

Indian MBA grads face hiring test

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In five months, the MBA will lose its status as a universally accepted credential for management jobs. In India, at least, b-school grads who want those jobs will also have to take a test.

On Feb. 20, the All-India Management Association (AIMA) will roll out the Management Aptitude Skill Test (MAST), a screening test designed to determine whether business school graduates in India are qualified for jobs, according to several published reports.

The details are a little sketchy, and my efforts to reach someone at the AIMA were unsuccessful. But AIMA President Sanjiv Goenka, told the Financial Chronicle that the test was designed to help students. "The idea is to give aspiring management graduates a level playing field. It is not always possible for companies to reach out to all the IIMs and other B-schools while hiring. In the process, talented students are left out."

Here's what I know about the new test. It's computer based and 150-minutes long, and it will test the candidate's "management aptitude, domain knowledge in areas of specialisation like finance, marketing, HR, international business, operations & IT and assess their personality traits such as leadership, handling stress, decision-making skills, stability and teamwork abilities," according to the Economic Times.

The Times is reporting that a number of big employers are already on board, including the India-based operations of Deloitte, MetLife, Pfizer, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Nokia, Lenovo, and TATA Communications. But the Financial Chronicle quotes an AIMA director general, Rekha Sethi, as saying the number of companies planning to use the test goes well beyond that. "There has been overwhelming response from both companies and b-schools," Sethi told the publication. "We are looking at 200 corporate endorsements and have already got 100 so far."

It's unclear to me if the test will be required by these companies, as part of the application process perhaps, or if it will be optional. It's also unclear if the scores will be publicly available (so employers can mine the database for high-scorers) or if the candidates themselves can direct the scores to specific employers (similar to the GMAT and other standardized tests). Other unknowns include whether candidates with degrees from schools outside of India will need to take the test for Indian jobs, and if the test will be required for jobs in India only or for any position for which a graduate of an Indian b-school is being considered.

Throughout most of the world, standardized testing is something that business school applicants are accustomed to. But the notion of a post-graduation test that qualifies an MBA graduate for employment (the way the bar exam qualifies lawyers or the licensing exam qualifies doctors) is new.

I think most employers, even if they sometimes complain about MBA grads who need to be retrained after they're hired, still assume that business schools, whatever their flaws, do impart the basic knowledge and skills needed to thrive in a corporate setting. (If they didn't believe that they wouldn't pay them six-figure starting salaries.) So I'm left wondering whether something like this, while it might make sense in a country where the quality of business school education is uneven, would be necessary or useful in the U.S. and Europe, where programs are more established.

I think an argument can be made that it is. Think about it: with few exceptions, grade inflation is as big a problem in b-school as it is anywhere else, and many top U.S. b-schools won't even disclose grades to recruiters. The programs themselves, or the portion of them given over to academics, are getting shorter and shorter--in Europe you can get an MBA in less than a year. For recruiters that's a little like buying a car without opening the hood. A test like the one AIMA has planned would allow them to look under the hood.

In a perfect world (perfect from an employer's perspective) all candidates would have internships before a hiring decision is made, giving the employer a few months to put them through their paces. But it's an imperfect world. A test is an admittedly poor substitute for an internship, but is it better than nothing at all? Is it better than "Trust me, he'll do a great job"?

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