until the right offer comes along.

4   Don't panic. Recruiters, even the dimmest of them, can smell fear. Be confident; if you are asked a question and you don't know the answer, say so. Bluffing is common in this game, and most HR people are good at spotting it.

16. MBA and lifelong learning

The MBA is of course only the first stage in a manager's lifelong learning. But it is of crucial importance because it lays the foundations of the lifelong learning programme. The fundamental skills and abilities developed on the MBA are the very skills and abilities needed to manage lifelong learning: research skills, communication skills, networking and teamworking abilities.

First, lifelong learning and knowledge management are codependent terms. Knowledge management refers to the fact that managers' primary task is increasingly becoming the management and use of knowledge. But new knowledge is constantly required in order to keep ahead of the game. A programme of lifelong learning is thus essential to supply the required new knowledge.

Learning for managers is not something that comes and goes; it is a continuous, enduring process. This is why the MBA experience is so valuable. MBA programmes are intense, concentrated and continuous processes of knowledge management. But it should not be assumed that this process can stop once the student graduates from the programme and takes up or returns to a job. Rather, the process of knowledge management, especially knowledge acquisition, must continue.

It should be possible for students to transfer their knowledge management skills and techniques straight from the MBA into the job. Similarly, subsidiary skills and abilities – like research skills and oral and written communication skills – should transfer straight across. As this book has pointed out, all these skills require knowledge management. The ability to see knowledge management as part of the daily routine of management more generally, then, is one of the most important benefits of the MBA.

And it is not just skills that matter, but also the attitude of mind. The ability to see the bigger picture, to think globally, to manage across boundaries and across cultures; the ability to respect and understand other people; the ability to tolerate diversity and even make it work for you: these are all things which the MBA will help to develop. All these assets in turn will impact on future learning.

After reading this article, you can try to answer the question- 'Is an MBA degree worth it for ME? Evaluate your alternatives. Include factors such as the nature of job, job satisfaction and preferred sector of employment. I am sure you will make the right decision to become a successful MBA by adapting all the acts and features discussed above.