

Online MBA course helps KPMG retain graduates

CORPORATE PROFILE KPMG

A long-term relationship with MBSW is bearing fruit, says **Linda Anderson**

KPMG, in the UK, is a strong advocate for distance learning.

The professional services firm first established its relationship with Manchester Business School in the UK in 2003 when the school delivered an executive programme for its employees.

Since the firm opted for a distance learning MBA in 2005, offered by Manchester Business School Worldwide, their collaboration has gone from strength to strength.

Currently there are between 40 and 50 KPMG employees on the MBA programme for Financial Managers and Finance Professionals, with the first group of students close to finishing the programme.

Michael Walby, the national exam training senior manager at KPMG, says the MBSW programme meets very specific business needs for the group.

"The programme is driven by the desire to develop and retain staff," he says. "It is an intensively competitive market for qualified chartered accountants and this programme means that some employees would be motivated to stay at KPMG."

KPMG aims to retain employees for at least five years and Mr Walby says that, so far, offering MBA training as a retention tool is working well.

KPMG opted for a distance learning package because of its flexibility. Mr Walby says the distance learning format is best suited to KPMG's business needs as the accountancy firm's clients expect KPMG employees to fit additional training around their working practices and business requirements.

"Distance learning is an excellent concept for a more diverse workforce, especially when traditional learning is not always appropriate," he says.

KPMG and MBSW worked closely to identify the desired outcomes and certain aspects of the programme

were tailored to accommodate KPMG's business practices and working environment.

MBSW was then able to deliver the firm's needs in terms of programme content and as a result of the collaboration KPMG understands the design and implementation of the programme, which blends distance learning with some face-to-face content.

About 15 KPMG employees begin the MBA programme each year. It can take as many as five years to complete.

Although the average age of candidates is lower, at 21-25 years, than the 28-32 years of most business school MBA participants, the students are still expected to have work experience.

'It is an intensively competitive market for qualified chartered accountants'

Mr Walby believes the successful completion of the programme is dependent upon experience of the workplace and consequently KPMG employees must have at least 18 months to two years experience working with clients before joining the programme.

"We were conscious of the younger age. We don't want to devalue the MBA and put forward people not able to contribute to the workshops like other students, which is why we want work experience," says Mr Walby.

KPMG also looks for maturity in MBA candidates. The programme, explains Mr Walby, is dependent on self-motivation and students must be able to manage the process of training themselves. He says the MBA course requires discipline to study, often alone, whilst maintaining a career.

"It is a significant commitment in terms of time," admits Mr Walby.

One of the perennial criticisms of a distance learning programme is isolation and KPMG tries to ensure participants spend time with each other.

At the start, each intake spends time together as a group.

"There is a lot of support, which is valuable to them," says Mr Walby.

He admits the programme is not suited to everyone but says individuals who realise they are not capable of continuing with the programme, or feel it is not meeting their needs, will choose to drop out on their own.

The MBA programme has a number of different elements: the initial modules cover general aspects of an MBA while the second semester has been designed specifically with KPMG in mind.

KPMG employees also attend face-to-face workshops at MBSW – some are geared to KPMG, while others are open to participants from outside the firm studying on the programme. Participants also work on projects, with KPMG offering support.

Mr Walby says feedback he has received from participants on the programme is very positive.

"I have had [employees] on the programme who have gone on to perform exceptionally well within the business, justifying our decision to recruit these individuals [onto the MBA] and adding value to our clients."

With the first KPMG cohort close to completing their MBA, Mr Walby says the group can now measure the success of the programme. He says one of the challenges facing the firm is to ensure that managers are aware of the new capabilities of the MBA employees.

"It is important to realise that value, because the MBA is a niche programme and within the group is not as widely known as an accountants' qualification," he says. "But we have people like myself to make sure the business is fully aware."

Mr Walby says his next challenge is to understand how to successfully manage the new MBA's careers.

"We have achieved the objective – to retain them for five years – but where do we take them next?" he asks.