

ZDNet Asia

IT execs urged to take MBA path to CIO's chair

By Sol E. Solomon, ZDNet Asia Friday, August 28, 2009 06:02 PM

ICT managers eyeing chief information, technology or operating officer positions should consider an advanced degree course such as the MBA (Master of Business Administration), if they have not had formal tertiary training in business, suggests an academic.

Professor S. Viswanathan, head of IT and operations management of the Nanyang Business School at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), said courses for more experienced managers focus on strategic thinking, leadership, teamwork and inter-personal skills, rather than technical skills.

"Teaching the state of art in technology, and current strategic and business issues is important. However, because the technology and business context changes rapidly in today's world, it is important to impart broad problem solving, analytical, teamwork, interpersonal and conceptual thinking skills that can help the students over a lifelong career," Viswanathan told ZDNet Asia in an e-mail.

"While an MBA degree is not essential for executives to climb up the corporate ladder, other things being equal, having one is always an advantage," he said. "Besides, the frameworks, concepts, strategic thinking and business vocabulary that one learns in an MBA program is very useful in senior management positions."

For instance, practice assistant professor Michelle Cheong noted that the banking industry is currently looking to strengthen its internal processes and operations. To support this focus, there is growing demand in the sector for technology and operations professionals who understand the banking industry, said Cheong, who is director of Masters and professional programmes at the School of Information Systems, under Singapore Management University (SMU).

The university's Master of IT in Business (Financial Services) program is co-designed and co-delivered with business and IT leaders, she said in an e-mail interview, which helps capture "a successful blend of managerial and practical skills and know-how". It trains professionals to transition into leadership roles, such as head of technology and operations, she added.

The course focuses on the banking industry's specific needs for technology, process and operations professionals in four major segments: capital markets and investment banking, corporate and institutional banking, private banking, and retail banking.

The NTU also offers an MBA course with specialization in technology, and is designed for participants with two to 10 years of work experience, Viswanathan said.

The school also runs its Advanced Management Program (AMP) and Executive MBA (EMBA) for general managers or heads in their respective functional domains. At this level, strategic thinking and leadership are more critical so even functional domain courses will have strong strategic orientation, he said.

At the undergraduate level, the NTU offers a double-degree in Computer Engineering and Business, as well as the Bachelor of Business (Bbus) program with IT specialization. The Bbus (IT) students learn business management subjects and will receive a business degree, but they also attend elective courses in business IT such as enterprise systems and IT in financial services.

Viswanathan said: "Typically, most IT jobs in large organizations require a good understanding of the business processes in a particular functional area. The Bbus (IT) and double-degree holders are effectively able to communicate well with the user--that is, business managers--as well as with the technical staff in the IT organization."