



# Anyone can do an MBA

If you have staying power then you can do an MBA and the process will teach you a lot about yourself and teamwork, writes **Madeleine Lyons**

So you think you're MBA material? Congratulations, but here's a news flash - anyone can do it. New MBA classes usually divide into two distinct groups - those who think they've a God-given right to be there by virtue of their innate drive and searing intellect, and those who can't believe they're there and worry they're going to be caught out at any minute.

The former will initially posture and bluster and intimidate the latter, but gradually the less self-assured group will assert itself and bring the most enriching and diverse learning lessons to the table.

If you're capable of absorbing information, meeting a deadline and working with others, you can do an MBA. It's more of an endurance test than a measure of exceptional academic capability - which is often how it is (wrongly) perceived.

Don't do an MBA if your end goal is a telephone number salary - I'm afraid its currency isn't valued that highly these days. There are plenty of other bright mortals capable of doing the same job who haven't had the privilege of swanning about hallowed halls in their spare time, and as a result they are hungrier and more determined than you will ever be.

The real benefit of an MBA is personal growth, a very worthwhile investment if you can afford it or, even better, you can persuade your employer that they can afford it. Think about it, what level of deep learning can be achieved by doing 18 subjects, 20 projects, 10 presentations and 16 exams over an eight-month period? You will only scratch the surface of most subject areas and, at best, acquire a passable understanding of the basics.

The likelihood of you being asked to regurgitate the precise

workings of market theory or to draw up a balanced scorecard in a workplace setting on foot of all this is highly unlikely.

It's not what you learn, it's how you learn that makes the MBA a worthwhile experience. It's how you cope with being one of about 70 people thrown together in a high-pressure environment that's the key.

The initial volume of reading and course work you are set is mind-blowing. Add to this a couple of deadlines for team projects and presentations and you are one very preoccupied person.

The test of the MBA is whether you can take all this on, prioritise what needs to be done and work effectively with your team to achieve good results.

All of the awful moments are more than adequately compensated for by the fact that the pain is shared. One person's strength tends to be another person's weakness, making it possible for each person to contribute something of value and enhance the collective experience.

This involves learning to trust others, really listening to what people have to say, and believing at all times that whatever the task is, it can be done.

There is no place for people losing the head or dragging their heels - it very quickly becomes a matter of personal pride that you will not let yourself or your team down.

A huge benefit of the MBA is the people you meet - and I don't mean the opportunity for future networking 'synergies' that the promotional brochures often crow on about. Once the course is under way everyone is in the same boat and feeling vulnerable. How people deal with the pressure can be a real eye-opener. I have seen grown men practically crying over the delivery of a Pow-

erpoint presentation. I have listened to a classmate calculate how much he was out of pocket on his MBA investment because a lecturer was absent for a couple of lectures.

You will meet some of the most infuriating and inspiring personalities you are likely to come across in your lifetime. But like some kind of secret society, you will find you have a grudging loyalty to even the most maddening characters because of your shared experience.

As with every college programme the syllabus will have its highs and lows, from course content to quality of lecturing. The high cost of the MBA means shoddy modules shouldn't really be tolerated, but they do exist. On my programme, an International Relations course based soundly on the notion that Japan will soon emerge as an economic powerhouse had clearly never had its material updated from the 1980s. Similarly an Electronic Commerce module based loosely on the premise that "this internet thing is really going to take off", with handouts featuring sketches of mainframe computers, didn't quite deliver an exciting insight



**Left: Smurfit Business School**  
**Above: students at the Smurfit school. "One person's strength tends to be another person's weakness, making it possible for each person to contribute something of value and enhance the collective experience"**

into the new information economy.

You will also be exposed to a whole new vocabulary, replete with jargon and nonsensical clichés. This can be tedious in the extreme: resist it at all costs.

What did I take away from my MBA? A little humility I hope. An understanding that everyone I work with has a valuable contribution to make, including myself. An ability to face a deadline or challenge without losing the head.

There's a very positive reinforcing effect to be had from working at full tilt with lots of balls in the air.

Another big lesson is to expect the unexpected – in the corporate world nothing is set in stone, people are dispensable, and ultimately the bottom line reigns supreme. It's not personal, it's business.

That's why personal growth is the most lasting gift the MBA can give, all the rest is learning by rote, and real life bears very little resemblance to even the finest academic theories.

*Madeleine Lyons successfully completed her MBA at the UCD Smurfit Business School in 2001.*

