



**MBA Expert Q&A Series
Questions for Walter Hutchinson,
Application Advantage**

(Q&A Series originally appeared on Knewton.com)

MBA Expert Series: The science of b-school admissions

Welcome to another installment of our MBA expert series! This week, we were fortunate enough to sit down with MBA admissions expert Walter Hutchinson, founder of ApplicationAdvantage.com, the boutique international admissions advisory, and also founder of MBAdashboard.com, the admissions supersite powered by proprietary technology tools designed specifically for global business school applicants. Walter holds degrees from Columbia University and has lived in North America, Asia and Europe while advising professionals and students representing more than 20 countries.

Do you think the admissions process is very much a science? Or is it unpredictable and human?

It depends on who you talk to, but I think of the process as a blending of both; to label it as one or the other, misses the mark. For my part, I base my opinion on perspective I gained first as an applicant to top universities, then as an admitted student, admissions office staffer and later professional consultant to students from all over. My sense is that the process cannot be distilled down to points on a single examination – committees could not select a well-rounded class of students solely on that basis. At the same time, the human factor alone is not effective in filtering hundreds or thousands of applications in a systematic way.

I have been analyzing this compelling paradox ever since my high school and Columbia days when I first worked for admissions offices. Those experiences combined with an early tool I developed for one of those offices, enabled me to define unique challenges

the process poses for students depending on where they are from. For instance, future MBA and graduate students from countries where the educational and career advancement system is examination-oriented, usually perform better across the board on GMAT, TOEFL and other standardized tests, than students from countries where soft skills and leadership training are more-typical paths to career success. Between those two extremes, there is a lot of variation among countries, regions and cultures, but the point is that the local frame of reference tends to influence whether future students are more comfortable with the process as a scientific or a human, unpredictable one.

This is why countless students perform incredibly well – almost effortlessly – on some aspects of the process, while revealing stark weakness on others. To help students improve their profiles and become better-prepared to be well-rounded competitors, I designed and commissioned construction of an admissions platform in 2007 called MBAdashboard.com, which draws on experience advising people from many of the countries and cultures I alluded to; it will become available between 2010 and 2011.

The admissions process is always going to challenge students to excel on multiple levels, because rising to the top of a profession demands the same or more. So my idea was to create a way for all types of applicants to turn the entire admission process to their individual advantage regardless of whether they approached it as a scientific effort or an unpredictably human one.

MBA Expert Series: How has the admissions process changed?

Welcome to another installment of our MBA expert series! This week, we were fortunate enough to sit down with MBA admissions expert Walter Hutchinson, founder of ApplicationAdvantage.com, the boutique international admissions advisory, and also founder of MBAdashboard.com, the admissions supersite powered by proprietary technology tools designed specifically for global business school applicants. Walter

holds degrees from Columbia University and has lived in North America, Asia and Europe while advising professionals and students representing more than 20 countries.

In your view, how has the admissions process changed over the past twenty years? The past decade?

The pace of everything has sped up, become much more sophisticated, and been transformed into a hotbed of innovation by internet technology. In the '90s, we still had paper applications. Up to 2004 or so, internet submission was still experimental. Now almost everything is done online. Yet each year, admissions committees still want to know answers to the same questions and students continue to enter the admissions process with the same concerns and in many cases, misconceptions.

The main differences between then and now are three-fold: 1) admissions committees now have a broader range of options for getting to know prospective applicants, 2) a number of admissions strategies have evolved with the availability of interactive media, and 3) the internet has turned admissions seasons into a continuous cycle.

Last year, I actually ran an assessment of popular student strategies using my 1990 admissions work as a baseline, and then compared the 2000 and 2009 evolution of those strategies against 15 admissions demographics to which students belonged. Surprisingly, a number of strategies are still current in 2010, but rapid diffusion of information has made it almost impossible for any student to gain an advantage based on gimmickry or superficiality, because even if an admissions committee hasn't seen an approach, it can probably be found easily on the internet.

Technology, therefore, forces students to play the game by advanced rules and raises the quality of competition, because students must put more effort into genuinely differentiating themselves. Attempted shortcuts can be instantly checked or assessed in ways that were impossible back in 1990 or even as late as 2000. In fact, the need for greater preparation by students and the increase in competitive pressures at top schools, makes it essential for students to begin preparing far in advance of their target

admission round. Long gone are the days when a strong application could easily be completed in less than a week.

I think the process is undergoing a shift which actually benefit students in the longer term, because technology combined with the steps required to substantively improve an admission profile, now encourage future applicants to treat the admissions process as an integral part of their ongoing development – raising odds that committees will gravitate toward them – instead of as “something they have to cram for and get over as soon as possible.”

MBA Expert Series: The value of an MBA in today's economy

Welcome to another installment of our MBA expert series! This week, we were fortunate enough to sit down with MBA admissions expert Walter Hutchinson, founder of ApplicationAdvantage.com, the boutique international admissions advisory, and also founder of MBAdashboard.com, the admissions supersite powered by proprietary technology tools designed specifically for global business school applicants. Walter holds degrees from Columbia University and has lived in North America, Asia and Europe while advising professionals and students representing more than 20 countries.

This week, Walter responded to a very timely question, and one that is surely on many applicants' minds:

What do you think about the value of the MBA in today's economy?

The MBA is more valuable than ever, but not for the reasons that make it glamorous and trendy during economic boom years. Likewise, the criticism it has attracted during recessions or unfortunate corporate scandals is not deserved. The truth is that while anyone can start a business without an MBA, very few people can successfully scale the growth of a company without the advanced management skills taught in a business

school program – not insignificant given that the vast majority of companies never make it to their fifth year.

Expectations about the degree and its true purpose need to be separated from hype and criticism – which means that you have to choose the MBA for the right reasons. If you think the MBA “will create a career”, you are setting yourself up for difficulty. If you recognize the MBA experience as an opportunity to leverage and sharpen skills aimed toward a particular set of risk and resource management goals, then it is more likely to be an asset.

This is why MBA admissions teams discourage the notion that an MBA experience is where people go to “find themselves” or “get their ticket punched.” An MBA does not cause or produce. It enables and facilitates. If you think about it, the reason it attracts so much attention – both negative and positive – is that it always matters. Love or hate the degree, very few major companies can survive without employees trained in advanced business administration skills.

People have for hundreds of years been applying structure and strategy to commercial activity. It just happens that in today’s contemporary, global and fast-moving economy, the tool which is recognized to comprehensively equip ambitious individuals with the skills for developing and leading enterprises from Beijing to Boston to Bratislava, is called the MBA.

MBA Expert Series: The biggest MBA admissions mistake

Welcome to another installment of our MBA expert series! This week, we were fortunate enough to sit down with MBA admissions expert Walter Hutchinson, founder of ApplicationAdvantage.com, the boutique international admissions advisory, and also founder of MBAdashboard.com, the admissions supersite powered by proprietary

technology tools designed specifically for global business school applicants. Walter holds degrees from Columbia University and has lived in North America, Asia and Europe while advising professionals and students representing more than 20 countries.

In your opinion, what is the biggest mistake students make during the admissions process?

Time management. By far.

There are no shortcuts to a stellar application. You either do the introspective examination of your life or you don't. You either explore why experience or thought leadership differentiates you, or you don't. Failing to follow through on these prerequisites is always a recipe for an underwhelming application.

It takes time for a student to discern why patterns or periods of experimentation in their lives will eventually help distinguish them; the unifying of themes, ideas, experiences and contexts across an admission profile is not always linear. In fact, some of the best essays result from a random convergence of personal reflections – which tend to elude procrastinators who are typically consumed by the rush to meet a deadline.

Badly-managed time has another consequence: submitting applications that are riddled with unwitting mistakes. I will give you an example. A couple years ago, someone was referred to me for advice after having previously been rejected everywhere they applied. Upon review of his old applications, I catalogued over 30 major errors or missed opportunities. Granted with my 20-plus years of admission perspective, it was easy for me to spot those issues quickly. However, we both agreed that some could have been avoided if he had managed his time more effectively. On his second attempt, after I guided him on how to reverse errors while seizing opportunities he missed the first time, he got into his top choice: Wharton. Not every reapplicant gets in, of course, but whenever I come across a student who I think should have, it doesn't take long to identify what went wrong – and (lack of) time management is usually one of the main culprits.

MBA Expert Series: The most important factors in choosing an MBA program

Welcome to another installment of our MBA expert series! This week, we were fortunate enough to sit down with MBA admissions expert Walter Hutchinson, founder of ApplicationAdvantage.com, the boutique international admissions advisory, and also founder of MBAdashboard.com, the admissions supersite powered by proprietary technology tools designed specifically for global business school applicants. Walter holds degrees from Columbia University and has lived in North America, Asia and Europe while advising professionals and students representing more than 20 countries.

Walter was kind enough to answer one of the most persistent questions on prospective b-school students' minds:

What are some of the most important factors students should consider when choosing an MBA program?

Among the factors you should consider are: location, post-graduation placement, the prevalence of spouse-friendly programs, hybrid learning opportunities such as institutional exchanges, and experiential learning. Every MBA program has a different take on the lineup of opportunities they provide and it is those differences which you need to look at closely when filtering your list, because admissions committees will be paying equally close attention to which applicant seems to be a match and which doesn't.

Even before getting to those program-specific factors, though, I think the first and most-frequently underestimated issue you need to address for yourself is whether the MBA is the right move.

Are you rising quickly in your organization but need the MBA to go further; do you need to change careers by exploring specific options through the MBA experience; have you maximized opportunities on your current path; will the transformational nature of business school help you to achieve a particular type of personal or professional breakthrough?

The second issue goes to timing: should you be applying now or targeting a future admission round or year?

Once you have worked out answers to those questions, only then should you turn to figuring out which program is the best one for you. Nothing stalls an application faster than unfocused goals or lack of any at all. Be sure you have a compelling reason for seeking an MBA, before you even begin thinking about the names of top schools. Why? Because when you have those answers in hand, it becomes easier to assess fit with a program. Moreover, your to attend a particular school, becomes more convincing and is more likely to result in admittance.

MBA Expert Series: MBA admissions myths of the 2010-11 season

Recently, we spoke to MBA admissions expert Walter Hutchison (founder of ApplicationAdvantage.com and MBAdashboard.com) about the top 5 MBA admissions myths (if you missed that post, [check it out here](#)). This week, Walter digs into two pervasive MBA admissions myths specific to the 2010-11 application season.

Here are the biggest myths flying around this year:

1) The total volume of MBA applications began trending slightly lower in 2009-2010, so my odds of admission will go up.

Not entirely true. Competition, especially at the top schools, is always going to be fierce. The total number of application may also be less relevant depending on the admission demographic you represent. For instance, a negligible improvement in the absolute odds of admission is not going to outweigh the relatively high level of competition among applicants from South Asia, East Asia, Europe and the US. Moreover, you cannot make the assumption that the quality of the applicant pool will decline in line with the declining numbers of applications. Every year, the competitive standards at top schools tend to increase regardless of fluctuations in applicant pool size.

There's another limitation to gaming applicant pool sizes: not even admissions committee members or officers know ahead of time exactly how many people will apply. So the hyper-accurate statistical information you would need in order to assess your chances in the season that you are applying, will ironically not become available until long AFTER you and every other candidate have submitted your applications. The most you would be able to do is make estimates based on historical trends and hope that there are not too many anomalies in your target season.

That's why the best approach when deciding to apply, is to make certain that you never take anything for granted. Put in your best effort no matter what you think some survey's results are telling you.

2) Since my company and career suffered a market-driven setback, top schools will think less of my applications.

False. Admissions committees are human and they are not going to hold you accountable for factors beyond your control. What committees will be interested in, though, is how you respond to this or any setback. What steps have you taken to make positive adjustments to your career trajectory? How have you applied your skills cross-functionally or to another area where your experience has become an asset? If you have more time available to you, how constructively have you used it? Your responses to all these types of questions can easily help you turn any perceived disadvantage into advantage. Approach your application with the same vigor and optimism as you would in

better economic times. If your goals, rationale and potential for leadership are well-articulated, then there is every reason to believe that you will be a serious candidate for admission at the very top business schools.

Walter Hutchinson is the founder of ApplicationAdvantage.com, the boutique international admissions advisory, and also founder of MBAdashboard.com, the admissions supersite powered by proprietary technology tools designed specifically for global business school applicants. Walter holds degrees from Columbia University and has lived in North America, Asia and Europe while advising professionals and students representing more than 20 countries.

MBA Expert Series: The top 5 MBA admissions myths

Anyone that's applying to business school knows that there is a plethora of information about the admissions process floating around — some of it true, some false. MBA admissions expert Walter Hutchinson (founder of ApplicationAdvantage.com and MBAdashboard.com) was kind enough to speak with Knewton about the 5 most persistent myths about the b-school admissions process. Stay tuned next week for two myths specific to the 2010-11 admissions season!

Without further ado, the top 5 recurring MBA admissions myths:

1) A recommendation from a VIP, C-level executive or business school alum will make me stand out

Almost always false. Such assumptions about recommender rank or alumni status are undercut if the recommendation fails to provide the admissions committee with specific insight into your professional development, passions on the job, noted strengths, leadership potential, weaknesses, areas for improvement, situational team skills, ethical character and all-round unique contribution. There is no way that a committee is going to

be swayed by a recommendation which relies on the writer's job title or affiliation more than it does on substantive comments about your career development.

The most important criteria for selecting a recommender is that they know you well. The strongest recommendation comes from someone who seems to know you professionally almost better than you know yourself, because that observational perspective is what intrigues committees. It is a characterization of you that cannot be captured adequately by only a string of superlatives. That's why recommendations which end up being little more than a collection of adjectives are essentially a wasted opportunity from the standpoint of building momentum for your application, because they betray the impression that your recommender does not really know you.

2) I need blue-chip company experience in order to get into a Top-10 program

False. Actually, a non-traditional, non-blue-chip background can make it easier for you to stand out, especially if you are not part of a heavily-represented admission demographic. By contrast, experience at famous or respected companies certainly helps in general, but can also turn into a liability if you rely too much on the company's marquis name to somehow validate your application. From an admissions perspective, the best applicants are identified by the extent to which they have proactively leveraged their available career opportunities or created them. That's why someone who worked at a startup that no one ever heard of, can appear more interesting than the veteran of a Fortune 500 company's unit. In addition, non-traditional experience makes it necessary for you to go the extra mile highlighting the ways in which you have brought business savvy and leadership to your activities – which translates into a huge advantage to you. Fortune 500 applicants, on the other hand, need to work as hard to differentiate themselves in other ways – when they don't, they cede the advantage to every applicant who does.

3) My essay angle is sure to be different from everyone else's, so my chances will be higher

False. Trust me when I say that admissions committees have probably seen every angle – ideas for companies, other initiatives or whatever. But even if they haven't, do you

really want to gamble that your angle will be the one perceived as different from all the rest? Let's put that gamble into context for a moment by looking at a school such as Wharton which received over 7000 applications in its recent admissions season. Wharton has 4 required essays, which means your single essay angle would have been one of over 28,000 reviewed. Now if we expand our field of vision to include previous years, the odds of having an essay angle that no one has ever seen, becomes imperceptibly small indeed. You are far better off investing time in showing why you are unique rather than in trying to develop "the perfect angle." For example, if your angle is that you are planning to launch a company whose value is new to its market, that's fine. But what will intrigue the committee is why you think you are right to lead this initiative, not the initiative itself. Regardless of what company, idea, vision, challenge or prop is used in an essay, your own potential must take the lead in differentiating you, which is exactly why your odds of standing out will increase.

4) The GMAT combined score is important, but the AWA doesn't matter much

False. Both native and non-native English speaker need to pay attention to this one. The AWA (Analytical Writing Assessment) may be used by admissions committees as a helpful holistic benchmark for your communication skills or for your attitude toward academic excellence. If English is not your first language, the AWA is one of the tools a committee may use to comparatively evaluate your essays – underperformance may raise issues that call into question your readiness for business school. Now let's assume that English is your native language, and you have done exceptionally well on the Math and Verbal sections of the GMAT, but you blew off the AWA and ended up with a score of 2 or 2.5. I actually advised someone who came to me after working hard to raise their GMAT combined score from 530 all the way to 760 by their 4th attempt. The first thing I noticed when evaluating their result, was a pattern of AWA scores in the 2 range. When I asked what happened there, they said they didn't think it was important to try. Unfortunately, an admissions committee would have wondered whether this person would truly value and fully apply themselves to the totality of the MBA experience. Admissions teams are not trying to trip you up, but they certainly won't give the benefit of

the doubt to unexplained inconsistencies. Don't give admissions committees a reason to doubt you.

5) Interview preparation is not a priority until after I submit my applications or receive invitations

False. This myth is one of the most insidious, because it always creeps up on unprepared applicants unnoticed...until it is almost too late. Likewise, applicants who insist that they do not need to practice far ahead of time, increase the odds that their overall admissions efforts will be undone. Considering that a single application represents untold hours, days and weeks of personal effort, why would anyone take an unnecessary chance like this one? Nonetheless, it happens every year. Not too long ago, for example, I advised someone who had applied to 7 top schools and won interview invitations at 5. Despite my urging, they thought interview prep was a formality even after receiving the first couple invitations. The outcome of the first interview was predictable: disaster. He then enlisted my help on a crash program of mock interview practice, which unfortunately overlapped with scheduled interviews. He managed to win acceptance from a Top 10 school, but not before making a series of avoidable mistakes that cost him during the first 3 interviews. He was very lucky. Not everyone secures 5 chances to overcome a strategic vulnerability like this one. So I would suggest that if you are waiting for an interview invitation before beginning serious preparation, you are effectively putting your chances and all your invested time in jeopardy.

Walter Hutchinson is the founder of ApplicationAdvantage.com, the boutique international admissions advisory, and also founder of MBAdashboard.com, the admissions supersite powered by proprietary technology tools designed specifically for global business school applicants. Walter holds degrees from Columbia University and has lived in North America, Asia and Europe while advising professionals and students representing more than 20 countries.