



## THE MBA AS CAREER CATALYST

Taking an MBA might change your life in many ways, but how dramatically will it allow you to change your career? Adrian Barrett talks one of the UK's leading career management consultants, Carol Slesser.

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The motivations for embarking on an MBA are as varied as the individuals that make up the international business school population. For some, such as young strategy consultants, the qualification is a logical stepping-stone up the career ladder. With others, the course of study is a way of broadening business and management skills to make them more effective in their current roles. However an increasing number of students are making this major commitment of time, money and energy in the belief that an MBA will allow them to make a fundamental change of direction in their careers. But is this belief grounded in reality or is it simply an expensive case of self-delusion?

The harsh fact of life is that, at least in Europe, much post-MBA recruitment is still based on what you did before you went to business school rather than the fact you now are entitled to three extra letters after your name. From a recruiter's point of view the MBA is consequently seen as 'icing on the cake' - but not the cake itself. If you were patently unsuited for life in strategy consultancy or merchant banking before you went to business school, then unless you are studying at one of a handful of elite international institutions, it is unlikely that your chances will be any better afterwards.

So does this mean that the popular perception of the MBA as a career catalyst is a false one? Not according to career management consultant Carol Slesser. Slesser originally started dealing with MBAs by running career development courses for Cranfield School of Management and has since worked with graduates from a wide range of major business schools, such as Manchester, Cambridge and SDA Bocconi.

"I think one of the great strengths of the qualification is the way it gets people to look at things from a different perspective," she says, "but they need to do a lot of extra work to discover what their real strengths are, what they really want to do with their lives and how they are going to combine the two in the workplace. Only then will they be ready to start looking for the next career move."

Slesser's approach is to spend time getting to know clients as individuals; looking at their family background, academic history, how they chose their present career and what progress they have made to date. In-depth interviewing is then backed up by a questionnaire-based on neuro-linguistic programming principles, to build a complete picture of what makes each person 'tick'. "We then go on to analysed what aspects of their work they wish to keep and which they want to dispense with," says Slesser. "This part of the process is absolutely key, because it allows an MBA to see how they can build on existing skills - something that sets them up for a change of direction, which is a realistic option, rather than a complete turn-around in their career, which in most cases is not."

Once four to five options for change have been agreed, Slesser sends her clients away to research just how feasible they are by talking to companies, personal and work contacts and specialist recruitment consultancies. "Once this is established, my role is to provide the individual with the tools that will get them the right job - the confidence to network effectively, good interview technique, the energy to see their campaign through to the desired conclusion."

Given a realistic approach (aspiring rock stars and Formula One drivers are deterred right from the start!) and a willingness to build on core skills, Slesser can point to many instances of MBAs changing their careers for the better.

Steven, for example, a Cranfield MBA, worked in finance related roles for a major US company, both in the UK and overseas, for more than ten years. In his mid-thirties by the time he consulted Slesser, he was keen to move to a smaller company in a more planning-oriented job. Despite getting interviews on the strength of his qualifications and experience, his search was proving frustratingly unsuccessful. After a lengthy evaluation process, Slesser identified his problem as one of presentation. A decade of working in an aggressive, international organisation had left him with a confrontational style and a tendency to lapse into in-house jargon, which confused and deterred potential employers. Tackling the issue through mock interviews and role-plays allowed Steven to tone down his approach and resulted in an offer of a strategic planning role with a British Financial Services company.

Sarah came from a high achieving family where academic excellence was expected as a norm. With degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge, she had built an impressive reputation as a research scientist with an international company, but was becoming increasingly bored and frustrated. Taking an MBA at a leading business school only served to exacerbate the problem and her employer, anxious not to lose a valuable member of staff, called Slesser in to help. "I identified that, while her scientific work satisfied her need for academic credibility, it stifled the creative side of her personality."

Using the in-depth profile that Slesser built up, the company was able to build a job from scratch around Sarah and she now works directly for the chief executive in an international communications role, where she combines technical understanding of the organisation's products with the opportunity to make use of her interpersonal and creative abilities.