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'The MBA will give me credibility when I look for a change elsewhere' -- Mr Prasad Boppana --
DESMOND WEE

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Online MBA courses are a boon for busy honchos but they miss the class interaction

By Dylan Boey

SOME nights ago, Mr Ng Kwai Yew did the unthinkable.

The student, who's a soccer fan, skipped class to catch a repeat telecast of a match between Manchester United and Arsenal.

But none of his lecturers or classmates ever found out.

His MBA course is conducted online. He logs on whenever he finds time away from his demanding job - and the occasional soccer itch - as group chief financial officer of HDB Corporation.

Mr Ng, 55, belongs to a growing group of midlifers in senior management who study online to keep abreast of new management trends.

'I can go in whenever I want,' he says of the flexibility of his course, which he enrolled for last July with Universitas 21 Global (U21 Global).

The qualifying criteria for an online MBA course are similar to those for a traditional one: a minimum of three years' working experience, a basic degree, a good average score of 610 in the Graduate Management Admissions Test and English proficiency.

Students access coursework and reference materials via bulletin boards, chatrooms and e-mail. The use of video conferences and webcasts is not widespread.

Some programmes are so fluid that students can take up to five years to complete.

Midlifers feel that online MBA courses serve them better. Because of their job seniority, most shoulder heavy responsibilities as well as family demands.

They may also travel frequently for work. All these explain why going for classes in a fixed place and time does not suit them.

And due to lower overheads (no lecturers or classrooms), costs are also cheaper. An online MBA programme typically costs US\$11,850 (S\$19,000) compared to a traditional one at, say, Nanyang Technological University, which costs between \$23,000 and \$27,000.

In a competitive world, the ability to get an online MBA has found favour with midlifers eager to supplement and update their expertise.

Says Mr Prasad Boppana, 42, a director with Aspentech, and an online MBA student with U21 Global since last December: 'In a position like mine, further growth would likely be restricted to the same industry. The MBA will give me the ability to cut across other fields and give me credibility when I look for a change elsewhere.'

ONLINE MBA courses took off worldwide in the 1990s with the emergence of the Internet. Then, only partially online courses were offered.

Since then, e-learning has grown. Last year, IT advisory and research firm International Data Corp reported that the size of the Asia-Pacific market had grown from US\$34 million in 1999 to US\$462 million in 2004.

According to Singapore MBA Handbook, a guide to more than a 100 programmes here, there are two major players offering online courses.

The first to do so here in 2001 was Purpletrain.com, a subsidiary of the Informatics Group which partners institutions like the University of Southern Queensland and the University of Wales.

The second was U21 Global in 2003, a consortium of 16 universities worldwide that include the National University of Singapore, University of Birmingham and Fudan University in China.

Spokesmen for both providers say their programmes are catching on among corporate midlifers, with this demographic making up about a quarter of their students.

At Purpletrain.com, some 500 Singapore students have graduated with an online MBA since 2001.

At U21 Global, about 22 per cent are midlifers above age 40 and holding senior management jobs. Its first batch of 200 students will graduate this August.

STUDENTS say the online option is not all sunshine and rainbows. Their main grouse? The lack of a human touch.

This is ironic since MBA programmes aim to create effective managers to manage people, teams and people-related problems.

Says Mr Ng: 'When you e-mail, you can't see the body language and cannot feel others' inflexion. Most of us, to some degree, want to get behind what somebody's talking about, to read between the lines. You cannot do that online.'

He overcomes this handicap by calling up his classmates by phone. 'Rather than wait for the other classmates to access the computer, we SMS each other in a hurry to get things done,' he says.

Agrees Mrs Amy Lew, a general manager who completed her online MBA with Purpletrain.com last year: 'Class discussions are very minimal. There are only two hours per chat, and only two chats per module.'

'Many don't participate. If you miss it, that's it. And I've missed it many times. There is a chat log you can read, but it is not spontaneous.'

Mr Jerren Lai, 35, director of Pierre Consulting which publishes the Singapore MBA Handbook, says such complaints are valid.

'Classroom MBAs attempt to emulate real-life scenarios by giving group projects, discussions and presentations as part of training. Online MBAs lack this kind of interactivity and focus mainly on paper knowledge,' he says.

He does, however, acknowledge that online MBA programmes are in their infancy and, given time, will implement more real-time consultation and video conferencing.

Meanwhile, busy corporate midlifers say they are willing to put up with such limitations. As Mr Ng says: 'This is something I have to accept in exchange for the flexibility.'