



SMART THINKING

BUSINESS SCHOOLS ARE WAKING UP TO THE BENEFITS OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES, BUT ARE THEY A HELP OR HINDRANCE?

by IAN WYLIE

INSTEAD OF MANUALS AND FILES full of course notes, when Christine Geocaniga enrolled on a full-time MBA course at Ashridge Business School near Luton this year, she was given a brand new iPad.

Swapping paper handouts for digital notes is more environmentally friendly but, not surprisingly, Geocaniga says she prefers carrying a 600g iPad in her backpack on other grounds too. After all, Apple's gadget is considered a seriously desirable object.

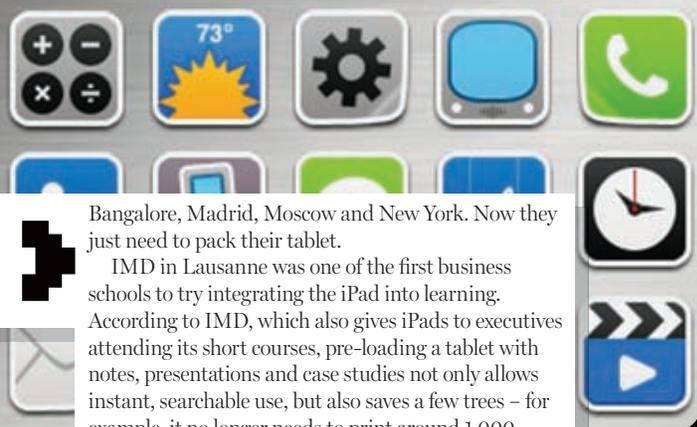
But there's another, more telling reason as well. It's all part of a sea change that's happening right now in business schools across Europe. Until a few years ago, MBA lecturers tended to view the use of new devices and social media in their classes as a distraction. But now that a generation of young people is enrolling who have grown up with smartphones, tablets, Facebook and Twitter, European schools are starting to revamp their courses to include these technologies.

But could this development be more disruptive than helpful in the lecture room? Not according to Ashridge's MBA director, Ilze Zandvoort: "iPads offer a perfect platform for bringing technological innovation into our classrooms. One of the key considerations in designing an MBA or other business programme is the environment the learner will face when going into the workplace, and today that includes technology and social media."

To students on the Global Executive MBA programme, which Madrid's ESADE runs jointly with Georgetown University in the USA, it's the iPad's portability that's a particular draw.

In the past, students have been sent printed teaching material wherever they're based. They've then had to place these notes in binders and lug them around the world to the course modules they attend in Washington, Barcelona, Buenos Aires, São Paulo,





Bangalore, Madrid, Moscow and New York. Now they just need to pack their tablet.

IMD in Lausanne was one of the first business schools to try integrating the iPad into learning. According to IMD, which also gives iPads to executives attending its short courses, pre-loading a tablet with notes, presentations and case studies not only allows instant, searchable use, but also saves a few trees – for example, it no longer needs to print around 1,000 pages per student for a four-day programme.

“With iPads, we have volumes of cases, journals and other readings available for reference,” says IMD MBA student Joseph Godsey. “And when having them on the iPad isn’t enough, all the information can be instantly synchronised across the ‘cloud’ and available on your laptop.” Quick surveys and polls can also be completed on the iPad, and answers uploaded to lecturers’ presentations.

But Godsey admits the use of iPads is not without its drawbacks: “iPads can quickly become a distraction to students, their peers and even the professors if students use them to multitask on unrelated topics.”

Some tablet devices fare better than others in business-school experiments. In a trial of Amazon’s Kindle DX at the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia, students complained of not being able to move between pages, documents, charts and graphs easily enough. When asked, “Would you recommend the Kindle DX to an incoming Darden MBA student?”, more than three-quarters said no.

The Grenoble School of Management is taking this new technology very seriously too. Last year, it established an innovation lab to test how technology can be incorporated into its courses. So far, they’ve looked at the iPad. Their conclusions? “The iPad is a good technology for aggregating all the content students need and it is a great personal organizer too,” says student Olivier Arsene. “But the virtual keyboard is less efficient. It lacks advanced-features and has weak multitasking capabilities. Flash media is unplayable and there’s a lack of collaborative apps.”

It’s not just hardware either. business school students and some of the schools themselves are getting smarter at using free social networking platforms as collaboration tools. At ESADE, students use Moodle – a free networking platform designed by an Australian developer specifically for education – to access class material, post comments and kick off discussions on topics associated with their classes. Importantly, Moodle is open source, allowing tech-savvy students to add on their own features.

According to Ilze Zandvoort, most MBA students will be expected to work in virtual teams when they are in the workplace and collaborating through social media is a good way of acquiring the necessary skills.



An entire course’s work and the student’s notes can be carried around in a 600g tablet



THEY ARE CAPABLE OF SUCKING THE LIFE OUT OF A CLASS BY TEMPTING STUDENTS TO CHECK THEIR EMAIL



FOR EXAMPLE, Rotterdam School of Management (RSM) says many of the students on its global MBA find collaborating on Facebook, LinkedIn and other platforms useful, particularly when project team members are on different continents.

Celia Sikorski is a Brazilian student on RSM’s Global Executive OneMBA, which requires students to work in global teams comprised of classmates who may be on any one of four continents and working in different time zones. “For my marketing project, I made use of social media platforms to conduct surveys,” she says. “While for group projects, we found that GoToMeeting, Skype and Centra were most useful.”

RSM says many of its students are using Twitter during classes – to tweet about the lecture, of course.

So, will new tech devices and social media fundamentally change the way business school students are taught and learn? Jaime Castello, marketing professor and director of the executive MBA at ESADE has his reservations. “Tablets and social media are capable of making classes more dynamic,” he says, “but they are also capable of sucking the life out of a class by tempting students to check their email and away from the class discussion.”

A fair point, but it misses a key fact, according to IMD professor Bettina Büchel: schools must surf this wave in order to equip their students properly. “New technologies are changing the way consumers interact with brands,” she says. “How can executives understand clients’ feedback without knowledge of these operations?”

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