



GLOBAL GLEAM

Jay Rege explores the application procedure that will lead you to an MBA degree abroad

ONCE you decide to pursue an MBA abroad, the first thing that starts is your GMAT preparation. You then decide on the universities you plan on applying to, have your academic transcripts made, work on the application essays, get recommendation letters from your employers and finally face the MBA interview. Most globally ranked MBAs (and ISB in India) follow this comprehensive application process where the admission decision based on an applicant's overall profile and not just on test scores.

ACE THE ADMISSION PROCESS

Take the case of computer engineer Ram Kumar (name changed), who has been working with a leading software company for the past six years. He has an excellent academic record (top five in his engineering class) and a GMAT score of 720. Yet, when he applied to the top seven MBA programmes last year, he was rejected by all.

An inspection of his essays and resume revealed that Kumar had nothing substantial to differentiate himself from the rest of the applicants. Neither did he have a clear idea of why he wished to do an MBA, or a definite career focus. These were probably his major weaknesses - the reasons for his rejects.

Most Indian MBA applicants to the global top 20 MBA programmes have almost the same profile: Male IT candidates averaging five years of work experience and 700+ GMAT scores. Women with similar profiles have marginal gender advantage over their male counterparts.

WHAT MBA ADMISSION COMMITTEES LOOK FOR...

During your MBA, you would have to attend classes, work on assignments and give exams. Thus, having a good academic record and high GMAT score definitely help as they are fair indicators of your intellectual aptitude. But these are not sufficient to get you in. Admission committees on the other hand, are looking for more.

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

Most MBA programmes do not specify any cutoffs for academic or GMAT score requirements. They look for candidates with work experience or those who have demonstrated leadership, team and social skills beyond the academic environment.

Most successful MBA applicants have anywhere between two to eight years work experience - the average being about five years. While there have been instances where candidates with less than two years or no work experience have been selected, you would need to have other significant achievements to your credit in order to qualify for this. Being employed at a good position and with a reputed brand helps, but what your attitude towards your work, initiatives that you have taken and your accomplishments are more important. Your resume, recommendations and essays are means though to communicate these to the admissions committee.

Committees like candidates who have demonstrated leadership characteristics, have taken independent initiatives and are good 'team players'. Talk about these in your essays and back your claims with recommendations.

Your biggest differentiator is your attitude and focus. However strong your profile may be, you cannot succeed if the admission committee feels that you lack clarity of thought. Your goals are your biggest differentiators and your essays, interview and recommendation (to some extent) are your channels to convey this.

RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

A common misconception is that higher the designation and qualifications of the recommender, the higher its impact. On the contrary, it is 'what' is written in your recommendation that is more important than 'who' is writing it. Of course, the recommender should be at a supervisory or managerial position and your peer.

Your recommender should be able to objectively site instances and references of your performance and initiatives. When asking supervisors for recommendation letters, request them to write about actual instances where you demonstrated leadership traits. Some make the mistake of requesting very senior officials for recommendations. This could prove dicey as, if your interaction with this official is infrequent, it is likely that he/she would write a more generic and superficial piece. Immediate supervisors on the other hand, are more specific.

"I WORK FOR MY DAD'S COMPANY. WHOM DO I GET A RECOMMENDATION FROM?"

If you run, or are part of a small or family owned business then either your suppliers, customers or other business associates could recommend you. Be sure to address this issue in your application essays. But inform the admissions committee that you didn't get your recommendation from your supervisor because you are your own boss, or you work for your dad.

ESSAYS

Here's where you can tell the admissions committee everything about yourself (your strength, accomplishments, goals and shortcomings). The most important aspect (that appears on almost all MBA applications) here is the question which asks about your short and long term career goals and your reason for considering an MBA at this point (popularly known as the 'Why MBA' essay).

Be articulate when answering, as vague or nonspecific answers can denote the end of your application. Good answers require research. You could find out a little more about the school, what it specialises in and the kind of careers its students take up upon graduation.

A good way to start would be look at the school's website. Try getting in touch with current students and alumni and discuss how the school can help your career goals. If you want additional information, do not hesitate to contact the schools MBA office directly. They will be more than willing to help you plan your MBA. In your essay, talk about why you are interested in that particular school. Highlight specific aspects of the programmes that you like and why an MBA from that particular school will help achieve your goals.

INTERVIEW

The last component is your interview. If you happen to be near the school, opt for a face to face interview. Else, a telephonic interview works fine. This would not be a test of your general knowledge, so you need NOT know who invented the fountain pen or discuss the genocide in Rwanda or NASA's future plans on Mars exploration. What you would probably be asked are questions about your personal accomplishments, ideas and future plans. You could also use this opportunity to discuss recent changes in your work profile or responsibilities not addressed in your application or inquire about the programme. Your interview could take place months after submitting your application so it would be wise to reread your essays and resume before attending the interview.

MAKING YOUR APPLICATION LOOK DIFFERENT...

- Visiting the school personally can help but may not always be possible (it might be too expensive, time consuming etc) – but at least visit the school's website and go through it thoroughly.
- Meet school representatives and talk to them if they are in India or a city near you during the MBA World Tours or any other occasion
- Have online discussions with schools reps (many schools have scheduled online chat sessions).
- Find out if there are alumni of the schools in your city. If yes take appointments and visit them.
- Whomever you visit, 'plan' your visit. Go prepared on what you want to discuss with the school reps/alumni.
- Carry your business card and try to remember names of people you meet. This is especially true if you visit a MBA fair where there are many schools gathered together. Many times students move from one booth to another and don't bother to remember names of school reps. If you can't remember names then write them down before you visit the next booth.
- If someone spent time talking to you at the MBA fair or an alumni meet remember to send them a 'Thank You' note (email)
- Make it a point to refer your meeting with the school rep/alumni in your application essays and/or during your interview. The whole idea of doing the above exercise is to show the admissions committee that you are genuinely interested in their MBA program.

Quite possibly many applicants won't be able to do many of the above mentioned activities (except visiting the school's website). That's fine too. Your biggest differentiator is going to be your attitude and your focus. However strong your profile is, you may not succeed if the admission committee feels that you do not have clarity in your thinking. Your goals are your biggest differentiators and your essays, your interview and your recommendation (to some extent) are your channels to convey this.

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