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'To Change is to Learn and to Learn is to Change'

By Bob Porter
UCF Forum columnist
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“To change is to learn and to learn is to change.” That was often the advice given to me by my mentor in life, Lew Treen, a war veteran, semi-pro baseball player, high school principal and coach.

One of the most important principles I have learned is that you never should stop learning. Sometimes finding the answers to the really tough questions just can't be solved using the knowledge you currently have in your head.

I bring this up as the executive director for UCF's Executive Development Center in downtown Orlando. Every week I have the privilege of interviewing applicants for UCF's professional and executive Master of Business Administration programs who are wondering whether to continue their higher education.

Can you recall a situation at work when you thought to yourself, “I really am not sure how to solve this problem?” Or “My boss gave me a new project, where should I start?” Or “My team brought me several solutions to a problem; how should I evaluate them?”

We don't have unlimited time to learn, so I tell those applicants that focusing on rewarding learning opportunities, such as an MBA, is important.

Questions regarding the right time to start an MBA come up nearly every time I interview a prospective student.

You probably know by now that life rarely follows the path that is directly in front of you.

I experienced this when I was just 9 years old. For a year I was admitted to a home for disabled children because I could not walk and was told I would never walk again. I

couldn't walk because three days earlier I had spent most of the day setting the world's record (I'm sure) for 9-year-olds jumping on a pogo stick.

Life does not get any more predictable as you get older, either.

We can't always predict the perfect time to get your MBA, but you'll know it's the right time for you when your excuses for not getting your degree will be outweighed by the benefits you'll receive for pursuing it.

I had the good fortune to work for General Electric right after I completed my engineering degree. I was selected to participate in a two-year leadership development program. I worked in four different assignments for six months each. Not one of the assignments was in engineering.

I later learned that 75 percent of all GE senior executives were graduates of this leadership program. GE cross-trained us so we knew something about all the areas in the company to better prepare us for our future positions. The company believed in training employees *before* they needed it.

I have personally followed this philosophy since then and it seems to work very well. While getting your MBA doesn't guarantee your next promotion or success in your own business, having the knowledge that you'll obtain from your degree should enable you to make better decisions and work from a more strategic perspective.

My decision to go back to school and get my MBA was driven primarily by questions like those above. It was about eight years after undergraduate school and I was getting more and more involved in larger projects that required significant capital investments. I realized that I did not have the business-analysis tools to determine if the projects should be undertaken.

Within three months of completing my MBA, I was offered the opportunity to run a new division of the company. I learned later that I was selected to interview for the position because I recently completed my MBA, which has opened up many doors throughout my career.

Choosing to start your MBA is a decision to be respected and celebrated. For those who decide that now is the time to start, there are always options to consider at UCF. My staff and I are always available for advice.

I tell my students that a good MBA program gives you the knowledge to start a business, to run a business, and to turn a business around. It will not make you a specialist or prepare you for every situation you may encounter in business, but it will expose you to the most important business topics, where to find information, and how to hire the right support resource for the business.

Also, if you have a technical undergraduate degree, obtaining an MBA is a very powerful complimentary degree as it will give you the principles needed to use your technical skills in business situations.

In the book “Adventures in Wonderland,” Lewis Carroll wrote the following about a decision Alice had to make: “One day Alice came to a fork in the road and saw a Cheshire cat in a tree. “Which road do I take?” she asked. “Where do you want to go?” was his response. “I don’t know,” Alice answered. “Then,” said the cat, “it doesn’t matter.”

Lew Treen, my mentor, would advise you to look ahead and decide what you want to change and what you want to learn, so you’ll know which way to go at your next fork in the road of life.

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