



MBA's Might, morals, minds and more...

HR Magazine met with Professor Arthur Francis, Dean of Bradford University School of Management to find out what HR should look for when recommending business schools for staff development programmes.

How should HR managers choose a suitable business school?

Financial Times rankings are crucial because they know people do MBA's in order to enhance their earning power. Therefore the FT ranking is based three years after people have earned their degree. These rankings must still be treated with caution, as salary increases may be distorted by the kind of students you have.

For example, if students tend to go into the financial services sector then they are going to enhance their salaries much

more quickly than students that go into say engineering or consultancy roles.

The three major international accrediting bodies are also helpful. Accreditations to look out for include:

- The European Improvement System (EQUIS)
- The Accreditation Association of MBAs Accreditation (AMBA)
- The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)

Any schools accredited by these bodies are worth seriously considering.

There has been talk of degree inflation. With so many new students entering business schools, is this something you worry about?

Not a worry that the market has an insatiable demand for MBAs. They still command high salaries. In developing parts of the world there is an even more insatiable demand.

The MBA is such a basic qualification in terms of doing management, that it has become almost universal for anyone wanting to be a manager—as it gives that basic set of skills.

Have you seen any changes in the last year due to the global financial crisis?

Yes, full time programmes have seen increased enrollments. People have put off going into the labour market and are instead taking executive education courses. Many companies will not subsidise staff to do such courses as MBAs as they are seen as a discretionary item.

Has the recent rethinking of economic theory had any impact on the curriculum?

Anyone who has done an MBA ought to be aware of the three 'M's': might, morals and minds. It is important, post credit crunch, that managers are mindful of all three. Regarding might—what have we learned about regulators not being powerful enough? Regarding morals—to what extent were people behaving immorally? Regarding minds—to what extent do we simply still not know enough about how markets work, how bubbles are created, and how to control these bubbles?

It is also necessary to improve moral education. When students are studying economics, and to a lesser extent those studying business, it can wash the morality out of them. To help address this, business schools around the world are re-examining their syllabuses to ensure they effectively cover sustainability and CSR.

Has globalisation and the rise of economies like China and India changed the focus of MBA programmes?

Yes. We've always been a pretty globalised business school with lots of International students. We have also tried to recruit faculty on a more international basis so we now have several staff from China and India—creating a nicely diverse community.

Likewise, we also make every effort to ensure syllabuses are genuinely multi-national and diverse. For example, 12 years ago the strategic management module—taught largely by case studies—had every single case study from UK businesses. Now the situation is very different, and case studies include companies around the world including Japan, China and so on.

The liberation of Chinese and Indian economies was due to the application of liberal market economic principals. This has had a profound effect on their economic growth and despite the last couple of years those economies are still growing rapidly. What we now know about how to manage companies, as a lot of Chinese and Indian companies are being run on modern management principles that have been taught in America for the last hundred years. So we do not have to re-learn things, but rather it is a question of incremental improvements in our understanding.

Is it challenging conducting research in countries like China?

Good ideas don't have borders. I have found that best-practise management is relatively universal. For example, just-in-time manufacturing may have first been adopted by Toyota—but was adopted on the basis of American management theory—and has now been adapted across the world.

What does your school do in terms of focus on Human Resources Management?

Firstly, for quite some time we have taken the view that the modern manager needs to develop their soft skills and people skills as much as their hard management skills. In our MBA programme everyone has to compile a personal development portfolio, working with a tutor to identify gaps and weaknesses in their personal development.

For example, if you are not a team worker—how can you improve or develop your skills in that area. These skills are just as important as analytical skills.

Secondly, everyone on the MBA and MSc programmes must take a compulsory HR element. There is also a good range of HR electives such as reorganisation, leadership and advanced HRM, so if students want to go deeper into these areas they can do.

Thirdly, there is a strong HR research unit focusing particularly on leadership.

Have the requirements of leaders changed over the last 10 or 20 years as the world is changing faster and

technology is increasing. Has what makes a good leader changed?

Prof. Francis: I'm pretty sure our views on what makes a leader have changed over the last 20 years. This is perhaps because the leadership task itself has changed, or because we have become more sophisticated and better at understanding what a leader should be.

Now organisations have become more fragmented and de-layered—many firms being more loosely held together. Leadership in such circumstances is now more about motivating, delegating and incentivising people than it is about delivering smart orders from the deck and telling the troops what to do.

Do you think there is increased emphasis on the HR Department and does HR play a bigger role?

The debate 20 years ago was that the HR department ought to be embedded in line management. I think that's still true, and it's important to have a HR department that is absolutely on the ball and able to provide suitable training, advice and facilitation to staff. A lot of traditional personnel functions need to be incorporated into line management. Also being a manager is now so much more complicated, that having a well resourced and well-informed department that is up-to-date is more important than ever.

How important is training and development in an economic downturn?

If you think education is expensive, try ignorance. Cutting back on education is clearly very dangerous. If you continue developing in the downturn you will be better positioned when the tide turns the other way.

How you fund it is another matter. The British government last year was very foresightful and released a lot of funds to subsidise businesses sending staff on training courses, which was tremendously helpful for the companies concerned.

If you are a HR director, make an effort to keep in touch with local business schools. Talk to managers that you have sent on programmes and get direct feedback from them—this can then be built upon to help improve management practices.