



21st CENTURY LEADERS

Manchester Metropolitan University

Regional event report



QAA



21ST CENTURY LEADERS

Reshaping Business and Management Studies

This workshop at the Manchester Metropolitan Business School, was one of a series where employers, academics and management consultants were brought together to share opinions on the current and future business curriculum. Delegates divided into smaller, mixed groups to discuss six key questions. Opinions were captured by a team of reporters, from which this report has been created. It aims to pull together the main viewpoints and conclusions rather than to provide a verbatim commentary of the discussions

The ideal candidate for a managerial position possesses a mix of knowledge, technical competence, interpersonal skills and experience. Recruiters are also looking for people with the right attitudes and behaviours, including personal accountability, self-awareness and professionalism. There is some evidence that educational institutions are taking steps to ensure that graduates have the benefits of work experience, develop relevant skills and are able to put theory into practice in the workplace. Nonetheless, recruiters still find that job candidates lack practical management skills and the ability to see the big picture. New graduates often lack the most basic workplace skills and at senior levels managers appear to be motivated too much by desires for financial remuneration or position.

At the same time, some argue that employer expectations are too high and that they need to take greater responsibility for training and developing their own employees. There is a strong consensus about both the benefits and the difficulties of providing effective work experience for students. Workshop participants put forward a variety of ideas on how employers can engage in initiatives which will help to improve the quality of business education.

Question 1: Describe your ideal management job candidate

- Is there a different skill set required from MBAs compared to Bachelors – or is it just a question of maturity and level of skill?

Question 2: Describe the candidates you *actually* see

- Is there a different skill set/education level required for senior positions compared to middle level? (or is it just experience?)
- What management and leadership skills do good candidates demonstrate?

Recruiters consider relevant knowledge and technical competence to be a prerequisite for job candidates but they are looking for people who have also acquired managerial and interpersonal skills, and have the right attitudes and behaviours to fit into an organisation. These are often lacking in the candidates they see, along with a good understanding of IT and a sense of personal accountability and honesty. New graduates in particular tend to rely on their qualifications but have little understanding of the adult world of business and it is important for them to develop this through work experience and extra-curricular activities. Characteristics highlighted as particularly important included: the ability to apply theory in practice, a sense of professional curiosity, ability to fit in with organisational culture whilst still being capable of questioning and challenging, and the ability to learn

from experience. At senior levels employers are looking for people who are able to lead and influence others, can see the bigger picture and are confident and self-assured. Concerns were expressed that too many managers appear to be motivated by money or 'naked ambition.'

Harder skills

An ideal candidate can apply taught theory in a practical context. Employers indicated that an ideal candidate possesses appropriate knowledge and technical competence for the sector and level of the role; the level of management skills and development needed will depend on context or sector. Requirements differ according to the size of the organisation, with Maryam Herin, Senior Lecturer at the Manchester Metropolitan Business School adding that in a smaller organisation it is less necessary for a candidate to hit hundreds of benchmarks.

People are often promoted into management roles because they are successful in their area of technical competence, such as in sales for example, but they do not possess the required management skills, have undertaken no training and do not necessarily make for successful managers.

Ideal candidates should be able to:

- coach others
- give attention to detail
- manage conflict
- drive and deliver change
- think critically and reflectively
- display an ability to learn, engage with, understand and apply knowledge, rather than simply absorb it
- be creative
- work cross-functionally
- employ project management skills
- be aware of global issues
- sell - this skill is becoming rare
- understand and make sense of complex issues
- display analytical ability and an understanding that correlation works both ways, not just linear
- ask questions without being afraid to ask 'Why?'

Delegates also noted that current managers lack sufficient IT and technology skills.

Mindset

Values are key to employing the correct candidate indicated Alison Robinson Canham, a freelance educationalist. Maryam Herin stated that an ideal candidate will be able to balance the values of the organisation and the values of their boss.

Person specifications tend to focus too heavily on skills as opposed to attitudes and behaviours. An ideal candidate should be self-aware, reflective, willing and able to learn from their own mistakes, having a desire to improve their own performance and that of others too.

An ideal candidate will possess professional curiosity, and the ability to fit into an organisation at

the same time as being able to challenge its ways of working suggested Alison Robinson Canham. Confidence is an important quality for candidates to possess as managers should be able to speak out if they think something is wrong. However, delegates indicated that organisations need to build a culture where employees feel comfortable and are able to raise concerns. Justin Lerner, Consultant for the Social Balance Consultancy expanded by adding that if an organisation wants to change itself, then it needs to identify what values it wants to uphold and develop when recruiting.

Dave Mettam indicated that an ideal candidate should possess a holistic approach; they will have a natural ability to see the bigger picture, as opposed to the linear thinker who moves sequentially from one step or task to the next. For example, a big picture thinker will look to build capability as opposed to eliminating waste or may collaborate and understand other projects in terms of resources, time and clashes, as opposed to simply delivering a project. Big picture thinkers form part of the team, helping to set the context with linear thinkers helping to make the preferred strategy work. Both have important roles in the team but holistic managers are currently lacking in business.

For senior level positions it is more about attitudes and confidence, whereas at middle level ideal candidates should display potential.

An ideal candidate should possess most, if not all of the following qualities:

- a cultural fit with the hiring organisation
- a readiness to hit the ground running
- adaptability
- resilience
- commitment
- the ability to recognise and be comfortable with change
- the ability to cope with uncertainty
- assurance/self-confidence.

Alison Robinson Canham suggested that adaptability, agility and resilience are particularly sought after by SMEs.

Delegates indicated that there are a number of issues with the attitudes of current managers and management job candidates. There is currently a lack of personal accountability, self-awareness, openness, honesty, forthrightness and emotional intelligence in industry. Some business school graduates exhibit a sense of entitlement and do not have the credentials to back up their applications. Delegates added that some people seem to move through life without making much effort; they turn up to work or study and don't do much, are unable to explain what they have achieved; they lack work ethic and the desire to succeed. Vin Mole, Director at Compendium Enterprise expressed a concern that currently, people applying for management positions appear to be motivated by solely by money.

Greg Stephen Knight, Employer Relationship Manager at the Chartered Institute of Management Consultants suggested that there is disconnect between current candidates' perceptions of work and the reality of the workplace.

Soft skills

In addition to possessing good basic technical competence and a positive mindset, an ideal candidate should have a number of stronger softer skills including:

- effective communication skills
- active listening
- being articulate
- ability to form relationships with others and be social
- ability to influence people, convince them and inspire them to be followers
- negotiation skills
- ability to read and understand others
- empathy.

Experience

Candidates who are new graduates lack experience of the adult world. Students are learning in isolation from the reality of the world of work. Employers expect students to come out of university with business knowledge, but some delegates questioned whether business schools are responsible for incorporating life skills into the course or whether students should be developing these outside of their studies. Employers are expecting graduates to be ready with life skills but delegates felt that this was a very high expectation, commenting that many employers no longer do much training themselves. Employers have to take some responsibility for delivering some aspects of training.

Delegates indicated that for roles at lower levels and in the early stages of their careers, candidates tend to rely on their qualifications but should look to build some experience. Vin Mole indicated that from entry level, candidates should be able to demonstrate that they are able to grow and lead. At middle-management levels, candidates need a combination of practical experience and demonstrable skills. At senior levels, experience and achievement become more important in order to demonstrate credibility.

Academics indicated that the best job candidates are those who have some work background; they are not necessarily academically talented but are able to apply theory effectively in practice. Work experience gives students confidence and self-motivation. Weaker students are those who come straight from further education; it is difficult to get them to take work experience seriously even when it is part of their course. Maryam Herin indicated that an ideal candidate will have experience which allows them to evidence how they apply their skills as well as their achievements. In addition, participants considered that the best candidates are those who reflect upon their experience, and can learn from it.

Date Mettam suggested that it does matter which university students have studied at; with 50% of young people doing university courses, it is generally very difficult for employers to differentiate between candidates. Those with a further degree stand out more. Graduates who have done something in addition to their studies, such as acting as a Student Union Sabbatical Officer, Sports Captain or undertaking charity/voluntary work have fresher experience and have started to develop the skills that employers are looking for. He added that much of the managerial skill set that might be considered 'talent' is innate and cannot be inculcated through training.

Delegates noted that in a difficult job market, recruiters tend to sift out applications from people who do not possess the specific qualifications employers have requested and this may lead to some of the more competent candidates being overlooked. Employers stated that at the interview stage they frequently see candidates who have done no groundwork or research on the organisation or who do not have an understanding of the role or sector.

Bernard Clarke, Director of Know and Do Ltd indicated that there was no single source for the best candidates.

Management and Leadership skills

Dave Mettam indicated that being a bigger picture thinker is a critical quality for senior managers, who are the stewards of the whole organisation, in its wider economic, social, cultural and regulatory environments. Consulting Director at Interact Development Limited. Nigel Starr, Lecturer in Organisational Development, added that middle managers currently have a better outside world view than senior managers, who often do not see the full picture as they are too focused on end results. Senior management teams that are essentially made up of linear thinkers and take a linear approach to management are often less open to new ideas, creativity and challenge from their subordinates. Dave Mettam added that industry is suffering from a lack of managers and leaders with a grounding in systems thinking, organisational and management cybernetics - the science of an effective organisation.

Senior managers are leaders, whereas middle managers are followers. Alison Robinson Canham added that it is important that managers possess the ability to lead, *'not just naked ambition'*. Nigel Starr highlighted the importance of senior managers being able to facilitate and encourage the next levels down as opposed to being prescriptive. Senior managers need to be bolder, manage conflicts of interest, have enterprise skills, transformational skills, the ability to challenge and must be non-conformists. Leaders do not need to take an interest in day to day details but should have good ideas and an entrepreneurial mindset. At senior levels, successful managers can move easily from one sector to another because they are effective at leading people, creating and implementing vision and can influence others to get behind them.

Ian Ablett, National Union and Learning Representative from the Department for Work and Pensions, indicated that in the civil service managers are unwilling to take a strategic perspective and instead they tend to cling on to the comfort of the task.

Question 3: What is being taught?

- What are the knowledge and skills you expect a business school to teach?
Assign a rating 1-10.

Question 4: Are there any skills specific for you region/sector?

- What are the top 5 skills required now, and in the future?

Participants felt it was important for the business school curriculum to be both theoretical and vocational. They highlighted that while business schools focus on teaching the theory and history of business, they also aim to develop autonomous learning, critical thinking and reflective practice and that opportunities for volunteering and careers advice are provided. There is also evidence that business schools as well as further education colleges are also giving attention to the development of managerial skills. Nonetheless a number of weaknesses were highlighted. These included too exclusive a focus on the private sector, functional subjects being taught in silos hindering students from understanding how these fit together, a lack of teaching on the systems perspective of organisations and inadequate careers guidance. There were calls for students to be taught the basic skills of organisational life such as writing memos and letters, answering the telephone, using email for business. However, some argued that employers need to take more responsibility for training and developing new recruits.

Currently being taught

Business schools mainly teach the theory and history of business. They encourage autonomous learning and development, reflective practice and provide opportunities for students to hone their

presentation and problem solving skills. Participating academics highlighted that self-awareness, diagnostics and careers advice are all included within their programmes, as well opportunities for volunteering.

Dave Mettam commented that business schools currently teach functional subjects in silos with no common glue which would pull out the essential connections between them.

Another comment was that business text books tend to focus exclusively on the commercial sector. It is important for different business models to be covered.

Paul Williams, Head of Staffordshire University Business School indicated that he felt that a discussion on how the progression from undergraduate to post graduate management study can be developed was long overdue. This should examine how the two link together, whether they are building the right foundations and what skills and attributes should be developed. He added that Staffordshire Business School recently reviewed their portfolio and this has meant that skills and attributes form a greater part of their programmes. There are more opportunities for students to develop these skills within extra-curricular activities. Changes to the support services students receive mean that students are helped to recognise the particular skills they are developing and what these will allow them to do. Knowledge and understanding are put into context in different situations.

Alan Lund, Programme Manager at the UCBC indicated that the education system in the UK encourages students to specialise too soon. Wendy Bowers, President of the East Lancashire Chamber of Commerce agreed, adding that GCSEs are chosen when pupils are just 13 or 14, when they do not understand what some subject areas such as engineering really involve. She suggested that better guidance should be given, using questions to understand what students are good at and what they enjoy.

There is a difference between what is delivered by further education and higher education. Janice Hardman, from Accrington and Rossendale College suggested that higher education is where you are talked at, and further education is where you learn skills and then have to put them into practice.

Delegates also discussed the current issue of university grading and how effectively soft skills and performance during work placements can be assessed.

What is expected to be taught?

Employers considered that the business school curriculum needs to be both theoretical and vocational, with both linked together so that what is taught can be put into practice. Courses should also allow for reflection on the topics covered. A safe environment where students can be free to make mistakes and learn from these was important.

Delegates questioned how different 'applied' courses are? They wondered whether the QAA has any data that they might be able to provide on how much weight different courses and/or business schools give to the practical element.

Some expressed regret that many work placement students and job candidates appear to lack even the most basic skills and are unable to write letters, memos and emails for business purposes, answer the phone and speak to customers, or generally use technology for business purposes, despite a general understanding of IT.

For this reason they felt that basic skills should be taught including:

- writing skills, including proposals
- numeracy
- time-keeping
- team-working.

A wide range of subjects were considered important by delegates, covering both the traditional fare of business courses such as operations, finance and marketing, self-management, people management and interpersonal skills. The following were all mentioned.

- marketing
 - finance, including budget and resource limitations
 - business operation skills, understanding how a business works as well as specific methods such as lean and six sigma
 - commercial awareness
 - the application of technology
 - risk management – an understanding of risk and how to manage it
 - personal responsibility - professionalism, self-reflection, self-actualisation, adaptability
 - critical thinking
 - communication skills - being articulate, listening, writing
 - people management
 - team working and collaboration
 - project management
 - negotiating, including contract negotiation
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- decision making
 - strategic thinking and planning – identifying opportunities
 - entrepreneurship – one comment here was that one third of Harvard programmes is devoted to entrepreneurship. This raised the question as to whether business schools in the UK have too strong a focus on employment as opposed to entrepreneurship.
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- cross-cultural skills – understanding of cultures and languages, ability to communicate cross-culturally, empathy and awareness. These were seen as important in the context of global business.

Employers suggested that business schools should take advantage of the diverse student population to introduce international perspectives into courses. More case studies from different countries should be used, as the majority currently come from the United States and may not be applicable. The value of bite sized learning and flexible modules was also mentioned.

Despite a strong focus on skills in the discussion, one delegate suggested that research and state of the art knowledge is an important asset that graduates can bring to an organisation. *'A degree is so much more than just learning the softer skills'*. Participant also discussed whether employers expect too much from business schools. Employers are repeatedly saying that students are not work-ready but maybe they are too quick to assign responsibility for skills development to universities and colleges rather than taking responsibility for training themselves. One comment was that business schools should provide education not training.

Following on from his comments about functional silos in business school teaching, Dave Mettam argued that the largest gap in the curriculum is the lack of the scientific principles of organisations,

including: complexity, organisational and management cybernetics, requisite variety, Conant and Ashby theorem, system dynamics, soft systems methodology, and an understanding of emergence. He considered that these subjects could bind all the professional content together.

However, expertise in this area is rare with only two departments at Hull Business School and the Open University giving it due credence. Dave indicated that by the time students get to university, they have experienced so many linear learning experiences that it is difficult for them to take these subjects on board and special tests are required to assess students' suitability to take these modules. He further maintained that the system makes it impossible for business schools to address these issues fundamentally, but it should be possible to add modules that will give students an understanding of how everything fits together. If business schools were unable or unwilling to do this, he felt there was opportunity for CMI to fill the void. He added that there is a whole set of company/sector specific knowledge and context that may be best carried out by CMI and employer organisations.

Other participants in the discussion also felt that the issue of functional silos needed to be addressed. Business schools should pull all the different areas of knowledge together. It was considered that there should be some way to connect the dots to create a richer picture. Subjects which lent themselves to this included decision making and strategic thinking, Delegates added that if a wider view point was encouraged then Corporate Social Responsibility and ethics could be embedded within this.

Knowledge and understanding may be discipline specific but employers indicated that it was also important for business schools to make sure that they are giving students opportunities to develop and demonstrate citizenship, social responsibility, professionalism, critical thinking and ethics.

One delegate highlighted the controversy surrounding Michael Porter and the closure of his consultancy business and suggested that the academic community should be more aware of such incidents and their implications for the curriculum. In response, other delegates felt that academia needs to reflect changes in the business environment, with a range of different models and frameworks being taught.

Employers pointed out that time frames must be considered when implementing any changes. Universities are bureaucratic and slow moving. One comment was that there is too much aiming and not enough firing. Long-term planning at business schools is hampered by an emphasis on the annual budgeting cycle. Academics indicated that it was tricky trying to develop, manage and monitor multiple streams.

Region/sector specific skills

Dave Mettam stated that any consultant he used would have to be a systems practitioner, or at least would understand the fundamentals and be able to work within a broad context.

The top skills required now and in the future

From the long list of topics mentioned by participants, the highest ranked skills reflected the need for core qualities: interpersonal skills, communication skills, the ability to reflect; decision making, influencing, adaptability; and qualities managers need to be successful in more senior roles, such as commercial awareness and strategic thinking.

Delegates indicated that managers needed skills which allowed them to connect the organisational dots, ensuring that ethical management practice and corporate social responsibility are effective.

Systems awareness, including an understanding of emergence and an ability to see the bigger picture so that managers can challenge initiatives that are pursued both blindly and without addressing the broader more fundamental issues were noted as vitally important by Dave Mettam.

In addition delegates other top skills included:

- political awareness and skill, including impact and use of power
- analytical skills
- research, study skills, the ability to locate authoritative information
- common sense/gumption
- IT skills.

Question 5: How can employers help?

- Suggest a list of potential interventions: work placements, employer lecturers, events etc.

Question 6: What have you seen work well in practice?

- What activities are most beneficial to the candidate?

The importance of work placements was highlighted and it was suggested that “every course should have a placement module”. However, organising placements presents a number of challenges and participants also suggested ways to make them more effective. A number of additional suggestions for how students could gain a better understanding of the world of work and employers could become more involved in business education were put forward. These included: mock work environments, student projects, mentoring schemes, guest lectures, student involvement in business incubators and curriculum development. A number of successful initiatives were described by delegates.

Placements

‘Every course should have a placement module’.

Manchester Metropolitan University representatives described a system where students have work placements embedded into their course one day a week. Placements are most beneficial where employers are committed to supervising and managing the placements, work to the structured programme and provide a mentor for the placement. Placements must consist of worthwhile, real duties as opposed to students being exploited by just doing the filing.

Employers indicated that placements are easier if students already possess basic skills, such as emails, writing letters and answering phones. Employers feel these basic skills should be addressed in employability modules in schools and in foundation degrees. In general, however, universities assume that students already have these skills. Employers added that this means that it can be three to four weeks before students are able to contribute anything meaningful to an organisation and the placement becomes a cost to employers. Alison Robinson Canham suggested that business schools and employers should require students to apply for their placement. This would not only help them to practice their interviewing skills but leads them think about and prepare themselves for what is required of them in the world of work.

Business schools admitted that there were health and safety/insurance issues to sort out and problems within the public sector, which due to cuts are unable to commit time to managing placement students. Organisations prefer to take apprentices rather than students on work experience, with some colleges losing students to apprenticeship programmes. Although

placements cannot be made to be compulsory, those who did them were the strongest graduates.

One group of delegates indicated that a placement scheme which supports students in data collection for dissertations could be useful. It was added that sometimes this data might benefit the organisation for a win-win scenario. However, students should not be punished for not meeting company expectations.

Employers' expectations of placements need to be managed better. There should be something which informs employers of what their responsibilities are and the benefits to them of taking on placement students, as currently there is a lack of understanding. Delegates from SMEs commented that they find it more difficult to get involved with placements in comparison with larger organisations. They also felt that the public and third sectors should be more involved in placements.

Suzanne Tyrrell, CMI Programme Director at UCBC indicated that an internal agency in her college takes on external work and recruits students to do it. However this works better in the catering and engineering sectors as opposed to management.

Projects

John Vaughan described a school of business and commerce which had employed someone to find work projects for business and management students. They found many projects but this worked better for developing technical skills which the hiring businesses knew they lacked rather than allowing for the development of management skills. It was also suggested that students could undertake real live projects provided by an organisation.

Mentoring

A mentoring and advice clinic was suggested, where students get involved with business advisors and learn through observation how to give advice. It was felt important to find more ways of putting students into these kinds of situations so that they can gain experience and develop skills. The potential of alumni mentoring, where students are supported with advice given by graduates who have moved into business was briefly noted.

Guest Lecturers

Role models are important but are difficult for managers to present. Some groups of delegates suggested that employers could engage with students as guest lecturers, industry speakers, or be used to support prospective entrepreneurial students looking to go down different routes; however, another group of delegates indicated that initiatives of this kind did not appear to go down well.

Further interaction

Beyond placements, projects and mentoring, there were a number of additional suggestions for how business schools and employers can both contribute to the production of successful management graduates.

One delegate highlighted the positive effect of students working before and/or during their qualification - students with work experience tended to have a better work ethic and were better able to apply theoretical concepts. Several delegates expressed the view that careers advice provided to business students has to be fit for purpose. They added that in schools, a lot of teachers provide careers guidance without having had any experience of the real world.

Other suggestions and examples included:

- mock workplaces in the learning environment
- assessed role plays
- offering incentives to employers, such as the use of facilities and basic consulting to SMEs
- student consultancy teams
- *'tea out with the professor'* events
- employment café speed dating at the MMU Centre for Enterprise
- the IDEAs programme
- employers becoming co-developers of the curriculum

- strategic advisory boards, working and connecting with the community
- *'project education'* a course which teaches people in all areas the fundamentals of projects in a twenty hour course, which includes risk and stakeholder management.

One further question raised was how the success of such initiatives could be assessed.

Case studies

A number of examples of initiatives were mentioned by participants in the discussions:

- Wendy Bowers indicated that her daughter's school was participating in an employability award as part of a wider scheme. The criteria included punctuality/lateness, effort, work placements, community work and school involvement. However, communication skills were not included.
- The 'Teachers into Industry' scheme was mentioned by Cliff Mockett. Many academics have no business experience or lack contemporary insight into industry. Some universities require academics to undertake some form commercial activity during their tenure.
- Paul Williams stated that he is aware of one university which now addresses employability from the first year at level 4, whereas this used to start at level 6. Employability is now much more embedded across the whole programme in compulsory modules and students are supported to develop an e-portfolio to demonstrate what they have learnt and achieved.
- Staffordshire University have set up an online radio station which is run by students. Students are always actively encouraged to get involved in activities of this type.

REGISTERED GUESTS

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