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# New world order

Ivey EMBA California trip offers vision of the future, writes John Cremer

As global business changes, executive education programmes must not just keep in step, but also show the way by anticipating trends and shaping ideas about the major issues. The leaders of tomorrow clearly need all-round expertise in the practical and theoretical aspects of running an organisation, covering everything from financing and strategy to the softer skills of people management and marketing. But they must also appreciate the bigger picture, with the acuity to foresee developments likely to have an impact on their own industries and the ability to interpret the broader social context.

For that reason, the Ivey Business School introduced a new programme into its EMBA course on entrepreneurship and innovation. This gave this year's graduating class the opportunity to see how technology, new business models and the spirit of enterprise are overturning conventional thinking and creating a "new world order". The course is built around an 11-day trip to Silicon Valley on the west coast of the US. This time, it included meetings with over 400 Ivey alumni living there – one of whom sold a successful start-up to Oracle – plus company visits to the likes of LinkedIn and Intel. It also included illuminating sessions with some of the "grandfathers"

of the internet phenomenon, as well as with bankers, investors and analysts. Unsurprisingly, the experience was an eye-opener. "Hong Kong is a very enterprising place, but a lot is family-based," says Janet De Silva, dean of the Ivey Business School, Asia. "Everything in Silicon Valley is about new ideas, new business creation and ways to 'disrupt' the traditional approach."

Various meetings and discussions centred on what it takes to launch a start-up, build

visits to some of the big firms, students saw how competition for talent has an impact on everything from recruitment to rewards, and how a work environment is managed. "Silicon Valley is a brilliant place, but it creates 'tummy trouble' for everyone who visits – a gnawing question of 'do I have what it takes to do that?'" De Silva says. "It opens up perspectives and makes people ask what new ideas they can bring into their own companies."

One class member, whose

investment company, to simulate the start-up ecosystem in Hong Kong and around Asia. The concept allows budding entrepreneurs to pitch their ideas to a panel of experienced investors, which can lead to more discussions, introductions to useful contacts and arrangements for funding.

De Silva also stresses that entrepreneurship is not a quality exclusive to start-up companies or the hi-tech industry. "Most firms now value people who are very entrepreneurial in carving out new markets and overcoming new challenges," she says.

In other respects too, the school is helping influence business thinking in practical ways. As one element of a partnership with The Women's Foundation in Hong Kong, scholarships are open to women taking the Ivey EMBA. Behind this is the need to see gender diversity in senior management positions and the boardroom and, crucially, to ensure more women have the executive education expected in such roles.

We reach out to some women who may not have thought about doing an EMBA and encourage others who have considered it, but are unsure about the commitment," De Silva says. "The aim is to create an environment where women pursue senior careers, hold places on boards and set role models for others to follow."

## Silicon Valley is about new ideas, new business creation and ways to 'disrupt' the traditional approach

JANET DE SILVA, DEAN, IVEY BUSINESS SCHOOL, ASIA

family business focuses on electronic musical instruments, credits the course with helping her see a need to rethink the company's business model before anyone else did. Another credits the EMBA with pushing him to develop an idea he felt passionate about into a viable start-up. He now runs a concierge service storing and delivering golf equipment, suitcases, bicycles and surfboards. To support such initiatives, Ivey alumni set up with Nestlé, a Hong Kong-based angel



PHOTO: NEW ASIA

Janet De Silva



Christina Lopez

## Buzz that got me hooked

When you have both family responsibilities and a demanding career which entails frequent travel, the idea of starting the Ivey EMBA programme can seem more than a little daunting. What convinced Christina Lopez to take that step was the buzz she got from sitting in on just one case-study class.

"It was difficult at times and always challenging," says Lopez, director of talent development, global learning and development at the DFS Group. "But the school lays out the full calendar in advance, so I was able to arrange travel around weekend classes, and the faculty was also very accommodating."

Putting extra emphasis on entrepreneurship, the curriculum included a special class visit to Silicon Valley. It was a chance to learn from Ivey alumni and hear from top executives about what it takes to go from start-up to a successful business, thus providing a "360-degree experience". To add impact, class members also had to devise and pitch a product or service idea for a new company.

Reflecting on the trip and other courses which took her outside her comfort zone, Lopez agrees that the exposure and key learnings from modules such as entrepreneurship, marketing, finance and strategy helped her prepare for a global merchandising role, where she will need to be an "entrepreneur" for her company's fragrance business. Whenever advising potential Ivey candidates, Lopez always emphasises that the exposure and key learnings from the programme is hard work, but that it should be. And in her view, for anyone ready to invest the time and make the commitment, it is "extremely double".

## Gaining a whole new perspective

Simon Heaton chose the Ivey EMBA programme for a number of reasons.

He was on an assignment in Hong Kong at the time, which made the logistics easy. The school's reputation was well known to him, partly from his previous spell in Canada. The case-study method had a special appeal. And, most importantly, he was suitably impressed by the range and relevance of subjects in the curriculum.

At the outset, though, there was an understandable sense of trepidation. "When contemplating the programme, you wonder how it is possible to get through all the topics and cover them in depth," says Heaton, who was recently appointed as global head of executive resourcing at Barclays Bank.

But looking back, I remember the core elements of all the classes and, on a Monday, we already using what I had learned over the weekend."

As someone with extensive experience in talent management and recruiting, he was especially keen to learn how everything else fits together in a major organisation and what determines priorities.

In this respect, being part of three different teams for group work

Simon Heaton

and case analysis proved to be a big help.

It presented a chance to learn from the strengths of others, question their recommendations and methods of operation, and be both teacher and student depending on the topic under discussion.

For Heaton, one "transformational moment" was the class on big data and analytics, a subject on which he knew little, but can see will have a major impact on HR management in the years to come.

Also revealing were the courses on finance, which put him in a position to understand the formulas and speak the same "language" as senior management colleagues when he joined the bank.

"Lacking 15 different subjects as a team and individually, and being graded as you go through, has given me more confidence in my own abilities," Heaton explains.

"I now approach projects and operations at work from a different perspective, can see what we have to support as an HR team, and am able to communicate everything more clearly."



Gabriela Koehli

## Grab opportunity to test out ideas

Taking the Ivey EMBA doesn't guarantee promotion, but a clear pattern is discernible. With the career boost the course gives, many students find themselves offered a significant step up even before finishing their studies.

In June last year, Gabriela Koehli progressed from CFO of Bayer Taiwan to her current role as CEO.

Overseeing about 550 staff, The Swiss native, who started as a business controller in Europe in 2005, had previously led projects such as merging production companies and centralising accounting activities outside Taiwan. But she is quick to acknowledge the help the Ivey EMBA gave in offering the general management skills and breadth of experience to face challenges.

"The programme was like being in a business simulator, in the way airlines have a simulator for pilots. Through case studies, you are put in

the shoes of 150 decision makers and have to make decisions as they would. The class is a 'safe' environment, so you don't run your own company 'into a wall,'" she says.

Koehli is aware that as you rise in an organisation, your decisions affect the success of the business and staff. It is vital to have a proper frame of reference to assess alternatives and understand the scope and possible impact of each action.

"The programme was also an opportunity to test out ideas in different areas and get experience I would not get to this extent in the current job," she says, highlighting modules on IPOs, downsizing, leadership and foreign markets. "It was fascinating learning how to manage the many situations you face and how you may need different skills in a multinational or a small enterprise."

Koehli now feels more complete, better at anticipating needs and expectations, and more adept at getting messages over to staff and customers.



Thomas Tong

## Challenge yourself to be a more effective leader

Each member of the Ivey EMBA class approaches the course with different aims and ambitions. Thomas Tong, director of venue operations for the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre (HKCEC), had two specific goals.

One was to acquire an all-round understanding of how the business world works, which the academic training and case-study method provide. Having worked in the same sector for around 30 years, the second was to challenge himself in terms of personal growth and becoming a more effective manager.

"I started out as a hotelier at the age of 19 and never had much formal management education," Tong says. "My goal is to be a world-class leader and I've now equipped me with the knowledge, skills and ideas to help that happen."

It is easy, Tong notes, when you work under one roof and sometimes round the clock, to fall into tried and tested ways of operating and interacting with others. To improve at corporate and individual level, you need new perspectives, the best thinking, and original solutions to avoid the "same old" snags.

"It is important to upgrade your 'software' and update what you have accumulated in your career so far," says Tong, whose employer offered generous financial support for his studies. "By mixing with classmates who have expertise in other industries, the experience also corrects beliefs you have about what you think works best in your own job."

In his current role, Tong has already changed his approach in significant ways. He credits courses in operations and strategic marketing for making him more analytical and seeing

not just one side of the story. He also has a much fuller grasp of everything on the finance and accounting side. And in meetings, he now asks very direct questions to save time and inspire action.

"My staff say I have become upbeat and very focused," he

says. "I feel more effective in addressing issues and know my level of commitment and enthusiasm has improved."

His advice for those aiming to take the programme is clear and to the point: "Be open-minded, prepare to work hard and realise there are no shortcuts."

## Ivey gave me the knowledge, skills and ideas to [be a world-class leader]

THOMAS TONG, DIRECTOR OF VENUE OPERATIONS, HKCEC