

MBA hiring, pay soaring

Still, employers remain picky. Here's what companies are really looking for.

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For the second year in a row, recruiters are flocking to B-schools. In fact, 98% of 60 schools polled in a recent survey say they're seeing a big increase in job offers to MBA students, and 70% report a jump in starting salaries and signing bonuses.

Much of the demand is coming from those traditional stalwarts of MBA hiring - consulting, financial services, and consumer goods companies.

But recruiters aren't hiring indiscriminately, says Greg Ruf, CEO of MBA Focus (www.mbafocus.net), which maintains a database on more than 20,000 MBAs that it uses to help about 1,800 U.S. employers find job candidates from around the world.

Indeed, 42% of U.S. schools report that they're playing host to more and more recruiters who are there to find students from other countries, and to woo them for overseas jobs either in their own home countries or elsewhere, according to the MBA Career Services Council, a trade group for B-school career counselors and corporate recruiters, which conducted the survey.

But international experience isn't the only ticket to a desirable post-MBA job. What are top employers looking for in a candidate? Ruf, who spends most of his time meeting with recruiters, has his finger on the pulse of what they are thinking, and seeking, now. Some excerpts from our conversation:

Q. It's great to see demand for MBAs picking up again. What is the biggest change you've seen since the last big surge in MBA hiring, back in the late '90s?

A. The most noticeable change by far is that now, the top 25 or 30 MBA programs' students are about one-third international. To a much greater extent than before, you walk around on campus and see people from everywhere, from Buenos Aires to Beijing.

In fact, many more of our client companies are hiring us expressly to find candidates for jobs in developing markets. They will ask for Chinese MBA students who might make good "local hires" in China, for example.

Q. You also do targeted searches for employers who are looking for particular skills. What's most in demand now?

A. Obviously, technical skills - quantitative know-how, for instance - are important, and strong communication skills are always in demand. But the biggest buzzword now is globalization.

It's really a marked difference from just a few years ago. Now, the big U.S. tech companies, investment banks, consulting firms, and consumer-goods companies are trying to find people who can function globally. An MBA with overseas work experience, or familiarity with one or more foreign markets, has a real advantage. That person can probably choose among several great job opportunities.

And of course, if you're going to move up, as most MBAs expect to, global experience is a must. If I had a college-age or graduate-school-age child right now, I'd try to encourage him or her to spend a year or a semester in China, or in India.

China especially needs tens of thousands of trained managers to fuel the economic growth they're experiencing now, and there just aren't enough qualified people. Anyone who has spent time in China and knows something about it, and also has an MBA from a top U.S. school - well, that person can pretty much write his or her own ticket.

Q. One question I have to ask you: I often get e-mails from readers who are contemplating getting an MBA from a local college - say, a state university near where they live - and they want to know whether it matters where an MBA comes from. That is, will they be able to get a job with a big investment bank or consulting firm with that degree from a relatively obscure school? I always tell them it does matter where their MBA is from, and the top firms hire only from the top schools. Am I wrong about that?

A. No. It's shocking how right you are. The big brand-name investment banks and consulting firms do 90% of their recruiting at a "target list" of brand-name campuses - and it's a tiny number of schools, sometimes as few as six, sometimes as many as 14, but a tiny list.

I try to encourage them to look at the next tier of schools, because there are some very sharp students there, but the top firms won't even look. It isn't the recruiters' fault, by the way. Their lives would actually be easier if they had a broader pool of candidates. No, it's the partners making that decision, and it has to do with the whole culture, and traditions that date back many years.

So yes, if you want to work at a top firm, you have to go to a top school like Harvard, Wharton, Chicago, Stanford, or Columbia - unless you have an uncle in the business.