



MBA required? Is a graduate degree essential to upward mobility in business?

By Jody Robbins

Some see an MBA as a critical building block to greater career success; others might see it as just another sheepskin to hang on the wall. What's the truth of it?

Like any degree, an MBA is what you make out of it, says Dr. Michelle Bradford, a professor at DeVry University's Keller Graduate School of Management.

"Students are not only learning course content, they're learning to collaborate, to multi-task, to be professional and cool under pressure, to be leaders," Bradford says. "At the same time they're being prepared for the latest technological advances of the workforce, they're learning how to research, articulate their thoughts, and communicate it in a way that gives them confidence."

Critical to success?

Approached with a ready-to-learn mindset, attaining an MBA can be a valuable learning experience. Not to mention, some positions are just plain not available to you without it. So an MBA can be critical to upward mobility in the workplace.

According to the Recruiting Trends 2017-2018 report, published by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University, the market for new hires with MBA degrees is strong, especially with larger companies. “All advanced degree levels will experience growth in job opportunities this year,” the report states. “Both MBA and Master’s degree hires will continue to experience solid growth in opportunities, increasing 22 percent and 10 percent, respectively.

“The largest companies appear to have backed off their aggressive hiring of the past two years,” the report continues. “For the past two years, job growth for bachelor’s degrees had exceeded 15 percent for the largest companies, this year the growth is a modest 7 percent; this growth is in line with historical patterns in mature labor markets. These organizations expect to hire more MBAs than last year, up 36 percent.”

So, statistically, earning an MBA is a good place to be for new graduates entering the workforce. Is it critical to success? Sometimes, yes, as in the case of Keller MBA student, Aggie Thao.

One success story

In deciding to work toward her bachelor’s degree from DeVry, then her MBA from Keller, Thao had a very definitive goal: attaining the job she always wanted. She got it and is now an investigative auditor for the California Department of Justice in the criminal division under the Attorney General.

“Growing up, I always wanted to go into law enforcement but at 5 feet tall, was afraid I didn’t have the capability to deal with a criminal twice my size,” Thao says. “This position gives me the opportunity to work side by side with undercover agents. I have ability to do a lot of the things they do, just don’t have to be on patrol, on duty, and have to deal with the physical aspects of the criminal world.”

Without her Keller MBA, Thao would be “sitting behind a desk as a basic accounting auditor,” she says. Instead, she found a way to attain her version of success. It wasn’t an easy process. “I first looked into going back to college in 2010, but as a single mother working full-time, I didn’t have time for a traditional college experience,” Thao says. “After looking at different universities for online programs, DeVry popped out because I had a family member attending DeVry at the time and after talking to the admissions representative, he really made me feel like DeVry is something I can actually do and still be successful.”

After Thao received her bachelor’s degree, she decided to spend an extra year to earn her MBA.

“Based off my experience with DeVry’s administration and professors, Keller was my first pick,” Thao says. “When I started there, I met Dr. Bradford. She gave me a lot of the basic different options and opinions during and after the program, and also assisted me in career development. “She was always willing to take a time out and help me as necessary, by taking a look at my resume, or whatever. After the program, I was able to obtain a position that I would have never thought I’d be able to get into, but did so with the knowledge I obtained from the school and assistance from her.”

Potential benefits

Dr. Bradford sees a host of both practical and higher-level benefits to pursuing an MBA.

"I think studying for any advanced degree heightens students' awareness, critical thinking, analytical interpretation, and gives them a deeper understanding of the information at a much higher level than is true with a bachelor's degree," she says. "It's not just about the course content. It's also about being amongst like-minded leaders that bring a lot to the table and want to continuously grow professionally. They're very driven and that makes the learning experience incredibly exciting and conducive to learning."

With a Ph.D. in organizational psychology, Dr. Bradford teaches courses focused on helping students understand the value of information within an organization. "We take a lot of the works and theories out there as to how systems work and how both leaders and individuals interact within an organization," Bradford says. "We help them understand the framework so they can be more effective managers and leaders.

"The fun part is helping students feel really empowered in recognizing their place in the organization, and how much ability they have to influence no matter where they are within the organization. It's a powerful thing and the students at Keller are very motivated to do well, are very open to understanding the holistic picture, their place within it, and how they can continue to grow within and positively affect that framework."

As for her relationship with Thao, Bradford has found it rewarding as well. "A big part of what I appreciate about DeVry is that we get to nurture the student from a holistic perspective," Bradford says. "I think that's why Aggie did so well in her schooling, because usually folks who seek out mentors are high performance and high achievers and are receptive to learning. She wanted to move her career forward, was open to feedback, advice and guidance."

"The faculty here at Keller has a shared philosophy and we live it: we're there, we want to partner with our students, and see them succeed. Aggie understood her part in engaging in a mentor relationship and was always open, prepared and ready. I can honestly say this for every faculty member at Keller: All-around success stories like this are what drives our culture, the student experience, and that's very much what we care about."

Choose your path

In the end, each individual must decide for themselves whether an MBA can help advance their career and enrich them personally.
