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It is never too late to seek fresh pastures

With redundancies on the rise, more mature managers are taking the plunge and enrolling on an MBA course



Widget Finn

With redundancies hitting every sector many people are wondering what to do next. You do not have to be a thirty-something ex-financier to do an MBA to change your career. In fact you do not even have to be thirtysomething. Increasingly, more mature managers are taking the plunge.

At the Open University Business School the average age for students is 37 and about 15 per cent out of 1,400 are aged over 50.

Richard Wheatcroft, masters programme director, argues that older students contribute balance and are quicker to see the connections between subjects such as accounting, marketing and strategy.

"They have more life experience and the MBA helps them to make use of that experience," he says. Older students also learn from their younger colleagues. "Twenty years ago the world was a very different place, so they absorb modern attitudes to business," Wheatcroft adds.

Thorarinn Hjaltason brought an unusual angle to the MBA programme at Durham Business School — the view from Iceland. He had been director of urban planning in an Icelandic local authority for 13 years and decided at the age of 57 that he wanted a change of direction.

Twenty-five years after taking a masters in engineering he expected a return to studying to be difficult.

"I was fairly slow for the first few months but the toughest part was doing an MBA in a foreign language.

"It was a huge plus for my personal development, taking a year's break in my career, getting to know people from all over the world and hearing young people's ideas. It made me more mature as a leader."

A year later he moved from the public to the private sector as a consultant engineer. "I would never have dared take this job without the MBA," he says.

Thomas Dillon, 50, also sees the MBA as a path leading in another career direction. He is an in-house lawyer with the Motion Picture Association based in Brussels. "I could not see much prospect of advancement in my current post and I wanted to develop some management expertise,"

He is not conscious of the age gap between him and fellow students on the MBA in film business at Cass Business School, London. "It's a graduate course for grown-up people who are all students together." Given the opportunity, he would have taken an MBA earlier in his career but 25 years ago "few people took them".

However, at Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School, Belgium, MBA students can be as young as 25, so Philippe Haspeslagh, the dean, is hesitant about encouraging mature students, who he defines as over 40, to sign up. "Occasionally we have one or two but we have to be certain that they are still versatile and flexible enough to benefit," he says.

He admits that mature students can bring a calming and wise influence to the classroom when there is stress about exams or job prospects. But he says: "They have to bring an angle, such as experience in the music sector or journalism,"

Terry Wilson, 47, is the oldest student on Vlerick's full-time MBA programme, where the average age is 31. What has he learnt from his colleagues? "They keep my creative juices flowing and I receive free market research on Generation Y," he says. The cutting-edge technology issues can be challenging, however, he concedes.

Matthew Clevenger, 43, who has 20 years' experience with an airline, suspects that he is seen as an anachronism by his 25-year-old fellow MBA students studying finance at the International University of Monaco.

Nevertheless, it seems that it is never too late to do an MBA. Wheatcroft, of the Open University, recalls an application from an 84-year-old retired civil servant. "He was keen to emphasise that he was not doing it for career reasons."

Opportunity knocks for a second start

Richard Hallows, left, 54, had worked in local government "forever" when he decided to embark on the personal challenge of doing an MBA, Widget Finn writes. "I had always believed in lifelong learning and, although I had considerable experience of the public sector, I wanted another dimension. I wanted an understanding of how the private sector handles the management issues that we come up against."

Hallows chose a part-time MBA programme at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School to fit in with his role as director of social and community services at Vale Royal Borough Council, Cheshire.

"My fellow students were aged from 24 to 35 and were an incredibly clever and ambitious bunch. I learnt a lot from them — enthusiasm for learning, entrepreneurial skills and innovation of private sector thinking." He found that the most challenging part of the course was producing presentations that were out of his field, and realising that he was not the senior manager, "just one of the team".

Hallows, who graduated in 2006, is about to take early retirement. "I'm moving to the private sector with incredible confidence, which I wouldn't have had without the MBA."