

The Opportunities and Optimism for Graduate Management Education

Despite recent volatility and pressure, GMAC's research reveals GME candidates remain positive about the benefits it brings. By **Joy Jones**

Graduate Management Education (GME) has experienced monumental changes and mounting macro pressures in recent years. Besides the COVID-19 pandemic and its lingering effects, factors such as prolonged economic disruptions, volatile visa policies and geopolitical environments, as well as major shifts in demographics and growing educational alternatives, have all contributed to the unpredictability our GME community is facing today.

While these macro pressures have created some instability in the industry, they also present opportunities, uniquely available to the global business school community, to emerge stronger. GMAC research shows that two-thirds of GME candidates remain undeterred by the global economic conditions and committed to the pursuit of their business education dreams. Furthermore, the number of candidates interested in pursuing international study, particularly in Western Europe and the United States, continues to grow as fear of the pandemic eases. The timing is ripe for us to lean in on the immeasurable benefits of GME in providing individuals with the adaptive skills highly-desired by current and potential future employers, the rich experiences satisfying not only their professional but also personal goals, and the meaningful connections lasting beyond the spans of their career to last a lifetime.

“

GMAC research shows that two-thirds of GME candidates remain undeterred by global economic conditions





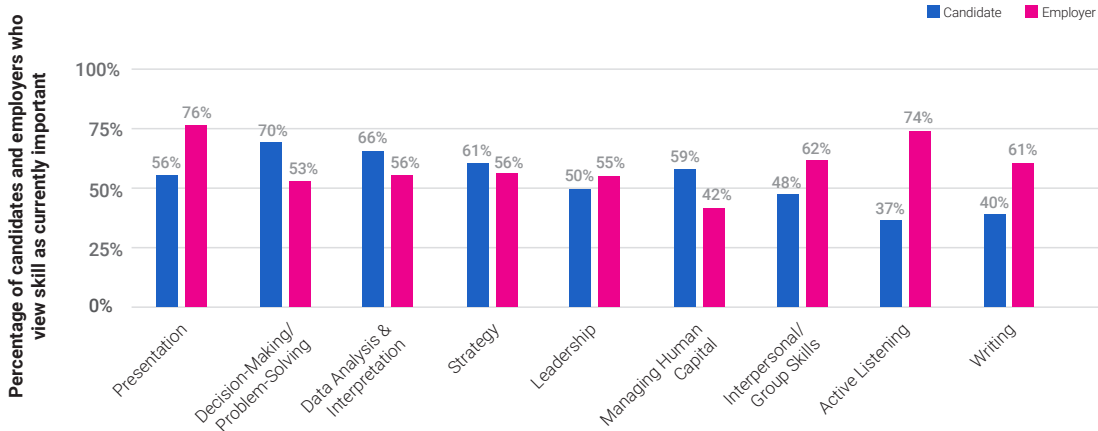


Figure 1. Candidate and Employer Skill Importance

Adaptive skills of today and tomorrow

We should look at the bigger picture of GME through a deeper dive into the demographic trends among candidates. Understanding candidates from Generation Z—born between approximately 1996 and 2012 and now the largest generation applying to business schools—is critical as graduate business programmes plan to develop deeper pipelines and continue to build more inclusive classrooms. As they emerge from the shadow of the pandemic and begin to feel hopeful about their future, we are at a timely crossroads to drive Gen Z prospective students to the path of advanced business degrees, assuring them that GME is a promising path to opportunities in the workplace that will give them the edge in a competitive labour market. Gen Z need to feel confident that the skills they will learn in business school will offer them the know-how and qualifications to achieve their personal and professional dreams.

Specifically, with the rise of new technology, hybrid offices, and multinational teamwork, prospective students and employers alike are expecting GME graduates to bring forward classic business school capabilities in new ways (see Figure 1). For example, corporate recruiters





have shared that communication, data analysis, and the ability to make strategic pivots in an uncertain world are currently among the most important skills for GME graduates – and most agree that this importance will continue to grow while being deployed in increasingly hybrid and cross-cultural contexts. At the same time, our survey of prospective students shows that seven out of ten candidates want to develop data analysis and interpretation skills, and six out of ten candidates think business analytics and data science will stand out in importance. GMAC’s recent look at candidate segmentation further supports the point in that ‘career advancers’, the largest of the eight candidate personas identified in the pipeline, are motivated by gaining technical and adaptive skills that create more career options.

Evidently, employers and candidates are on the same page, understanding that decision-making, problem-solving, and analytical skills are essential, especially in an information-loaded world where technology is challenging authenticity. Business schools around the world are in a great position to provide the nurturing environment and deliver the much sought-after skills for prospective employees and employers alike.

Meaningful connections

Besides gaining critical skillsets, building long-lasting and meaningful connections has strengthened as a significant draw to prospective GME candidates. The pandemic has demonstrated to many of us that school and work do not have to be undertaken in person. It has made clear that technology—and evolving social norms about online and hybrid format—means studying and working can be done from anywhere when needed. This means that programme delivery requires some flexibility by leveraging digital tools to offer options for students to connect in a meaningful way no matter whether it’s in person or virtually. This is especially prominent for Gen Zers since, as the first fully digital generation, technology has touched every part of their lives.



However, while the flexibility that technology brings is desirable, Gen Z has shared that they place a premium on personal interactions, learning from peers of diverse backgrounds and cultures, and applying these learnings to solve real-world problems. They believe that the classroom is a great starting point for developing the cross-cultural competence employers so eagerly seek. To win the heart of prospective students on the fence about business education, we need to double-down on promoting our unique curricular and co-curricular approach to learning, networking, and delivering immersive experiences, particularly to younger participants.

Life-enriching experiences

We know from our survey that most prospective students believe GME will help them stand out at work, but they often cite cost as a top barrier. Understanding and underscoring the return of investment for GME has always been a critical element in pipeline development and recruitment. Without a doubt, financial outcome – such as salary increase – is one key factor that many prospective GME candidates consider. ‘Wealth builders’, the second largest persona identified in our candidate segmentation study, are more likely to have a top priority of reaching their financial goals and earning more money compared to all other groups when considering business education.



But it’s not all about the money. Looking at the multi-faceted picture of success beyond its traditional sense could be the difference in motivating individuals of different genders and generations to commit to GME. For instance, many women and millennials are ‘social-impact champions’, seeking financial independence but also wanting to work for ‘good’ employers with admirable corporate social responsibility principles. There are also those, especially among Gen Zers, who are ambitious but consider mental health, wellness, and work/life balance as crucial dimensions of their academic, career, and personal futures.



“”

Understanding and underscoring the return of investment for GME has always been a critical element in pipeline development and recruitment



From degree programmes to new certificates, concentrations, and executive education, there are a wealth of options appealing to a wide spectrum of candidates in different stages of career and life. Gen Z, for example, while remaining interested in GME, are less committed to degree programmes than the generations before them. Microcredentials, new certificates and even self-teaching via digital resources are other venues and platforms appealing to their pursuit of advanced education. They are less aware, however, that high-quality versions of these formats may also be available through your institutions. The 'lifelong learners', who occupy 10% of the pipeline segmentation, are motivated to pursue business education for their personal growth and development. One of the biggest changes – and a golden opportunity – for our community is to adapt and develop lifelong learning systems that offer programmes and experiences that are attractive and relevant to people at every stage of their development.

GMAC and the value of GME

As a mission-driven, non-profit organisation that represents leading business schools globally, we are committed to leveraging our expertise and harnessing new insights in developing the business candidate pipeline – in partnership with schools and corporations – so that it remains clear why the value of GME stands head and shoulders above other options. GMAC is committed to all the people we serve – prospective candidates with talent and aspirations in business careers, corporate employers eager to tap into their potential and skillsets, and school professionals who are passionate about holistic admission practices to build an inclusive classroom.

We have an opportunity to bring the curricular, experiential, and cohort-based learning that we uniquely offer forward in our engagement and recruitment of prospective candidates. As I commemorate the first anniversary of my taking the reins as CEO of GMAC, an organisation just marking its 70th anniversary in 2023, I cannot help but commend my colleagues in the GME community who have quickly adapted to the growing needs of an ever-shifting global candidate landscape and business environment. As we stand hand-in-hand, ready to meet whatever challenges our industry will continue to encounter, I remain hopeful for the opportunities ahead. We at GMAC are refreshed and renewed in our dedication to helping the dreams of business school aspirants become a reality by ensuring their talents are discovered and that they find in your institutions the right business school programmes to set them firmly on a path toward long-term success.



About the Author

Joy Jones is CEO of the Graduate Management Admission Council.