



Even MBA Students Fall Short in the Writing Department

By Gwen Parkes, Posted Mar 15th 2011 @ 4:20AM



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MBA students can no longer write their own ticket for the perfect job or career advancement, as many employers and graduates alike are discovering a disconnect between what is being taught in business schools and what is expected of graduates once they enter the workplace.

Many graduates are settling into high-paying jobs only to find out that they lack the writing skills necessary for that job, leaving them at a loss for words and facing the possibility of getting replaced.

Not making the grade

"I went to the Pace University MBA program not even thinking about writing and did well in my speaking presentations, but quickly realized that I was a poor writer when I took essay tests or had to write papers," says Henry Motyka.

The former Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) software advisor says that he decided to get a business master's to learn about the financial aspects of his job that his work experience did not teach him, and because he knew that the MBA credential would be beneficial to his career and advancement at the Big Four tax firm.

Motyka says he values the Pace program for helping him educate others at work, as well as raising his level of focus and commitment at work. However, the MBA program never offered the opportunity to correct his flawed writing style. "It made me uncomfortable that my writing skills were not up to snuff," he admits. "But it was 1 little percent out of 100 that wasn't perfect, and not enough to make me quit the program."

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An emphasis on speaking

Eric Chen, assistant professor at Saint Joseph College and an MBA graduate himself, agrees that while the "focus in business school is on communication, there is a premium placed on verbal communication versus written communication."

Chen says he honed his writing and communication skills prior to entering business school when he worked as an equity research analyst, but he also points out that master's programs cannot be held at fault for turning out poor writers, since the MBA is a practical degree, not a research-oriented one.

Motyka is not blaming his MBA program for failing to correct his weak wordsmanship, but he does feel that his below-average writing skills are what held him back at his job. "All my memos were corrected by my bosses, which I appreciated, because it was free help; but it was embarrassing as an executive that I was spending all my time writing memos that were poorly written."

Other factors to consider

Roy Cohen, career counselor, executive coach, and author of 'The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide; Success Secrets of a Career Coach,' believes that there are other factors that come into play when examining whether MBA

graduates are making the grade in the writing department.

"A large portion of the MBA community at the top business schools is composed of foreign nationals, and to require flawless English language skills could have the potential to eliminate a vital source of international revenue."

The second factor that leads to poor English skills, both written and oral, is what Cohen refers to as "the tyranny of technology." Nowadays we communicate via text message and e-mails so frequently that we have relaxed the way we speak and write. We use more slang terms and abbreviations to crank out messages faster, and many people throw the basic rules of grammar and punctuation by the wayside, expecting their computer or mobile device to correct itself. "It's the norm," Cohen says. "In fact, most e-mails now have an addendum excusing poor grammar and incorrect spelling."

In 2000, when Motyka was laid off from PWC with the rest of his division, his MBA did him little good. "My writing skills were horrendous and really held me back again. I eventually paid a lot of recruiters and career coaches to help me improve my writing skills, but I feel like I never hit my mark again career-wise."

Since 2000, Henry has done various consulting projects and has worked for some smaller accounting firms; but he learned the hard way that most of his job is about writing, and in order to be good at it, he has to practice his writing craft everyday -- something that was not stressed when he was in business school.

How to do it differently

If you are thinking about getting your MBA, Motyka recommends finding out what your weaknesses are before the program starts so that you can seek help while you are still in school.

Cohen agrees and says that it's worthwhile to seek out a writing mentor in your MBA program so that you can "maximize the return on your investment in the MBA program."

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