Thinking of going back to school? Find out why you should be pro-active and take ownership of your career now.

**THE MISCONCEPTION IS** that education stops once you have received that 'white piece of paper' – the certification used to get your first job. Be it a bachelor's or master's degree, many are contented with this level of accomplishment and rely on building up a portfolio based on work experience. However, learning does not simply stop there.

More Singaporeans are holding to at least a diploma or bachelor's degree these days. There were 10,031 local graduates and 16,515 diploma-holders in 2005 compared to 8,218 local graduate and 11,171 back in 1996. In addition, there were also a significant number of overseas graduates not captured in the statistics.

**Increased Competition**
The pool of educated people has become more competitive and thus, it is even more vital to stay on top of the game by obtaining either a higher level of qualification, or gaining more relevant skills to become more competent in what you do.

Going back to school for the working adult is a popular choice nowadays. Kaplan Centre for Corporate Learning noticed a growing interest in continuing education amongst working Singaporeans aged 25-45, with an estimated 6,000 working adults enrolled in the school presently.

**Globalization and Technology**
Many working adults are prompted to learn a new skill due to changes in the workplace. "Today, people are working in an increasingly borderless world and must compete globally. Therefore, the qualifications that are highly sought after are those that are recognized internationally and valued by MNCs," says Mr. Patrick Ho,
CEO of Kaplan Singapore. Examples of such qualifications at Kaplan include MBA (Master of Business Administration) and CFA (Chartered Financial Analyst).

Globalization also led to a rapidly changing economy and professionals have to work even harder to keep up with the latest technology and moving market trends. Associate Professor Ooi Lee Lee, director-MBA programme at NTU, explains, "With the advent of globalization in this technology age, modern managers are expected to keep abreast with the latest business skills and knowledge that enable them to manage people and business across cultures and often in a virtual environment." Thus, professionals have to be pro-active and continue to upgrade their skills in order to achieve a certain level of competency.

Switching Careers
Mr Patrick Ho said: "Continuing education is applicable to those who are also considering a career change and need to bridge the knowledge gap from a non-business background moving into management or business roles. For example, a doctor who wishes to start his own practice may need to learn about managing the business aspect of things such as operations, recruitment, managing budgets and other resources."

Growing Demand for Customization And Relevancy
Associate Professor Annie Koh, dean of executive education at Singapore Management University, believes that times have changed and employers are looking for customized training and competency. She believes that employers are no longer hiring based on qualifications alone, as evident from the 1997 economic job crisis, but seeking to hire professionals with the right skills for the job. Professionals should seek to specialize, like doing a course in Information Technology for financial services instead of being contented with just a generic one. This will help them to relate to their respective job industry and become better at what they do.

Better Job Opportunities
Companies often engage customized training to groom staff with high potential for leadership or management positions so that they can learn more skills and take on greater responsibilities. Prof Koh feels that people should be more pro-active and upgrade themselves with programmes that are skill-specific and relevant to what they do. Prof Koh advises, "Now that you have a job, you should be thinking ahead already, like how to upgrade yourself even if your company doesn’t want to invest in you. You have to take your own destiny and create your own path."

What Are The Returns?
The decision to continue education is an investment based on favorable returns and/or enjoyment level. Assoc Prof Ooi notices that the students in NTU’s MBA programmes have reportedly seen an average increase in salary of 110 per cent, three years after graduation.” However, she stresses that the return should not be based solely on monetary terms. Mr. Patrick Ho reinforces this by adding that returns are dependable on several factors such as grades and the relevance of the course to the job. Mr. Wong Peng Meng, associate director of NUS Extension, adds that some of the corporate companies are repeating the same programme for their staff and this by itself is a testimonial that the programme has been useful.

Investing in continuing education is a bold step and requires careful consideration and commitment. Before taking the plunge, here are some things you should consider.
Important Factors to Take Note:

1. Consider the quality and reputation of the institution. With so many institutions to choose from, caution is needed when choosing an institution.

2. Check for the quality of the teaching staff. Do they have the necessary credentials? What kind of work experiences or accomplishments do they have under their belt? Are they dynamic individuals?

3. Make sure the curriculum of the program covers the desired learning requirements and knowledge areas.

4. Also take note of the duration of the program. Is it a part-time or full-time course? Is there an accelerated version available? Note that some courses occur during working hours and may require you to burn weekends also.

5. Are you fully committed? Part-time students might need to set aside at least three evenings per week to attend classes and work on projects during the weekends. This can sometimes go on for 12-18 months. Family support will be beneficial as well.

6. Are the tuition fees within your budget? Are you able to take a loan or pay in installments? Is there a scholarship available, or is your company willing to sponsor you?

7. Find out the calibre of the other students in the program, as they will form part of your network eventually. The classes offer excellent opportunities to network, and sharing amongst your peers is a huge part of the whole learning experience.

8. At the end of the day, you want to make sure that the program equips you with relevant knowledge and practical skills necessary for future career opportunities.

9. Get proper guidance from the advisory team on whether this is the right career path for you. It’s not just about having adequate knowledge; you must have the passion and personality for the job as well.

10. Don’t follow group mentality and take it just because everybody else is doing so! You need to be realistic about what you want out of it. However, if you’re happy with your current job, then you can take up another language or skill instead.

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*Figures based on NUS, NTU and SMU from MOE’s Education Statistics Digest 2006*