

MSN

Six Reasons to Go Back to School this Year

By Vicki Salemi

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From improving your marketability and making more money to tapping into the resources of a campus career office and honing your technical skills, returning to school makes great sense.

While the Bureau of Labor Statistics show 15 out of 20 occupations predicted to grow fastest through 2014 require some form of higher education (with nine occupations requiring at least a bachelor's degree), it's apparent that a diploma is indeed key to a bright future. Recognizing the significance of a degree in today's work environment along with the accessibility and variety of educational options geared toward adults, there's no time like the present to reap the bookish benefits based on the following six reasons to return to school.

1 - To make a career change. At age 37, Martin DuWors was burned out from working in the service and parts departments and collision repairs of an automobile company. "In possession of only a high school diploma, I felt as though I had no options."

At the urging of his brother, DuWors realized he needed to return to school. He enrolled in Northeastern University's computer systems specialist program and completed 16 information technology (IT) courses while working full time. Though difficult, Martin realized that attaining a bachelor's degree was his ticket out of the job he had for almost 20 years.

After completing the IT courses with credit hours counting towards his bachelor's degree, DuWors pursued an IT position, took a pay cut, and then reaped the benefits of the technology explosion through 2000. In 2003 he forged ahead and completed his bachelor's degree in the midst of recovering from melanoma surgery, and graduated the following year with a 3.99 GPA.

2 - To earn more money. For Alexander Inchausti, earning his associate degree in network systems administration from DeVry University (Miramar, FL) is the beginning of his educational journey. After he completes his bachelor's degree in technical management, he plans on pursuing his master's. "In addition to enhancing my own education, obtaining a higher degree will indicate that I have learned new skills that can only increase my value to the company I represent."

The senior deployment and operations engineer for Wireless Maritime Services, a joint venture of Maritime Telecommunications Network and AT&T mobility, recognizes the value of his degree. "The bottom line is you need to have a degree in order to be even considered for management material. Just looking at all of the available jobs online -- most companies require a bachelor's degree."

While earning a specific degree may not immediately command a significant increase in pay, over the duration of one's career, advanced degrees typically result in bigger paychecks. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average annual earnings of professionals with advanced degrees was \$55,445 compared to professionals with a bachelor's degree at \$46,435, compared to high school diploma holders of \$27,384.

3 - To improve your marketability. In today's job market, competition is fierce. In order to remain marketable to potential employers, Todd Leach, associate dean of academic affairs at

Northeastern University's School of Professional and Continuing Studies, emphasizes marketing yourself to future employers.

"Employers are seeking educational experiences [from students] that will provide them with transferable skill sets such as leadership, project management, communication, and critical thinking," he explains. "They are looking to educational institutions to provide that platform of competencies that can then be built upon for multiple and changing roles within an organization."

Since students are pursuing master's degrees in specific areas such as leadership, Leach says schools are addressing this interest. "As more employees compete over positions which cannot be easily off-shored, we are likely to see that competition raises the bar regarding what credentials will provide employees with a competitive edge." For instance, Northeastern University offers an executive doctorate degree designed to advance the analysis and decision-making skills of higher-level executives beyond master's programs.

4 - To gain personal fulfillment. Not satisfied with your job? According to Linda Diaconis, Ph.D., RN, professor of nursing and chair of the RN to B.S. option at Villa Julie College, personal fulfillment is related to job satisfaction. "Advancing one's education is a way to open doors and take advantages of opportunities," she says.

Such is the case in the nursing professions, Diaconis explains. "A retiring nursing workforce is a ripe time for potential nurses to earn a higher degree to make them more attractive for that position. Many nurses who wish to sit for certification exams must first acquire their bachelor degree."

5 - To get a foot in the door. Doreen Shanahan, director of the education to business program at Pepperdine University, says the intense learning experience often embedded within the curriculum of certain programs allows students to gain experience while having access to top company leaders. "[They can] build networks that facilitate employment opportunities, obtain career counseling directly from senior-level industry executives, and open doors for internships and jobs," she explains. Plus, it gives them the opportunity to add additional work experience to their resumes and understand job responsibilities from practitioners in the field.

For example, real-time MBA-level case projects bring executives and students together in the classroom to solve business issues. Based on recommendations made by Pepperdine students, Warner Brothers partnered with a fashionable racing apparel maker and branded a range of apparel that went to test market only six months following the class.

6 - To invest in your own personal stock. In addition to opening doors to future jobs and making yourself more valuable to your current employer, by pursuing your degree you're simply making an investment and commitment to yourself to persevere.

"Education is an investment that always pays you back," assures Dr. Susan Aldridge, president of University Maryland University College. "Housing prices may decline and stocks may plummet but an education lasts a lifetime -- bolstering your earning potential, enriching your intellectual life, and paying big dividends in personal satisfaction."