



Online degrees gaining more respect

Many hiring managers still skeptical, but distance learning hard to ignore

By Eve Tahmincioglu
updated 3:08 p.m. PT, Sun., Sept. 7, 2008

Online degrees have always been a bit like Rodney Dangerfield. They got no respect when it came to helping you land a job.

But cyberdiplomas at least may be gaining more recognition.

Thanks to the growth of online course offerings by well-established schools, and a slow but growing acceptance on the part of hiring managers to be more open to these virtual degrees, some job applicants are finding an online education is taken a bit more seriously these days.

Take Karan Giblin-Manson from Jacksonville, Fla., who got her bachelor's degree from distance-learning college Excelsior. She believes the online degree she recently completed is the reason she was able to land a job as a software analyst for a hospital chain.

After working for decades as a respiratory therapist and then working for a software company installing systems at hospitals, Giblin-Manson was laid off in 2006 because of company cutbacks. She sent out tons of resumes and interviewed for many jobs, but suspected her lack of a college degree was holding her back.

Giblin-Manson had included on her resume that she was in the process of completing her bachelor's degree, and she also included her expected graduation date.

Right after she received her degree in April, she got three calls from companies looking to hire her.

"I really believe getting the online degree was the trigger," she says.

There's definitely a growing interest in online degrees among employees and job seekers out there as workers make efforts to enhance their skills and resumes but don't have the time to go to traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms.

Advances in technology such as video streaming and instant messaging, and the fact that so many homes have high-speed Internet connections, have made online courses easier than ever to take.

Nearly 3.5 million students were taking online courses in the fall of 2006, the most recent data available, according to an online learning report by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. That was a 9.7 percent increase from the previous year, and double the past four years. More than two-thirds of all higher education institutions now have some form of online courses.

At Albany, N.Y.-based Excelsior, enrollment has jumped 12.5 percent this year, says Bill Stewart, assistant vice president for institutional advancement at the distance-learning college.

"The common reason they're enrolling with us is because they may have started a degree but never finished it, and they find themselves in a situation where they need a degree to advance in their current job, or they're looking to change careers," he says.

While such programs are gaining traction, there still seem to be some negative vibes out there when it comes to online degrees.

Excelsior commissioned a Zogby study earlier this year to survey 1,500 CEOs and small business owners about their thoughts on a online education. Only 45 percent thought online programs were as credible as traditional college campus courses. But among those familiar with online colleges, 83 percent found the programs just as credible.

"Right now, pound for pound, I don't think it carries the same weight," says Warren Arbogast, a higher education and technology consultant, when asked about an online degree vs. a degree from a traditional college.

Fly-by-night operations that offer fake degrees haven't helped the overall reputation of online degree programs, he says, and even reputable online schools often tout how easy their programs can be. That doesn't boost confidence among hiring managers, he says.

"And all Americans are really brand-sensitive," he adds.

That said, Arbogast believes online courses today are substantive and gaining credibility, but it will take some time before they are on a level playing field with face-to-face programs.

"The whole conversation about online degrees and if people take them seriously is a familiar conversation we were having a decade ago about weekend MBAs," he notes. But today, these part-time advanced business degree programs are all the rage.

One of the keys for recruiters when it comes to evaluating an online degree is the school that's offering the program.

"A recruiter evaluates the caliber of a university or college," says Angela Pertruccio, director of the career center at the Whitman School of Management at Syracuse University. "While many schools are providing online degree formats for students, not just any school with an online degree will be attractive to a recruiter. It still depends on the strength and national recognition of the program as a whole."

More and more schools, including well-known names like Harvard and Yale, have gotten into the online degree act -- and that's good news for many of you who don't have the time but want to continue your education.

But there are things to keep in mind before you sign up.

First, make sure that the school you're interested in has accredited degree programs. The last thing you need is to spend years finishing up a degree only to find no one recognizes it.

Experts suggest checking for accreditation on the [Council for Higher Education Accreditation Web site](#).

Beyond a school's credentials, it's up to you to figure out what a degree from a particular institution will do for you career aspirations.

Petrucchio suggests doing a bit of homework to find out what the "perceived value of that degree is in the marketplace." That means calling alumni from the school and also recruiters. The institution, she says, should be more than willing to share this information with you. If not, then forget them.

Also, if you want to advance at your firm, or want to get a job someplace else, it's a good idea to find out which degrees are held by the people in the jobs you want. Finding resumes of individuals online these days is easy thanks to social networking sites like LinkedIn, so do a bit of snooping.

Giblin-Mason says she knew Excelsior had an "excellent" reputation and talked to alumni. "I then went online and called a counselor to see how it would work best for me," she says.

Next thing on her plate: to get an MBA from Excelsior.

© 2008 MSNBC Interactive

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26458424/>

[MSN Privacy](#) . [Legal](#)

© 2008 MSNBC.com