

NO TIME FOR SCHOOL?

By Erin Strout

Solutions for managing home and office Full-time salespeople struggle as part-time MBA students.

Thinking about going to graduate school part time? First consider that Jodi Flax could probably tell you exactly what she'll be doing at 10:03 p.m. a week from now. Or maybe even six months from now. Flax, director of marketing, strategy, and business development at Miicro Inc., a biotech company in Chicago, has had to become an ultra-planner -- somebody who can account for precisely every minute of her life -- while she earns her MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

Being a full-time professional and a part-time student is a rough life. "It's hectic and hard to balance work and school, so there have to be trade-offs" Flax says. "You realize quickly that you can be successful, but that you're not going to excel at everything."

Take, for instance, Flax's last business trip. She was in Florida for client meetings, which inevitably ran into the night. "I was in the middle of finals, so I had to come back to the hotel room to study," she says. "Then my flight home was delayed so I was an hour late for my test. I got it done, but it was tight. Time spent on planes isn't for sleeping anymore, that's for sure."

In the last two years the nation's business schools have been flooded with applications from professionals who believed a bad economy was a good time to earn an MBA. But many didn't want to leave the security of their jobs (or their paychecks), so they opted to be part-time students -- with many companies footing the hefty tuition bill as an employee benefit. Flax was in a sales position when she started the MBA in 2001. "I was getting great on-the-job experience, but I had a biology background, so I realized I was missing the core fundamentals," she says. "My company agreed to pay for it, so I decided to go for it."

Tom Roberts also took advantage of earning a long-desired MBA on his company's dime. He graduated this year with a master's from Temple University, in Philadelphia and is breathing a sigh of relief. "I never wanted to unplug from the work environment or go into further debt, but it was challenging to plan entire semesters around my job," says Roberts, who is a national sales director at a subsidiary of Maax Inc., a bathroom products manufacturer. "I had to schedule six months to a year in advance to balance everything with work. For instance, if I knew I had intense negotiations or heavy travel in the fall, I would have to push off certain classwork until the spring."

In the end, what part-time graduate students learn is that seeking an MBA is a worthwhile pursuit -- but it requires sacrifice. "There are times when my social life suffered or I would miss time with my family," Roberts says. "But you have to remember the long-term benefits."

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