



Speaker Panel: Pursuing an MBA – Motives, Value, and Opportunities

A candid discussion about what it really takes to get into business school, how to best employ time as a student to position oneself for the right job, what opportunities exist at Microsoft for MBAs, how experienced business leaders view & value the direct impact of the MBA on their careers, the real tradeoffs/considerations one should be ready to make in pursuit of an MBA, and the importance of professional networking.

Please see the [list of panelists](#) and schools represented below the transcript

Flow of Q&A: We addressed pre-submitted questions to panelists in the order of what an MBA candidate would encounter: [Admissions](#), [Current Students](#), [Career Services](#), and [Alumni](#). We then had [questions from the floor](#). The transcript follows this flow.

Attendance: 157 people joined in person, while 50 dialed in to the conference call.

TRANSCRIPT OF PANEL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Admissions -

Q: How specific do we have to make the career goals in our MBA application?

- **Molly (UC Berkeley):** Be more specific than vague about why you're wanting to study an MBA and how it'll help you achieve your short term and long term goals. It's important to think about the goals and have clarity and a roadmap of how you'll get there
- **Pauline (Harvard Bus School):** It's important to have an idea about where you'd like your career to be when you're done. Understandably, many people gain new experiences through the course of the MBA and new/different job opportunities can open up as a result of going through the MBA/job search afterwards
- **Katie (HBS Career services):** some students do come in looking to make a career change; Harvard helps with career vision especially in first semester, help people clarify their career plans, and also help navigate the recruiting process later on.

Q: Regarding criteria considered when evaluating applications - what are the most important things a candidate can focus on when applying for an MBA?

- **Pa'lee (UW) -** Leadership potential & clarity of the individual; clarity in career ambitions for post MBA and clarity of the individual as a whole; this shows in the essays. Who am I and how will this program benefit me in life, career, professional pursuits; what can I offer the program?
- **Barry (MIT/Sloane) -** how well do you *present* yourself to us? What do you have to say? Where have you been and where do you see yourself going? Your ability to think through, plan and structure your approach to the process. The quality of your background rather than "numerical" aspects.

Q: Regarding diversity admissions - what can minority candidates can do to improve their chances in this area?

- **Barry** - don't make yourself out to be something you're not to try and give the school what you think they're looking for - be authentic. If you're boring, talk about your boring-ness! :-) The admissions committee wants to see YOU.
- **Pauline** - people often get concerned, "what if my background isn't traditional finance/investment banking etc"... for HBS, diversity is key in terms of background, industry knowledge and interests just as much as your ethnicity. About a third of HBS students are international, so be yourself and bring the essence of who you are.
- **Chester** - from an alum point of view; take the admissions process very seriously - this is a competitive process. Take the GMAT seriously - it's a combative test in and of itself. Put the right amount of effort into studying for the GMAT and prioritize what you need to do.

Q: How do MBA admissions offices ensure diversity? Do you have quotas?

- **Pa'lee** - no quotas. We only have 100 full time MBA students at UW so we are quite selective, but applications are reviewed on their merits and every program has their criteria. We'd like to see more quality diverse applicants of course! UW is a state school so there's lots of financial help (people may not know that). There are scholarships - African American, Hispanic etc - diversity applicants are always reviewed for possible scholarship eligibility as well as program eligibility. Quotas don't ensure the quality of classes that we'd like, so we've stayed away from them.
- **Barry** - same with MIT/Sloane

Q: Is there a perceptible difference in quality between evening/PT or full time MBA programs?

- **Molly** - Haas School has 3 MBA options - traditional fulltime, evening/weekend, and the Berkeley/Columbia exec MBA. The evening/weekend and fulltime students have exactly the same access to career and student services, electives, etc. - it's the same Berkeley MBA. The exec MBA gives you both a Berkeley and a Columbia MBA upon graduation; it's a 19-month lockstep program and it's not modeled after the fulltime or evening/weekend program
- **Pa'lee** - UW has several part time programs available - a 3-year evening; a tech management program (on the Eastside/Bellevue campus; 18 months); various exec programs. Evening and full time caliber is similar. Evening program is longer to ensure this similarity in quality.

Current students -

Q: What worked for you when you applied for your MBA?

- **Edmond** (Kellogg/Northwestern) - I applied to Kellogg in Chicago and don't think they have many west coast students - I fly to Chicago almost every weekend. Talk about yourself, surface your passions, don't make up stories. Ping me offline for details of what I said :)
- **Randolph** (Harvard Business School) - HBS has a strong focus on leadership so in my essays I demonstrated a strong history of leadership and aspirations to lead in the future. I also think the diversity of my professional experience helped me. Many people haven't held several positions by the time they apply to business school, so having had three jobs - two with Microsoft - made me unique given my background. Ultimately you need to also contribute to the learning environment overall.
- **Chuka** (MIT/Sloane) - Resist the cookie cutter approach! You need to differentiate yourself in some way. I didn't have as much work experience prior to applying, so I had to find other ways to differentiate myself by showing in my essays the things I'd done that differentiated me from people who had worked for much longer than I.

Q: What do you wish you'd known when you applied?

- **Edmond** - I'm quite satisfied with the program at this point (seeing as I'm just ending my first term). Nothing unexpected so far. Part time & weekend students often worry about not being able to participate in extra-curricular activities, but we have been focusing on that via a club for the weekend MBA candidates, and we are replicating some the fulltime students' extracurricular experiences for our benefit.
- **Randolph** - there are sometimes expectations that come with going to a top school. It's easy to buy into stereotypes around the kinds of people you'll encounter in the program. Also, learning that a school is strong in one particular area may lead one to believe it lacks quality instruction in other disciplines, but the reality is that the programs are all extremely well rounded and you have the opportunity to round out your experience as much

or as little as you'd like - make sure you're not making a decision based on an assumptions or poor facts, talk to people who are familiar with the program before you apply.

Q: What do you consider most valuable about your time at MIT/Sloane?

- **Chuka** - the balance - they focus on making sure the student experience is well rounded. The access to courses and executives from various companies. I've worked hard and studied a lot but have still had a lot of fun.

Career services, recruiting, HR -

Q: There are a lot of foreign and domestic MBAs and talent out there - is there a preference one way or another for specific schools or backgrounds in the industry?

- **Kerry (Microsoft Recruiting)** - We don't generally have a preference for foreign vs. local schools - MBA recruiting gives you a huge pool of candidates who are ambitious and well qualified. Yes, companies like Microsoft like to be at the top schools not only to recruit students, but also to represent our brand at to a broad range of future leaders. There's great MBA talent across tiers too, so Microsoft is fairly agnostic about the type of school. We do invest in schools where there's a high concentration of people who fit our company, though.
- **Katie** – Preference for schools depends on the company - some companies look for a variety and are open to candidates from all areas. All employers ultimately want great students and great applicants with a variety of backgrounds.
- **Bryan** - A candidate's diligence in recruiting wins the day and can make up for a massive career change: preparing for opportunities, executing on site, and following up with companies of interest to you. Proximity does make a difference too - local students have an easier time networking and doing informationals with companies close by, which sometimes gives them an edge.

Q: What options exist for people changing careers?

- **Bryan** - it does require more work on the recruiting front if you're switching, as there is some preference at companies for career-deepeners. Massive career switches may also be easier for full time students as they're able to pick up projects, internships, spend more time networking etc - evening/part time switchers have some more challenges due to time scarcity
- **Kerry** - If you have a significant career change interest, doing the MBA full time is a sound strategy- make sure you pick up relevant coursework (shows your passion and commitment, even though it isn't the same as experience), take advantage of internships and invest the time to immerse yourself. Use the 2 years to thoughtfully outline what your transferrable skills and experiences are.
- **Molly** - while it can take a lot more work for evening and weekend MBA students to switch careers, Berkeley affords everyone full and equal access to career services and on-campus recruiting. So, evening and weekend MBA students can - and do - quit their jobs to take advantage of MBA internships, like their fulltime counterparts.
- **Leeman** - be careful what you wish for because there's more to switching than meets the eye. You never know what a new discipline/industry is really like until you've made the switch. Also be careful which companies you join and the breadth of roles they offer within your chosen discipline, as you could find yourself in an unexpected role and disappointed.

Q: For people who leave a company to pursue an MBA is it advisable to go back to the original company and what are starting salary indications?

- **Kerry**- if you're in an organization that's a good cultural fit for you, are achieving and performing well, then be very thoughtful about whether or not the best way to achieve a career switch is to leave, get an MBA, then come back later. Do an ROI analysis - is it worth giving up two years of compensation/career progression? Also factor in how difficult/easy it is to make functional transitions within your company (it's easier at Microsoft than many other companies, so you may not need to leave to get the career switching benefits). Also think about your network within the company. You might not always need to leave your company to make a career switch.
- As to compensation - it's a talent market and irrespective of school or student quality, market dynamics dictate compensation realities. These may vary for

Questions to alumni/graduates -

Q: What role has your MBA played in your career progression to date

- **Randy** - I was in the military prior to going to HBS, so I wanted to change function, industry, and location. The full time program at Harvard gave me the flexibility to make changes into previously unfamiliar territory. I use my MBA every day; the case method teaches you four things: there's always too much information, you never have the data you want, you're going to have to establish assumptions, and you're going to have to make a decision. That describes my job here at Microsoft - dealing with data, ambiguity, cutting through layers to identify the right assumptions, and ultimately making a decision. The difference in the real world is that once you make a decision you then have to execute against that decision. After your many cases in b-school, you may think you have the right answer to every situation. But you learn as you move forward the *wisdom* around the assumptions: you start to apply business judgment developed in the cases so you begin to see trends and themes that you can leverage in future work. A key benefit in my switch was the familiarity and comfort my MBA gave me with financial terms, compliance, regulatory requirements and business models. It taught me the language of business.

Q: How do you make the absolute best of your MBA?

- **Shola** - Business school teaches new mental models. Having an MBA doesn't *make* you smart. The benefit of school is giving you new ways to look at the world. It almost doesn't matter what classes you take: what matters is how they'll change how you think. The key is to develop new mental models in business schools.

Q: What was uniquely valuable about business school?

- **Tayo** - B-school was a very challenging environment with people from all over the world, and learning to adapt and work with them collaboratively and constructively was a key benefit. I learned about myself, my weaknesses, what I need to improve on. B-school arms you with mental models that you can apply to be smarter in the way you think, how you network, read/analyze and adapt to situations, and solve problems. My perspective is bigger now because I went through b-school, and I can work with anyone since I've been through that experience.

Q: In retrospect, what would you do differently to make your b-school experience more valuable now?

- **Gavin** - Build deeper relationships; go for more depth than breadth in friendships. It's good to get involved broadly but don't spread yourself too thin.

Q: What do you consider most valuable about your time in school?

- **Chester** - The business school experience unique to everyone. For me it was transformational. I was deeply technical prior to school. One day about 2/3 of the way into the program, I realized I could actually understand the impact of what I was seeing on CNBC - instead of charts and numbers, I could suddenly see the human story and how that shaped lives. I carry my MBA with me in everything I do now.
- **Leeman**. One thing you gain through the experience of going through an MBA is that for two years you have an extended family and you have to learn to live and work with them. But you need to leave that program exposed to as much of the real world as possible. Having been exposed to a lot of things in b-school gives me the confidence that I have the tools to solve any problems that are thrown at me.

Questions from the floor:

Q: How many of you were very sure of what you wanted to do career-wise when you went in, how did those plans evolve, & how many of you graduated with a different career goal than you had going in?

- **Shola** - I went in as engineer from a telecom company. I knew I wanted to stay in technology but on the finance side. Through my MBA I was exposed to marketing and fell in love with it - and decided I wanted to do marketing in a technology company. The lesson is to be open minded and willing to change.

Q: Tell us about the intersection between the internet age and applications to business school. Do you look up candidates on the web?

- **Pa'lee** - UW interviews everyone we plan to admit; we may do web searches on candidates and like to pull something out of left field in the interview. We've seldom have a bad experience with web searches but they do sometimes give added perspective. Definitely reconsider any possibly undermining information that might be out there on the web before you submit your application. Note: if you're an entrepreneur and say you've started a company, we definitely check that out.
- **Barry** - we also interview candidates - we aren't the FBI, but we do check backgrounds. We also verify letters of recommendation.
- **Pauline** - if you note a website or URL in your application, we'll look it up most times, especially if you claim to be a founding member of that organization or site.

Q: I'm still trying to figure out the financial aspect - doesn't add up for me right now - any creative options for financing an MBA?

- **Randolph** - before and after you get into school you have financing options. I'm a Morgan Stanley fellow - check into MBA prep websites and wherever you can to find who offers grants/scholarships (Non profits, consulting companies, private foundations, etc.) Many schools have financial programs and scholarships (extent of support often depends on your historical income). Don't make finances a gating factor, though, in pursuing an MBA - you'll find a job that'll enable you to pay the loans back in time and there are multiple ways to address the issue. Some schools have loan forgiveness and/or reduction programs too.

Q: Can the skills and knowledge gained at Microsoft supplant those learned in an MBA?

- **Randy** - An MBA doesn't supplant what you learn at Microsoft, but definitely augments. People's trajectories are often different after an MBA, and you can notice a difference in who they are and how they think about the world.
- **Gavin** - the network is also a key factor - at business school you meet people from a broad range of industries and backgrounds - in any given company, there's a core similarity that will never give you the diversity of perspective you'll get from networking at business school.

Q: Can I just read an MBA text and pick up what I need to know to change industries/discipline? What's the relative value of text vs faculty vs networking vs curriculum?

- **Leeman** - At Cornell they have immersion programs that accommodate career changers. At the end of the first semester you choose a core and focus on that for a whole semester. That exposes you to the industry, key players and case studies. It gives you confidence, understanding the language of that function/industry.
- **Shola** - as someone who changed careers, the texts are the least important part of an MBA - the exposure to the discipline you want to change to gives you an understanding of the language, the terminology and the fundamentals of that discipline, so you'll be more confident in your ability to understand and add value. Microsoft is a good example - MBA interns are given real projects and impact the business. That experience is invaluable.

Q: After joining Microsoft, I'm wondering if I REALLY need an MBA? What level changes can I expect when I've got an MBA? I don't need an MBA to get a job at MS, as I'm already employed here - so why do I need one?

- **Kerry** - you have to decide for yourself if you need an MBA. Are there things in your skill development and experience that an MBA would enhance? As to level - for a typical MBA (2-4 years exp, strong school, coming into a discipline like finance or marketing) hiring levels are 60, 61. For people with more experience, the level could be different. Your career progression may change after an MBA but ultimately Microsoft is a meritocracy, so the MBA itself doesn't change the trajectory: any positive impact to your growth path will be a result of the combination of skills, experiences, and perspectives ***that causes a different and better performance.***
- **Randy** - arguably, for starting a fulltime MBAs there's a sweet spot - optimally around 27 - where you're bringing in something relevant and getting from the MBA experience something valuable. Professional development has a vertical (i.e. level increases, promotions, etc.) and horizontal (i.e. breadth of experience) component. To get vertical in a company you have to be horizontal, which can involve trade-offs as you round out your foundational experiences. The MBA gives you exposure and experiences that you may not have got otherwise. You make considered trade off decisions. It's not the MBA; it's what you do with it. Who are you after the MBA? How do you think differently, how do you engage in conversations, how do you show up and contribute in general? Ask

yourself: where are you with your horizontal foundation of experiences and looking forward to your career goal, what else do you need to get there?

Q: What differentiates people when they're applying for an MBA with an advanced degree but only a couple of years experience? I'm an engineer in a group of other engineers.

- **Leeman** - Cornell has a 13-month program only for people who already have an advanced degree. It's an intense full time program worth considering.
- **Molly** - student involvement and student leadership are really important. A differentiator is how leadership is shown through extra-curricular activities and how you'd contribute to student life.
- **Chester** - even though you do the same function as others, you're an individual. Business school is about building leaders, so as you carve out your story about being a business leader, you will have a unique perspective. Choose your school - find one that fits your goals and personality - each school has something unique to offer, so find one that matches your personality.
- **Gavin** - if you're going to apply for your MBA in a couple of years, take the time to explore one of your passions in more depth, broaden yourself, join local groups (at work or outside) so you have a base of differentiation.
- **Tayo** - think about how you impact the world around you, your team, your community - get involved in community, make a difference, take on a leadership role in the community. That helps you be outstanding

Q: A lot of us Africans at Microsoft dream about making an impact on our home continent - does having an MBA help you think about challenges faced by Africa/Third World Countries?

- **Gavin** - I was very involved with Africa through business school (was in the peace corps in Togo before business school) - I joined the Africa club and helped organize African conference at Wharton. Did a dual degree, focused Masters in International Studies with a focus on Africa and African technology. I wanted to pursue knowledge about Africa and I made it a priority in school
- **Pa'lee** - the sky's the limit. As an MBA you can do a lot - entrepreneurial skills can enable you to do things like start up foundations etc. So many non profits and other orgs can use - would love - to use your skills.
- **Tayo** - you get to meet people from all over the world during your MBA - you can compare practices in emerging and established countries/regions and get different perspectives. The business education also gives you a framework for thinking through how to apply what you've learned and how to approach or tailor your solution to positively influence the environment and make a difference. It also gives you the confidence to take action.

Q: How much do you emphasize GMAT vs 10-15 years of work experience? Can we work around getting official transcripts if they prove difficult to secure from our home countries?

- **Molly** - for the exec MBA the GMAT is a requirement but we understand someone who's been out of the classroom for a decade may not have the same scores as someone straight out of college.
- **Barry** - understand the institution you're applying to - some business schools weight the GMAT more heavily than others. The most important thing is to make sure the school is the right one.
- **Pa'lee** - we do require a 4 year degree (many international degrees are 3 years), many international students have advanced degrees which helps with that. We do also require original transcripts, even though they're hard to get sometimes.

Q: I'm trying to evaluate if it's worth leaving Microsoft to go to business school.

- **Barry** - how you process information is important - that helps you decide between schools based on the style of teaching. Is now the time? That's something only you can answer - is it the right next phase for your life?
- **Leeman** - in making a decision to do an MBA, some people focus only on the monetary ROI; go beyond the financial benefit and look at the opportunities and experiences. It can expose opportunities to you that you might not have otherwise been aware of.
- **Chester** - rank the financial aspect low on your decision matrix. Know that there are ways to get your MBA financed completely.
- **Tayo** - think about your goals - which schools will meet your needs? Start from the end and work back; and that'll help you determine which program will help you get there.

Q: Do you help with immigration for foreign candidates who may want to study an MBA full time?

- **Barry** - at MIT/Sloane yes, we can help with I-20 processing and complying with financial requirements. The process starts with details you provide in your application.
- **Pa'lee**- UW international students have to show they can afford the program over 2 years. To date, we've had no issues with the visa requirements for our international students
- **Tayo** - I had the loans and had to get the visa - when you get to the embassy it's between you and the consular interviewer even though the school helps you prep and package. Pay attention to how you present yourself and your information to the embassy interviewer. There are actually people who can help you prep for the embassy interview - I was rejected at first but the second time was much better prepared and presented, and I got the visa approved on the spot.

Panelists and Schools Represented

Randy Wootton

General Manager, Online Services and Windows
Microsoft Corporation
MBA 2000, Harvard

Gavin Oxman

Product Planner, Visio
Microsoft Corporation
MBA 2007, Wharton

Kerry Olin

General Manager, Global University Recruiting
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Shola Aluko

Senior Product Manager, Windows
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MBA 2004, Ohio State

Leeman Abdulai

Finance Manager, Corporate Finance
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MBA 2007, Cornell

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Harvard Business School
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Molly Kihanya

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Haas School of Business
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Pa'lee Showalter

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Foster School of Business
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Barry Reckley

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