

Cliff Hinrichs

Essays and Interviews – Critical to MBA Admissions

Vortrag anlässlich des Expertenforums
MBA Gate 2002
am 24. November 2001 in Frankfurt a.M.

Schriftliche Fassung und
Vorwort von

Jochen Meyer-Burow

MBA GATE
Insider Infos zum MBA Studium

Vorwort

Am 24. November hat Cliff Hinrichs im Rahmen des Expertenforums ‚MBA-Gate 2002‘ in Frankfurt den nachstehend abgedruckten Vortrag: „Essays and Interviews – Critical to MBA Admissions“ gehalten. Cliff Hinrichs wurde 1970 in den USA geboren. Nach seinem Studium in New York arbeitete er mehrere Jahre als Derivative Trader für den ehemaligen Bankers Trust in New York und London. Nach drei Jahren in London wurde er Mitbegründer eines Online Portals für Immobilienhandel, für das er 4,5 Millionen Britische Pfund Venture Capital von British Energy erhielt. Er nutzte seine Erfahrungen, um verschiedene Start-Ups im Online Marketing und Business Development zu beraten.

Als Manager des Application Editing Service ‚Manhattan Edit‘ und Verbal Instructor des GMAT Unternehmens ‚Manhattan Review‘ beschäftigt sich Cliff Hinrichs beruflich mit dem Thema MBA-Bewerbung und hat zahlreiche, erfolgreiche Bewerber auf ihrem Weg in die Top MBA-Programme begleitet. Er kann außerdem auf die Erfahrungen zurückgreifen, die er während seiner eigenen Bewerbung gewonnen hat: Für den Studienbeginn Herbst 2002 ist er für das renommierte, europäische MBA-Programm INSEAD zugelassen.

In diesem Vortrag bietet Cliff Hinrichs eine sehr gute Anleitung zum Verfassen Erfolg versprechender Admission Essays. Er erklärt die Bedeutung der Essays im Rahmen der Bewerbung, bespricht die typischen Essay-Fragen und erteilt fundierte Ratschläge zu ihrer Beantwortung. Er geht zudem auf den Stellenwert der Admission Interviews ein und erklärt, was der Kandidat in einem Interview zu erwarten hat und wie er sich darauf vorbereiten und einstellen kann.

Ich möchte mich an dieser Stelle noch einmal sehr herzlich bei Cliff Hinrichs für diesen Vortrag bedanken.

Wer mit Cliff Hinrichs oder seinen Kollegen in Kontakt treten möchte, findet zunächst Informationen auf

- Manhattan Edit (Hilfe bei Bewerbungsesays)
<<http://www.ManEdit.com>>

Weiterführende Fragen an Cliff Hinrichs können per E-Mail gerichtet werden an: info@manedit.com

Ich wünsche Ihnen allen viel Erfolg bei Ihrer MBA-Bewerbung
und für Ihre weitere berufliche Karriere.

Jochen Meyer-Burow
Chief Editor, MBA Gate, <<http://MBA-Gate.de>>

Essays and Interviews - Critical to MBA Admissions

Introduction

Thank you very much for your introduction, Jörn.

I would like to begin by outlining the two main purposes of my talk today. First, I will share my personal experience in applying to business school. Second, I will offer you some (hopefully!) useful advice on writing good application essays and interviewing well. This advice is based on my experience in applying to business school and in managing Manhattan Edit, a professional essay editing service. Essays and interviews are the most important subjective parts of your application to business school.

Let me give you some of the background behind why I decided to apply to business school. By the spring of 2000, after a stint of freelance e-commerce-related consulting, I began reflecting on my career to date and where I wanted to take it. I felt I had chalked up some very solid professional experience, particularly in my previous positions as a derivatives trader and as co-founder of a UK-based dot.com that had raised over £5m in venture capital. My experience as co-founder of a dot.com company had really opened my eyes to how much more there was for me to learn about business in general than I could have realised when I was a trader. But I strongly felt that to advance, and possibly enable a shift in, my career I needed to consolidate what I had learned. My best idea of a future career was one that involved all the elements – strategy, technology and finance – I had enjoyed most in previous roles. Most of the job options that would combine those elements - venture capital, strategy consulting, or technology investment banking -required an MBA in order to maximise my potential.

I was quite late in the 2001 admissions cycle when I decided to take the first step – taking the GMAT. I took the test in April and was delighted with my score of 750. I felt that with such a score I was well on my way to getting into the program of my choice, but soon found out that the admissions process is much more involved than I had imagined. In the end, due to time constraints, I cut the number of my target schools down from

four to just one – INSEAD. When I realised how much work it would be to write good essays, I decided that I could do a quality job on only one application. After a long wait, I received the welcome news that I had been accepted, and was given the chance to defer my admission until the September 2002 intake in Fontainebleau, France.

I learned a lot about the admissions process by having gone through it myself – not least the amount of effort involved in presenting a quality application. As I mentioned earlier, I have learned even more through my work with Manhattan Edit, which has helped hundreds of applicants to get into the programs of their choice. The most important lesson I learned from all this experience is that the application process is certainly time-consuming, but that proper planning and hard work can pay off handsomely.

The Role Essays Play in the Application Process

Essays are a critical part of the business school application process. Why?

In applying to business school, you must first realize that you will not actually be competing with the entire pool of applicants. Instead, you will be competing with all the other applicants who present a similar profile to yours. The goal, therefore, is to stand out from all the similar applicants, whichever category they fall into: investment bankers, consultants (together with bankers the traditional ‘feeder’ industries for business school), engineers, public servants, and ‘non-typical’ applicants such as doctors, lawyers, and world-class athletes or artists – to name the most common categories.

Keep in mind, as I mentioned, that besides the interview, your essays provide the only real evidence business schools will have of your aspirations, personality and maturity. Unlike other graduate schools, business schools are very interested in evaluating you as an individual. In an ideal world, business school admissions committees view themselves as helping to produce great managers and leaders. Their typical view is that good managers and leaders exhibit balance in their professional and personal lives – a characteristic they will be looking for in your essays.

How, then, should you approach writing them? First, do not underestimate the amount of time that will be required. Allow a minimum of thirty hours for each school (slightly more for non-native speakers). During this time, you will go through many drafts – do not assume that your final draft will look much like your first attempt. If it is good, it rarely does. Get as much objective outside feedback as possible during the writing process, mindful that writing these essays is made much more difficult because there are many pitfalls associated with writing about ‘you’ – the most subjective topic of all.

I see two key ways to think about writing these essays that might help you understand why it is not a trivial exercise. First, think of the essays fundamentally as constituting a human interest story about you. You are obviously the main feature of that story, and you must not only answer the questions asked, but also do so in an engaging, distinct, consistent, fluid and memorable way. Second, think of the essays as a personal marketing and positioning exercise. It is dangerous, but tempting, to believe that you can get a good result simply by ‘filling the space.’ You must decide on a few themes about you that make you stand out from all the other consultants or engineers or investment bankers out there, and you must carry each of these themes all the way through each essay from beginning to end.

Typical Essay Question Types

There is actually not that much difference among the essay questions that different business schools pose. While the wording may differ, the subtext of the question – what you should really be paying attention to – is nearly always the same. Here are the typical question types you are likely to face:

Professional

- What are your career goals and why do you want to get an MBA?
- What interests you about our program in relation to other programs?
- How do your accomplishments demonstrate your management potential?
- How do you think current trends (esp. technology) will affect your career?

Personal

- What are your strengths/weaknesses? What has influenced your personality?
- What do you do outside work that demonstrates passion and commitment?

Professional & Personal

- What unique contribution could you make to a diverse class?
- Discuss a failure, your reaction, and what you learned from it.
- Demonstrate your integrity by discussing your reaction to an ethical dilemma.

Common Essay Writing Pitfalls to Avoid

Why an MBA? Why our program?

The most common error applicants make in answering these types of questions is that they have not reflected enough on why they want to do an MBA, what they expect to get out of it, and what the real differences between different programs are. You have to present a well-conceived response that demonstrates maturity and a knowledge of the program beyond what is obtainable in a marketing brochure.

Career Evolution and Goals

The first pitfall to avoid here is describing your career choices in a way that either does not reveal the thought process behind them, or reveals that there was little or no thought process. Other common mistakes include describing your goals too broadly (business schools expect you to have an idea where you are going, or at least a plausible decision-making framework if you truly are undecided among several options), and not carrying your personal marketing themes in your response.

Accomplishments

There are several things you need to do here. You need to choose accomplishments that support the marketing themes you have chosen, and you need to avoid speaking too generally about them – specific examples of decisions you made in key situations, especially ones that placed you directly in the action of those situations, are a key form of persuasion you must employ.

Although many of the accomplishments applicants choose to write about take place within a team context, you must be specific about what your role was and how you played it. The examples you choose should also ideally reinforce all the themes you want to convey – not just the one or ones explicitly referred to in the text of the question. Wherever possible, you should remember to provide as much quantifiable, objective information about your impact or contribution. Context is key.

Describing a Failure

This can be a tricky one because it can be very difficult to discuss one of your failures in a balanced, objective way. Do not even think about mentioning something that was not really a failure – it must be genuine. (Remember that every successful manager has had failures along the way.)

What the admissions committees will be looking for is how you reacted to the failure. You need to show that you picked yourself up after it and learned as much as you could from it. Show how what you learned from the failure has helped you in other situations.

Personality - Your Strengths and Weaknesses

There are a few key things you must remember with this type of essay. First, your strengths must be distinct. Saying you are a hard worker, for example, is OK but remember that most if not all of the other applicants are also hard workers before you decide that this is one of your distinctive strengths. As with the failure essay, your weaknesses must be genuine and ideally fit with the professional and personal profile you present. As an example, I said that when I started our dot.com venture, I overestimated my ability to pick up the basics related to business functions outside of my experience just because I had been a quick study in my career to date. It was a genuine weakness, but completely consistent with my background. You need to include good examples to show the impact of both your strengths and weaknesses, and for the weaknesses, you have to show what have done or are doing to overcome them.

Outside Interests

This essay gives you a chance to show your well-roundedness as a person. Be sure that you present enough information to support that well-roundedness, ideally choosing interests that are distinctive and demonstrate passion (and hopefully achievement) for one or more non-professional activities.

What You Can Contribute

This essay question is effectively a direct request from the school to present the marketing themes that you have chosen to emphasize. You must respond in a way that includes both professional and personal characteristics. They should be dis-

tinctive and demonstrate that you would be a welcome addition to a diverse class, not just someone who would benefit from attending a particular program. Most people would be able to take something away from going to Harvard Business School, for example, but not everyone would be able to contribute equally to that school community.

Optional Essays

This can be a danger area for many applicants. In deciding whether to add anything here, you must evaluate whether there really is something in your application that would be misleading without additional information, or whether there is something you want to say that does not properly belong in your response to a different essay. The key here is added value, because you are effectively asking already overburdened admissions offices to spend more time on your application. A big no-no is to complain about a low GMAT score or poor grades. One classic exception to this is that if your grades suffered somewhat as a result of you working to support yourself through school – that is clearly worth mentioning.

The Interview

Introduction

The importance of the interview can vary significantly depending on the program to which you are applying. Nearly all top programs require an interview. Stanford is an exception to this, although they have recently decided that they want to phase this in as an additional element in the application process. Unless you are a very poor interviewer, you should usually take advantage of an optional interview if one is offered.

Approach

There are a few key features of interviews that you need to keep in mind. They tend to last from one half hour to as long as two hours, in a set format or not. Often the format and amount of time are largely up to the discretion of the interviewer, who (if he or she is an alumnus) is usually a member of an essentially volunteer workforce for the school. Although the interview is similar to the application essays in that it supplies more subjective information about you, it is decidedly different in that it occurs in real-time. Because of this, and because the chemistry between two strangers can be a volatile thing, you must prepare well.

As far as your overall approach goes, you should prepare for your business school interviews in much the same way as you would for an important job interview. In fact, many similar questions are asked, although they can be less comprehensive than a formal job interview. Remember that all business schools, especially top ones, are keen to publish extremely high job placement statistics for their graduates, so you need to convince your interviewer that you have the skills necessary to land a good job after your MBA.

You should practise as much as possible, both with friends and also ideally by applying to your bottom choice schools early, so that the least important interviews occur first. In this way, you will be on top form for the interviews that really matter – the ones for your top choice programs. You must have crisp answers to all the key questions you can expect to be asked, which include why you want to get an MBA and what appeals to you about the particular program. Ideally, you should be able

to speak naturally and convincingly for at least several minutes on all the key topics. Although it is important to prepare, as with all interviews you must take care to avoid providing answers that sound over-scripted. The best way to achieve this balance is through practise.

What You Should Expect

Here are the key question topics you should make yourself very comfortable in answering:

- Why an MBA at this stage in your career, and why this program? (very important)
- Describe the evolution of your career. What have you learned? Where are you headed?
- How could you contribute to the school? (Convince the interviewer that they could have learned from you had you been in their study group)
- What do you do outside work? (Are you an interesting person they would like to know better?)

As with other elements of the application process, there are a few common pitfalls to avoid with the interview. The first is poor preparation for the basic questions – this simply appears unprofessional and is often fatal. Second is an over- or under-confident tone. The last major pitfall to avoid is not understanding what makes the particular program distinct, and not having specific questions about the program that only an alumnus (as opposed to a brochure) could answer.

I had two interviews with INSEAD, which for London-based applicants is typical. I think two interviews is usually better than one in that it gives you two opportunities to establish chemistry between you and the interviewers. Aside from all the typical questions noted above, my INSEAD interviewers seemed particularly interested in my entrepreneurial experience (consistent with INSEAD's own entrepreneurial roots), very specifically where I wanted to take my career, and what I learned from starting my own business. Of course, the emphasis will be different at different schools, and you are well-advised to find out as much as you can beforehand about what the interview process will be like at the programs you are most interested in.

Conclusion

Thank you very much for coming today, and thank you for your attention. I hope you find that my experience and views will be of some help to you as you make your way through your own applications. Good luck!