

Trends: Design Business

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Think an MBA can land you a job at a top corporation? Think again. In today's competitive market—one overstocked with product, where outsourcing everything from customer service to financial analysis is de rigeur, and consumers who are savvier and more sophisticated than ever before—problem-solving and number-crunching skills will only get you so far. Leading corporations are seeking candidates with empathizing, problem-finding, and creative skills, as well. Sound familiar? They want design skills. "Businesspeople don't need to understand designers better. They need to be designers," says Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. In turn, there is a proliferation of business schools introducing students to design, be it in an elective course or in a degree that combines an MBA with a Masters of Design.

In his book *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, Daniel H. Pink argues: "Design is a high-concept aptitude that is difficult to outsource or automate—and that increasingly confers a competitive advantage in business." This may explain why corporate recruiters from companies like General Motors or McKinsey & Co. are heading to top arts grad schools (such as RISD or Cranbrook Academy of Art) in search of talent. "The MFA is the new MBA," writes Pink. So business schools are changing the way they do business.

"It's not about teaching the same old stuff. Design is a dimension that's important for future business," says Heather Fraser, an adjunct professor at Rotman and director of the school's Designworks™ program. "Companies need innovation to survive, and design unlocks it." George Kembel, executive director of the Design Institute at Stanford, adds that a company needs more than innovative products. "You also have to be creative with the corporate strategy and business model, the user's experience, how you set up your teams—everything."

Several schools are forging new paths: The Institute of Design at Stanford, led by IDEO co-founder David Kelley, teaches design thinking and strategy to business, engineering, and design students. (The Institute does not offer a degree, but rather augments the degrees offered by the three schools.) Rotman has an optional design practicum where business students commingle with those from the University of Toronto's engineering department and the Ontario College of Art and Design. Here, students are divided into interdisciplinary teams to work on case studies that will require research, ideation and prototyping, and refining their ideas to design a business. The Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) is the first to offer a dual degree combining a Master of Design and an MBA. "Our strategic position is to be a business-oriented design school. It's based on creative innovation and user understanding,"

explains Patrick Whitney, director of IIT's Institute of Design.

While each of the programs has unique approaches, one thing they all teach is the iterative process (students typically have been taught students to wait for the perfect solution). "We'll make lots of crummy prototypes, and we'll fail early and fail often. This maximizes creative accidents, which makes for more innovation," says Kembel. Adds Fraser: "You try more new things with prototyping. It's pushing you and looking at places you've never been before." These schools are also teaching students how to collaborate. They are taking cues from the way designers consistently engage in dialogue with clients and conduct charettes.

This trend is certainly a "pat on the back" to designers, if only because it highlights their generally positive approach to problem finding and solving. In an article titled "The Design of Business," Martin says the dominant attitude in traditional firms is to see constraints as negatives and budgets as the drivers of decision. He continues: "In design firms, the mindset is 'nothing can't be done for sure,' and constraints only increase the excitement level." Now that's the attitude that's good for much more than business.