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My Career
Advancing by degrees

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COVER STORY

Extra qualifications can give you an edge but you need to choose wisely. By Ann-Maree Moodie.

A little like the newly married couple who are asked at the church door when they're going to start a family, or the new parents, infant in arms, being asked when child number two is planned, so too are many freshly minted graduates asked what they're going to study next.

It seems grossly unfair to be quizzed about further study when you've only just finished three or four years of full-time study for a bachelor's degree but today's job market is demanding and fluid. Postgraduate qualifications are considered de rigueur even for those roles that 10 years ago might have been considered "junior".

The postgraduate options are varied, ranging from education to social impact, international law and policy studies. Many allow students to enrol in a certificate program that can later be articulated to a full degree.

"If you're already employed, postgraduate studies can open doors: you can upskill [especially if you're looking for a promotion or if your industry is unstable], prepare yourself for a career change or simply further your education in an area of interest," says the 2012 Good Universities Guide on the postgraduate courses available.

But does a certificate or graduate diploma hold weight in the marketplace? And does a lower-level postgraduate qualification rather than a master's degree send the wrong message: that you're not smart enough for a degree qualification or that you don't have the discipline or motivation to complete another full degree?

Heidi Mason, of the international search firm Russell Reynolds, says regard is always paid if a candidate holds a degree rather than a certificate or graduate diploma. "A degree is a qualification we look for first, because without an underlying degree we generally would not be looking at the candidate at all," Mason says.

Postgraduate qualifications other than a degree are considered favourably if the credential rounds out the candidate or qualifies them in a specific skill relevant to the role for which they're applying.

"These additional qualifications would need to be quite particular, such as a safety qualification would be to some manufacturing or industrial environments," Mason says. "Similarly, Lean Six Sigma is another very specific qualification that, for the right role, would carry a lot of weight." (See panel.)

A qualification from the Financial Services Institute of Australasia indicates that the candidate has a broad interest in the financial markets but without relevant industry experience, the qualification would lose its impact.

"Any subsequent diplomas or certificates form an additional piece of knowledge about the candidate, because the course will generally have been undertaken to round out experience," Mason says.

With search consultants expecting job candidates to hold at least an undergraduate degree, the right impression depends on the course that was studied. "A master of business administration degree shows a good breadth of the theory and suggests they will apply this knowledge in their work," Mason says. "A master of finance degree is very valuable in the markets environment and, as it is such a difficult course, it reflects the candidate is smart enough to have done it."

The university is also important.

"Remote-access MBAs can rarely offer the same value to the candidate compared with those who have the experience of other students to learn from," she says.

"But it doesn't make much difference to me whether the candidate has articulated to a master's degree rather than enrolled immediately into the program. In general, I would be more concerned about why they didn't go to university initially. We rarely see people who didn't go to university straight from year 12, although I'm sure this was more of a case 10 years ago."

Ruth Medd, the chairwoman of Women on Boards (WOB), which promotes gender diversity in the boardroom, reads hundreds of CVs from women who have registered to be considered for board seats.

"A higher degree is viewed favourably and articulating from a postgraduate diploma to a master's degree is quite common and creates a good impression. In this case, a higher degree adds considerable value," Medd says. "But too many degrees can be a turnoff."

Research shows that women are more likely to use further education to get ahead. "Most WOB members have degrees and some have other qualifications," Medd says. "But often it's their life experience that is the focus of people who are considering them for a board position. So it's not a case of whether candidate A will do better than candidate B because one has a degree and the other has a diploma.

"It's the totality of their career that matters."

Ann-Maree Moodie is the managing director of The Boardroom Consulting Group.

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LEAN, MEAN, IMPROVEMENT MACHINES

Employees who complete the suite of courses that make up the Lean Six Sigma program often end up earning \$150,000-plus salaries. The director of the LSS Business Excellence Institute at UTS, Alan Skinner, says the program, which trains leaders and project managers over several weeks to make improvements in organisations, is used across a variety of sectors. "It's a common misconception that LSS is only for manufacturing," he says. "It's used to deliver improvements in service industries, too, such as health, for example in hospitals with surgical hardware and infection control, as well as banks and financial institutions, consumer products, sales and marketing and even call centres."

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