

Alternatives to the MBA

By Donald Asher

Today's workers need to plan on being fired. You can do a great job every day, and your division or your product line or your location is simply eliminated by organizational realities far beyond your control. So you need to worry about your career marketability. Your current employer may know what you can do, but can you prove to *prospective* employers that you have what it takes to make contributions? That's the acid test, and that's why educational credentials are more important than ever.

To be sure you are ready in case you need to jump ship--or just to grasp that next rung on the ladder--you will almost certainly need education beyond the bachelor's degree. When the workers to your left and right have advanced credentials, and you don't, you are at career risk. Many careerists facing this reality reflexively reach for the MBA, the Swiss Army Knife of master's degrees. But is that the best degree choice for you? Maybe not. The MBA requires heavy quant skills you may lack, prerequisite courses in economics and accounting you may have skipped, and so on. Besides, the MBA, even with its second-year concentrations, is a generalized degree. The MBA may be perfect for you after all, but you should also consider some of these degrees:

Master's in Advertising or Marketing. Instead of choosing an MBA with a concentration in advertising or marketing, you can pursue a degree that focuses entirely on these interests. Advertising and marketing programs have rigorous curriculums involving, for example, psychographics, demographics, and appropriate analytics and business metrics, but without the survey of general business topics you would find in an MBA program.

Master of Human Resources. If you have a career in human resources, and intend to stay in HR, this is the obvious choice for you. It is far more beneficial to focus on the law, policy, best practices, and theory of your chosen field than to spend time on such arcane subjects as general corporate finance.

Master in Organization Development. OD is a relatively new field, focusing on the human side of organizational systems. In short, OD is a human-focused, systems-based approach to addressing organizational problems. If you want to learn how to build teams, resolve conflict, design information flows, deal with organizational culture, create large-scale organizational change, or develop post-merger integration strategies, then OD might be right for you.

Master of Public Administration. If you work in the public sector, for a government contractor, for a major NGO or nonprofit, or in any type of highly bureaucratic organizational structure, the MPA may be a good choice for you. MBA programs focus on the needs of major corporate organizations, but outside the corporate world the types of information flows, IT, finance, and regulatory environments are different. The MPA is clearly better able to address the career needs of workers in public sectors.

Master of Public Policy. Although popular in the same sectors as the MPA, the public policy curriculum is more theoretical and more analytical than the focus of the MPA. People with MPAs do things--people with MPPs think about how things should be done. The MPP degree is popular in public-sector consulting, think tanks, policy-setting and regulatory environments, and with such glamour employers as the United Nations.

Master of Public Health. If you work in healthcare, or in a government agency concerned with healthcare delivery, then the MPH can be an excellent choice. The MPH is a wide-ranging degree, with curriculum that may range from epidemiology to ethnic marketing to public finance.

Master of Healthcare Administration. This is a more specialized degree choice than the MPH, appropriate for people who plan career advancement within a hospital, insurer, HMO, hospice, gerontology center, adult day care, extended care facility, or similar. One variant is the **Master of Hospital Administration**, which is obviously for people who plan to advance within a hospital setting.

Master of Sports Administration. This degree is self-explanatory, but with a caveat: It is sometimes more popular with aspirants than with practitioners. You need sports experience either as part of the degree program--or before you even enter--in order to get the maximum career benefit! If you plan to run a college athletic program, work in professional or Olympic sports, or even run a youth sports league, this degree may fit.

Master of Educational Administration. This degree can focus on primary/secondary education, or on higher education, but usually not both, so be sure you choose a program with the concentration that interests you most. There are many variants, such as the M.Ed. with a concentration in administration, or the M.A. in student affairs.

Master of Arts Administration. If you want to work in the business side of museums, theatre, public art or music, then this degree may be perfect for you. As with sports administration, if you want this degree to help you in your career, you need to have internships or experience in arts administration at some point before you graduate.

Master's in Urban Planning. City and regional planning degrees are not just for planning officers. Architecture firms, construction companies, commercial and residential developers, and such specialized firms as shopping center design consultants will employ and advance people with this degree.

Master's in International Relations. The MIR will help anyone in business, government, nonprofit or NGO environments who has transnational or international business to conduct. People are often drawn to the international aspect of the MIR degree. You need to speak more than one language proficiently *before* entering this type of program, and you will need overseas experience before your degree will lead to career success. As with some of these other choices, an MIR without the right experiences may have little career impact. And just for the record, the U.S. diplomatic corps use the

Foreign Service Written Exam (FSWE) as an entrance requirement, not a master's degree.

There are dozens more examples of alternatives to the MBA, such as the MSIA (master of science in industrial administration) or the MEM (master of engineering management). Any master's degree will have career value as you gain valuable transferable skills, but some of these degrees make more sense than the MBA for people with specific career plans. To learn more about master's degree choices, the comprehensive source is *Graduate & Professional Programs: An Overview: Full Listing of Degree Programs by Field*, by Thomson Peterson's Publishing. This is the only one-volume resource listing every accredited degree program in the United States. This plus Internet searches can lead you to many excellent alternatives, one of which may be perfect for you.

BIO: Donald Asher is a career author and a popular lecturer at MBA programs, but he wants you to know that he has an MHROD (master of human resources and organization development) instead of an MBA. His books include *How to Get Any Job with Any Major*, *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*, and *Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice* (the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process). His web site is www.donaldasher.com. © 2010 Asher Associates.