

MBA: A need or a want?

SIM PING KHUAN finds out if paper qualifications are necessary to get ahead in business

THE academic paper chase is on. Young Singaporeans in the business field today are looking at more ways to differentiate themselves from the rest of the flock, and not surprisingly, many see earning an MBA degree as a means towards an accelerated career progression and bigger paycheques.

So, do opportunities really present themselves in front of an MBA degree holder?

Local universities and other higher educational institutions are

offering several programmes to young graduates who are interested to pursue an MBA qualification. MBA programmes in Singapore expose students to a variety of subjects, including economics, organisational behaviour, marketing, accounting, finance, strategy, operations management, international business, information technology management, and government policy.

The cost of an MBA education is upwards of \$23,000 in Singapore, and one has to seriously consider whether sacrificing a couple of crucial career-building years for yet another piece of qualification is worth the trouble, money and time.

So, can an MBA certificate replace a proven track record and experience, when it comes to job applications? Not likely, but an MBA

certification will definitely help to some extent, says Annie Yap, managing director of recruiting firm The GMP Group. "In most cases, most employers view an MBA as only an additional academic achievement, (but) an MBA certification shows employers that the candidate has a positive attitude towards skills and upgrading and has attained more business knowledge. It is not comprehensive to use the certification to judge the candidate's potential . . . we have to evaluate him from various aspects."

BUSINESS ACUMEN

The Singapore Human Resource Institute (SHRI) did a staffing survey recently, and findings showed that more than 80 per cent of companies' recruitment assessments are based primarily on academic qualifications. So, does it mean that with many young people and companies collectively valuing the MBA certificate, it must be offering something that is of great worth to both the individual and the organisation?

"Many who take on an MBA programme are really looking at acquiring business knowledge and skills which they do not have because of their first degree specialisation. It is known that bigger pay packets tend to be with those along the management career tracks, and thus the need for (greater) business acumen is important, and business acumen can be attained through an MBA programme," says Yvonne Ong, manager of corporate development, SHRI.

Ms Yap adds in a similar viewpoint: "The knowledge (acquired from the programme) will definitely help to shorten the learning curves for the different aspects required for the

real business world."

However, Ms Ong, too, concedes that the networking, training and qualification that one can gain from the MBA programme can go only so far and no more. "But in no way is the MBA certification a substitute for a good, proven track record and experience. Many companies are looking for both . . . qualification and experience."

Laletha Nithiyanandan, the group director in South Asia of staffing company Kelly Services, raises the question as to whether Singapore is the right place to earn an MBA degree after all. "From a hiring perspective, MBAs are only seen as an additional education and intellectual exposure on the part of the candidate, unless it is from a top MBA school like Harvard University."

It seems like Ms Nithiyanandan is conceding that companies very much prefer MBA graduates from brand-name schools over those from local institutions. So, are the MBA programmes offered in Singapore in the same standing as those in the prestigious Ivy League universities like Harvard and Columbia?

Ms Yap dispels doubts over the quality of MBA programmes offered by local universities, and says that most executives she knew who had gone through local MBA programmes did well, and currently enjoy a certain standing in their respective fields.

However, Ms Yap feels that people should not give the MBA qualification greater esteem and consideration than it actually deserves. "At the end of the day, while the brand name of the MBA programme sells, it still boils down to the individual's personal attributes. A committed employee will go the extra mile to excel in his role regardless of his academic qualifications."

