

Perspective: Work-Study-Life Balance

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Abstract Engaging in a university management program is like running a marathon. It requires a high level of discipline, commitment, and mental strength from every student – regardless of being enrolled in a traditional campus or an online program. At times it is hard and painful, and you ask yourself why you are doing it; but once you have crossed the finish line, you are incredibly proud and feel like you can accomplish everything no matter how hard the challenge might be.

The main difference between campus and online programs is the higher level of flexibility online programs provide to its students and, with that, to their employers and families. With some exceptions, online students have the freedom to organize their study schedules themselves. This allows pursuing a professional occupation or, in some cases, even full-time employment. It also permits students with family commitments to continue a more-or-less normal family life.

Thanks to this increased flexibility, the author was able to remain fully employed at CSL Behring during the duration of the entire master program at the University of Liverpool. In addition, the author remained mobile for business travel and even more for an international long-term assignment that required relocation from Europe to the USA without interrupting the program. Studying in the late evening hours also allowed the author to spend as much time as possible with family and friends during daytime and weekends.

It was certainly not easy to bring work, family, and studies under one umbrella during the entire duration of the master program. However, studying online was found to be the perfect solution for the author to keep job, family, and study commitments in balance. This was obviously not a stand-alone achievement but required flexibility, comprehension, and support from all the actors including workplace and, more importantly, family and friends.

Keywords Campus vs. online programs • Discipline • Commitment • Work-life balance

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1 Introduction

There is no doubt that completing a university management program requires a high level of discipline, commitment, and determination from its students. Regardless of following a traditional campus or an online program, the journey is equally demanding. In both cases, students have to evaluate what program fits their educational needs, but in many cases, it is more than that. Accomplishing a university management program will, in any case, impact students' routine and time schedules and also conflict with time available to spend with family or friends, for hobbies, and potentially work. Bringing all these time commitments in balance is not an easy task and requires flexible solutions for students to be successful in meeting their work-study-life balance.

2 Why Online?

When evaluating the various management programs during several months in 2012, the author visited a variety of universities in Switzerland offering on-campus management programs. Most institutions offered generic MBA programs with focus on finance, marketing, or leadership. Only a few had programs specializing in logistics or supply chain which was the author's field of interest. The campuses of the small selection of potential programs were all located at least 1 h away from the author's hometown and required classroom attendance either on weekends or during several full weeks of the year.

Back in 2012, the author was husband and father of two little boys, ages 3 and 1. Staying away from wife and children every weekend during several years was not considered a suitable and family-friendly solution. Also, the author's employment required a certain level of business travel and would therefore conflict with the full-week classroom attendance model. Lastly, commuting from and to remote university campuses was not considered as a good time investment. As a result, the author's personal situation required an alternative solution to the traditional university campus programs, something that offered more flexibility not only for the author but also for his family and his employer.

Although online programs were not nameless to the author, they were not his first choice at that time mainly because of some people's comments about online programs not being as authentic as a traditional or hybrid university program. However, the more the author started researching on the topic of online learning, the more he was able to learn about the various online programs and the possibilities and flexibility they offered to their students. Most programs did not require fixed lecture schedules and classrooms, and course materials were accessible anytime and from everywhere. With no more logistical restrictions, the choice of suitable and qualified supply chain programs increased tremendously. The choice fell on the Master of Science program in Operations and Supply Chain Management at the University of

Liverpool, a business school accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

3 Flexibility Has a Price

The program started in November 2013 after successful admission and enrollment. Each module required a lot of academic reading and writing. Written assignments had to be completed twice a week, due by a specific deadline, and every week was graded with feedback from instructors about the work. Although highly academic, the program encouraged students to apply theory to real-life examples and to share those with other students of the virtual classroom. Through these exercises, the newly acquired knowledge was brought into a practical context, very often related to examples from an existing employer. Classmates and instructors would ask specific questions that required follow-up or more in-depth reading. At the end of every module, an assignment or project (individual or team) had to be performed and submitted.

Depending on the subject, the overall weekly workload averaged 15–20 h. In the beginning, this was higher until the right techniques and sources for research were found and applied. With more routine, it became easier to plan the respective workload. In order not to impact work or family commitments, the author chose to study in the late evening hours between eight and midnight, Monday through Friday. This modus operandi worked out well for the majority of the time, although, at times, weekends had to be used to finalize some work that could not be completed during the week. Scheduling of workload was a very important aspect for managing all the assignments of the online program in time, and self-discipline and schedule adherence became critical success factors. At times, certain assignments could not be accomplished in time due to business travel or other unplanned commitments. In these cases, students would contact instructors and ask for extensions that were typically granted.

The online program also offered students the opportunity to take breaks in between modules for personal reasons or simply to get some rest and tank energy after several intensive months of studying. In October 2014, the author's family grew to a five-person household with the arrival of an additional family member. For this special reason, the author made the decision to pause his studies and spend some time with his family and new arrival. Having the opportunity to spend these unique moments with his family was very important and appreciated by all.

Soon after, in summer 2015, the author was offered a Long-Term International Assignment within CSL Behring with relocation from Switzerland to the USA. This was an exciting new project for him and his family and required fast decisions and actions. After only 3 months, the entire household and family moved from Europe to the USA. Funnily, the only constant during this move was the university program since this was not impacted or interrupted by this transition. With all classes being

taught online, the author was able to have a seamless transition without any implications to his studies.

After completion of his master thesis project, the author finally graduated in December 2016. The feeling was almost like finishing a marathon after so much time of hard training. At times it was hard and painful, and the question why people do such things remains unanswered. However, once you have crossed the finish line, an incredibly feeling of pride goes through body and soul together with the belief that everything can be accomplished no matter how hard the challenge may be. This is probably the most important learning for every graduate to know and understand that big things can be achieved with the enough commitment and endurance. Of course, a graduation is not a solo performance but requires flexibility, comprehension, and support from all the entourage including workplace and, more importantly, family and friends.

4 Conclusion

The biggest advantage of online learning was found to be the high level of flexibility it offers to its students. Not only can classes be attended from everywhere in the world at any given time, studying online also eliminates the requirement for students (and instructors) to travel from and to campus locations. The elimination of logistical restrictions is even more beneficial for students who want to study and research in a specific field since the online campus is so much larger than onsite campuses and the choice of online programs is getting larger and larger.

However, online students have the freedom but also the responsibility to plan and organize their study schedules themselves. This doesn't make studying any easier; the work still has to be done. So much flexibility also requires a lot of self-discipline which is not everybody's strengths. Some students may require more structured programs with more extrinsic control mechanisms. For those who can work in a more self-controlled environment studying online on the other hand will allow pursuing a professional occupation or, in some cases, even full-time employment. It also permits students with other commitments to continuing a more-or-less normal life without renouncing to family, friends, sports, or other leisure activities.

Online programs can still develop in various aspects. As with campus training, good instructors make the difference between a good and a bad learning experience. Not all instructors are qualified or predestined for online teaching, and a more restrictive selection should be applied to grant the quality of teaching. Also, online technology has gone mobile in most aspects of life, but online learning platforms are hardly accessible through mobile applications. As a result, online libraries and classrooms should become easily accessible through mobile devices. The ability to access chats or forums from mobile devices anywhere, anytime, will provide even more flexibility for students and teachers.