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BUSINESS EDUCATION

Looking at the bigger picture

Canadian schools Rotman and McGill both have former management consultants as deans.
Della Bradshaw **considers their strategy**

In May this year the Rotman school at the University of Toronto played host to two of the business world's biggest hitters: Steve Ballmer, chief executive of Microsoft, and Michael Porter, Harvard professor and management guru. Their presence was testament to the persuasive powers of Roger Martin, the school's dean, who is a former management consultant and a Harvard MBA.

While management consultancy is high on the job list of many business school graduates, few management consultants go back to business school as dean – a notable exception being Tom Gerrity, former dean at Wharton, University of Pennsylvania. But in the past three years, two of Canada's top schools, McGill, in Montreal, and the University of Toronto have appointed management consultants to the top job.

What special skills do management consultants bring to the job? Gerald Ross, who took up the helm at McGill last August, confesses: "I'm not a fan of consulting." Nonetheless, he is not completely dismissive of the skills a management consultant can muster.

"A really good consultant starts with the first rule that the client owns the problem," he says. "The few really talented ones have a way of getting the patient to take on the problem."

Such has been his approach at McGill. The

first step of his strategic evaluation of the school was to persuade academics that they had customers to serve, a concept many found alien, he says. "They thought it commercialised the idea of the academic."

But at a faculty retreat the academics set about identifying their customers and, in particular, the most strategic customer. Their conclusion was "a genuine surprise", says Prof Ross: "the alumni".

The incoming student is a future alumnus, goes the theory, and with lifelong learning the mantra on everyone's lips, alumni are the paymasters of the future.

With e-learning and for-profit organisation wreaking havoc in the traditional world of management education, faculty had yet more to take on board. "The whole shift is that management is now a life skill," says Prof Ross. "And the way we're structured doesn't enable us to do that."

With the last big structural changes taking place in education in the 1950s, Prof Ross believes it is time for the likes of McGill to change focus completely. "We can't tweak the existing system – we need to go back and reinvent it."

His faculty are backing him. The first move is for the school to offer two pilot courses online from September in statistics and information systems. "If we can deliver content out of

the classroom, we can deliver anywhere in the world," enthuses Richard Donovan, associate dean.

At the Rotman School Prof Martin believes that his biggest contribution has been in perception and confidence: in persuading faculty that the school can be a world leader and that they should "dream big dreams".

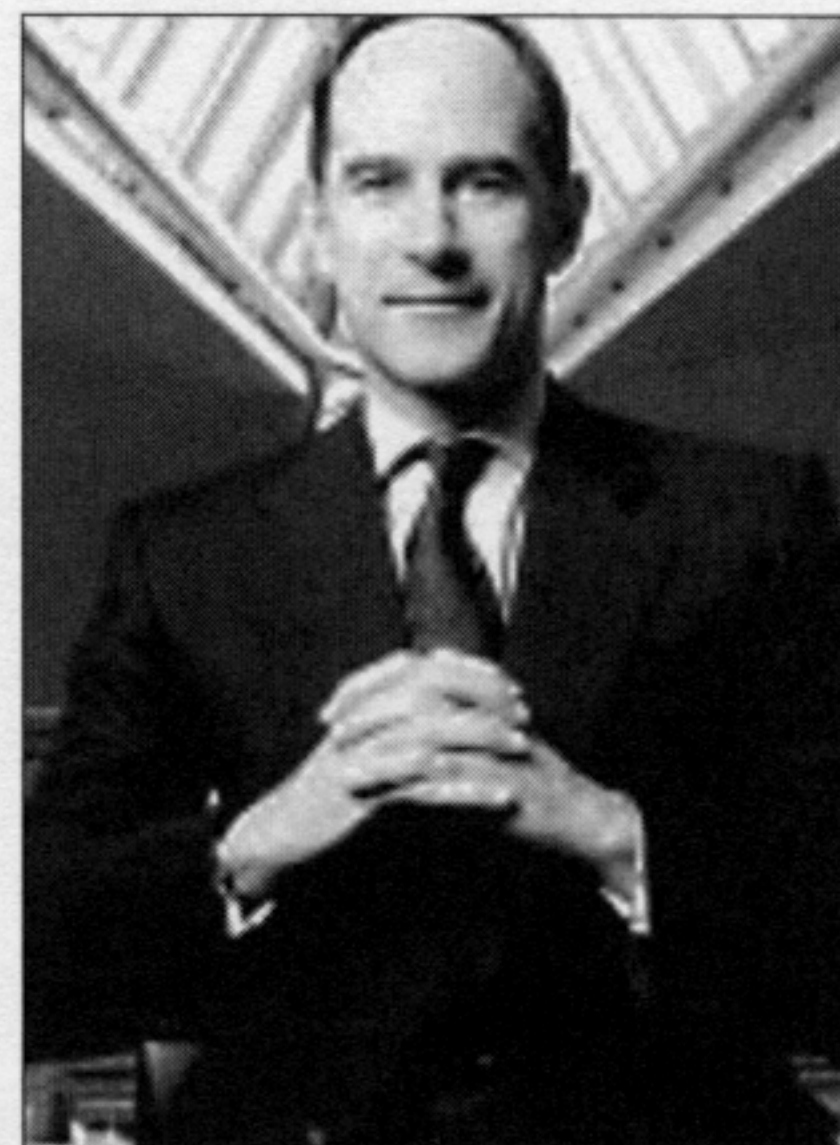
"I think it is right for companies to play to win . . . It would have been irresponsible of me to take the job without a strategy for winning."

Faculty are enthused: he has persuaded them that the city of Toronto has to have a top business school. "He brought in this unqualified notion that this has to be," says one faculty member. Peter Pauly, associate dean for research and academic resources at Rotman, believes there are more specific skills the former management consultant has brought to the table.

"What he brings that an academic doesn't bring is to focus in on a problem very quickly. Academics would tend to look at it not as problem-solving but at a conceptual level. [The dean can] size up problems quickly and apply the tools of his trade to fit the pieces together."

Faculty at Rotman also acknowledge that Prof Martin has helped them to plug into an extraordinary network of contacts.

Prof Martin and Prof Ross face similar problems: how



Prof Martin: 'Dream big dreams'

do two relatively small business schools by world standards, both of which are sited in Canada away from the main business school hubs on the east and west coasts of the US, compete in the global market? With the spread of e-learning, Prof Martin argues, there will be only 10 world-class business schools with their own recognised brand in a few years' time. His aim is to be one of those and to do it by building on the academic strengths of the school.

Prof Ross believes the key to it all is to develop learning models that are scalable, so that McGill's management teaching is not just about teaching people to be managers but also about teaching other professionals about management so that they can do their jobs more effectively – engineers and doctors, for example. Only by scaling up the delivery of its programmes can McGill reach all these people, he

says.

"If I had to be known for one thing, I would like it to be that we were the ones that developed the scalable model," he says. He even likens McGill to the Jesuits. "We could train people in the McGill point of view, in the way the Jesuits have."

Although both spent their time as consultants, Prof Martin at Monitor (Prof Porter's consultancy) and Prof Ross at Change Lab International (a consultancy he founded), they always maintained strong academic links. So much so that one professor at Rotman describes Prof Martin as a "closet academic".

So it would seem. Prof Martin is happy to teach on the Rotman MBA programme and he has also designed a five-day open enrolment programme on leadership, which he will teach himself. Prof Ross has also taught at the University of Michigan and the Wharton School.

Prof Martin believes one of his successes has been in devolving many of the activities at Rotman to the individual faculty and, like Prof Ross, giving faculty and staff control of activities at



Breaking with a tradition: Gerald Ross persuaded academics that they had customers to serve, a concept many found alien

the school. "I believe faculty are no different from other human beings and if you give them responsibility and accountability they will be happy and do great things."

And what can a management consultant bring to the job of business school dean? Prof Ross believes the two jobs are remarkably similar. "I see the dean's job being

about doing a job of one million things: in the consulting world, I used to work extraordinarily hard at a million things simultaneously."



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