

Going Back to School . . . While You're Still Working

(By Melinda Pittman)

You've done it. You've made the decision to go back to school.

Now what?

There's any number of reasons that people decide to return to school. It might be to finish their bachelor's degree, or maybe earn a Master's or MBA. Perhaps they want to improve and enhance their skill set in order to stay as competitive as possible in today's marketplace. Or maybe they're the type of person who feels the need to continually progress and evolve.

Benefits, rewards, and expectations

Going back to school can be a rewarding experience filled with untold benefits. Those benefits can include a higher level of confidence and accomplishment, a broader knowledge base, a deeper understanding of the business world, and a new network of friends and contacts. Of course, they can also include advancement in your current position or the opportunity to move the scope of your career forward more quickly.

What are your specific, concrete expectations for going back to school? What is it that you want this experience to contribute to your life outside of the abstract benefits mentioned above? These are questions you should ask yourself before you immerse yourself too deeply into the process itself. It's important to map out your expectations beforehand and analyze just how much this endeavor will impact all areas of your life. And when it is time to move forward, there are certain steps you can take to help ensure your ultimate success.

1. Consider distance education. This has become more and more of a viable option as the Internet continues to grow and evolve. Reputable universities are using the Web to offer graduate-level classes to professionals who have flexibility and time constraints. The operative word here, of course, is reputable—put another way, a university that also has a corresponding brick and mortar component. By choosing distance education, you're able to save a tremendous amount of time. And watching lectures via the Internet is a lot more plausible than it was five years ago. Just ask the inventors of YouTube.

2. Communicate with your employer. Some people mistakenly believe that their employers won't work with them. They try to tackle school without telling their boss, and then they draw scrutiny because of tardiness, fatigue, or any number of other ailments associated with pulling double duty. By telling your employer up front of your intentions, you've built the groundwork for meaningful discussion and discourse and more importantly, for ways in which to make the arrangement work. Employers have a vested interest in making certain that their employees are the most knowledgeable in the industry, which leads me to my next point . . .

3. See if your employer will pay for part (or all) of your tuition. Many employers offer tuition assistance or tuition reimbursement, or will contribute in some capacity to your education financially or working with you in regards to a more flexible work schedule. If you don't know what your employer offers, ask. Even if there is not a formal tuition assistance program, you'll never know how your employer will work with you unless you ask.

4. Make sure you have a strong support system. Chances are good that this whole endeavor will put a strain on other areas of your life, and that includes the relationships that you have with your spouse, your

children, and your friends and family. More than likely, compromises and sacrifices will have to be made by everyone involved. Everything should be discussed in detail beforehand, with expectations and goals clearly set and agreed upon. Once that system is firmly in place, the good news is that this endeavor can prove to be a very valuable experience for your family, especially if you have younger children. They will witness the emphasis you're placing on the value of education and will be more likely to follow your example.

5. Do your research (homework). There are a lot of factors involved with undergraduate and graduate studies, and no two programs are exactly alike. Requirements vary, as does the time it takes to finish the program and obtain a degree. Research the programs you're considering carefully and weigh the pros and cons of each. Or if you've already made a selection, find out all there is to know about that program.

6. Plan . . . but be flexible. As important as it is to plan your trip back to school, it's equally important to remain as flexible as you can. If, during the planning and preparation period, you determine that you should alter your timetable, don't be afraid to do so. It's much better to delay the beginning of your re-education by six months or a year than to start right away and never finish what you started.

7. Seek the advice of others. In addition, if you know people who have are currently going back to school or recently completed their degree, contact them and ask for their advice. In all likelihood, they will be eager to share. After all, there's no teacher like that of experience.

A tremendous blessing

Overall, the keys to maximizing the benefits of going back to school are to be prepared, manage your expectations, and maintain the proper perspective. It's all about knowing what you want and what you want to do and then taking the proper steps in order to reach your goals. Once the process is complete, you'll be able to reflect on what you've just accomplished and how you can apply it to your future. And by doing so, you'll be in a better position to take the next step in your life, whatever that might be.

As you can see, going back to school while you're still working is a tremendous undertaking, one that presents its fair share of challenges. However, if approached in the correct fashion, it can also be a tremendous blessing to you and your family, as well as an excellent opportunity for personal growth and satisfaction.

If you have any questions about this topic, feel free to contact me at melinda@pittmangroup.com.