

# When to get an MBA degree

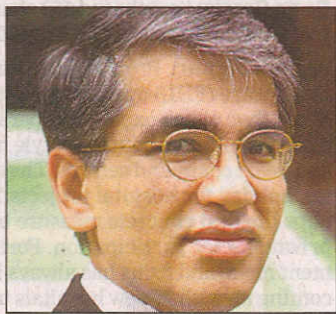
SOHRAB GILL and I have much in common. We grew up in Kashmir, are sons of government servants, went to boarding school, give it another year and both of us would be alumni of Delhi's Shriram College of Commerce and both will end our academic careers with MBAs. Being in your third year of bachelors business degree is a difficult crossroad for anyone, even without Sohrab's additional complication; he is one of India's top young shooters, has represented India in many tournaments and has his eye on an Asian games medal.

Recently we talked about the best course of action for him. Should he take a year off and sharpen his shooting skills? Should he get a job and get some work experience before his MBA? Or should he jump straight into an MBA so that he is done with academics?

Obviously where you stand on this issue depends on where you sit. As a recent parent, I now understand the instinct for stability, predictability and safety for your child. More than 80 per cent of the one lakh MBA students that sign up for an Indian MBA degree every year without any work experience, reflect the altars of stability (finish your studies and then settle down), misconception (you will forget how to study if you start working) or misinformation (only jobs worth having needs MBA).

But I argue that joining an MBA without at least two years of work experience is a mistake. This experience could be of any kind and breadth (staff or line function), depth (big job in small company or small job in big company) context (family, private, public or NGO) are irrelevant.

Only work experience can give you an appreciation for the all important people issues in organisations. Experience teaches us that humans are irrational and illogical. We realise that synthesis is much more difficult and important than analysis. We realise that the shortest distance between two points is not a straight line. Which MBA would



## Best Choice

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explain this?

Don't get me wrong; I think an MBA is useful for many reasons. It gives you an understanding of how the different functions of an organisation interlock. It gives you the theoretical grounding in subjects like finance and accounting. It gives you a network of friends and potential clients, investors and team mates. It also gives you gift wrapping: most good MBA schools are nice places to be at, but great places to be from.

You get more from an MBA if you have work experience. Most of us, even as adults, know what we don't want to do rather than what we want to. Experience never gives us definite answers (you can never outsource figuring on what you want!) but moderates idealism and gives you more data points on what you want to do and where you want to go. If experience matters, and salaries of experienced graduates seems to suggest it does, we need to broaden MBA admission criteria because speed tests are biased towards applicants just out of school.

I am confident Sohrab will follow his heart. The world of work is changing and the traditional career path just doesn't hold. A few years of experience before MBA is just a preview for Sohrab's generation who will have lives that will alternate between portfolios and periods of work, play, study and so much else. And they will be so much more interesting and creative for that.