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Author:	Robert Břešťan

Steve Jobs was unique. Others must study to be great.

Ivana Goossen

(The interview was originally published in Czech language; the following text is an English translation).

In a conversation with the director of the Prague location of a top U.S. business school, the University of Pittsburgh's Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business, we discuss elitism, the financial crisis, and why she feels a Eurocitizen.

The Prague campus of the University of Pittsburgh's Katz Graduate School of Business, the only Czech school ranked among the Top 50 EMBA (Executive Master of Business Administration) programs by the *Financial Times*, is located in a discreet building in the center of the Czech metropolis. The program holds the pleasant 41st position in the most recent ranking. Experienced managers from all over Europe choose this school to further their education; its graduates include a number of Czech top business representatives, such as Martin Novák from ČEZ, the 2011 winner of the annual "Financial Director of the Year" award, Martin Tesař, Chief Partner in the Audit Department of Deloitte Czech Republic or Libor Holík, general manager at Xerox Czech and Slovakia, to name but a few. According to the *Financial Times*, a graduate of this school can expect to see a salary increase of 46 percent on average, later in his career. "The majority of students will really be better off. But I don't want to say that it's only thanks to the education. The fact of the matter is that our typical student is already an expert and successful manager with 13 years of experience," says Ivana Goossen, director of the EMBA Prague location for the University of Pittsburgh's Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business, a Bulgarian national and herself a graduate of this university, in an interview for the *Ekonom* weekly. When it comes to the fact that the MBA degree is often viewed with skepticism, she remains realistic. "Similar to the way you have different expectations of different kinds of cars, MBA schools vary in quality too. I have personally met a number of people whom I thought about that it would have been better for MBA titles if they hadn't have one," adds Goossen.

*** Does the following equation hold true in your opinion: Education equals success, elite education equals a great salary?**

Yes and no. The probability of success certainly rises with good education. But it is neither sufficient nor necessary a prerequisite. We know the example of Steve Jobs, who wasn't a university graduate, and how successful he was. He was a visionary who could see further than other 'mortals'; he had clear visions of what he wanted. At the same time, it must be said, however, that he had a pile of capable people around him. His success wouldn't have been possible without professional management. The professional management – that's exactly what our school has for its objective.

*** Do you therefore bring up support for future Steve Jobses?**

Not at all, because in general, many MBA school graduates are heads of big companies and they are visionaries who see further and can find their way in the world of today at the same time.

*** Your school has been ranked the 41st best school in the global ranking of the Financial Times. The survey measures factors like salary increase of the university alumnus for instance, which is 46 percent in your case. Is that right?**

It's true that a great majority of our alumni enjoy a salary increase. However, I don't want to say that it is solely due to the education. There are a number of other factors. I am speaking about the applicants' eligibility – only quality and experienced people are admitted to the program, people who have potential to be even more successful and increase their value not only with respect to their career but also to the society. Moreover, our students learn not only from professors, but also from each other. This experience is of a benefit to the entire class.

*** Have you ever been upbraided for being elitist simply for putting applicants through too thorough of a selection process?**

What do you mean by being too thorough? We seek to provide the best possible education to talented people who have a great potential. Our students have 13 years of experience on average. However, we also accept students with only five years of experience if they have a strong career potential. At the same time, we offer two scholarships for people from non-profit organizations every year. Although, it's true that we primarily aim for people with already existing skills or knowledge, who want to move onto more strategic roles.

SINGULAR THINKING? A SUICIDE.

*** Has your program's curriculum changed in response to the economic crisis?**

At the time of the crisis outbreak, students often chose crisis management as their elective subject and responded to the economic crisis. Moreover, the Katz program comes from the United States, a country which is used to economic cycles, to their peaks and falls. Nevertheless, for the Czech Republic this is a new thing. The whole region has enjoyed lasting economic growth for the past 20 years. There were a number of new opportunities, privatization, new markets, accession to the EU; however, we have gradually been maturing here too, and now we're facing the situation that we have to join the league of adults. Before, the objective was clear, we knew what we were after. Now we have joined the group of seekers trying to find where the future is and where to go.

*** Isn't the American way of economic thinking, which is logically promoted by your school, different from the European one? Differences are evident, after all, given the contrasting ways of approaching the economic crisis...**

Undoubtedly, there is a difference in thinking. I would say that the traditional American style is characterized by a more individualistic approach and a higher degree of risk tolerance. People in the US are more willing to plunge into riskier projects. These can result either in a great gain or bankruptcy. On the other hand, European business culture doesn't have such a degree of risk tolerance on average. People prefer safer projects with a lower degree of risk and lower potential gain. This is projected into everything, into the response to crisis as well as into the welfare system. However, I think pursuing only one kind of economic thinking in the world of today is a suicide. Whether we want it or not, the world is global, and we must be flexible and choose what suits us. Therefore, our aim is to create a complex experience.

*** What feedback do you receive from your alumni? Do you know how they and their companies manage the crisis?**

What I hear from them is mostly positive. Nevertheless, no one is immune from the crisis. It sometimes happens that somebody loses their job. These people are mostly capable of restarting. The fact that you are a graduate from a certain school is of no guarantee that things can't get worse. But I think that our alumni have a strong confidence in their value and knowledge. Moreover, they have contacts that can help them.

*** As far as contacts and bonds are concerned, one could easily get the impression that the world is governed by people who know each other from MBA studies...**

Or by those who play golf together. I think it is natural that people associate with people who are like themselves, people they get along with. In principle, there is nothing bad about that. However, it mustn't lead to a situation in which the people who have power start to misuse it. I definitely don't think that we foster some behind-the-scenes environment here. The fact is, however, that people help each other, call each other, that they see common opportunities. This is a natural course, and it is a positive one.

*** Do you think Czech politicians would succeed in your selection procedure? The reason I ask is also because education seems to be a "talisman" for many of them. They are willing to pay for or gain it in exchange for various reciprocal services. They forge and plagiarize theses...**

Our reputation is of great value to us. If we violated the requirements of our accreditation in any way and it came out that we had committed deceptive practices, it would have enormous impacts on us. Cheating is out of the question. We want to choose quality people. And also quality politicians. If a politician applies with the right motivation and qualification, i.e. with a regular bachelor degree at least, why not? I think that many a politician would certainly benefit from such an education.

*** How do you personally interpret some of our politicians' hunting for degrees and their unwillingness or incapability to obtain them in due course?**

I don't know exactly what their motivation is. I can't see into their minds. It can be expected that at the moment they were deciding to set out on such path they thought it was the right thing. The fact that it will come to light one day is another thing. This is called "the newspaper test" in ethics. If they had studied ethics at our school, they would have learned to do an analysis of potential future impacts of their decisions. They wouldn't have merely learned: "This is ethical and that is not" They would have done analysis of an ethical dilemma with respect to themselves and others, and perhaps they would have made a different decision.

YOUNG AND ARROGANT

*** As far as MBA degrees are concerned, they do not enjoy much trust among the public. The abbreviation has various interpretations, like "Manager By Accident" in English or a more vulgar "Mladý-Bibý-Arogantní" (young-stupid-arrogant) in Czech. Where does this distrust of MBA degrees come from?**

The worth of the MBA degree varies depending on where it comes from. The way you have various expectations associated with various kinds of cars, there are various schools and various programs, too. I've met a number of people whom I personally thought about that it would have been better for MBA degrees if that particular person hadn't had one. Perhaps it has also something to do with the age of graduates. When people enroll for an MBA program as soon as they finish their bachelor degree, they often have the feeling that they know everything, that they have enormous potential and the market should get to grips for them. But it's actually only at this moment, that they start to be confronted with the reality and to learn. It takes several years until they switch from the mode, "I know everything," to the mode, "I know there is much I don't know yet."

*** Hence the fundamental difference between MBA and Executive MBA, which is intended for people with much greater experience...**

Yes. Generally, an MBA is a daily study program right after graduation, when people often don't have any work experience. They haven't had a boss yet, they haven't faced their client, and there are many things they still have to discover. The feeling of power – originating from the fact that they wonderfully manage their studies – has to be transformed into the feeling that they wonderfully manage their business. We work with people who have provable experience and successful practice.

*** Nevertheless, the MBA degree is not considered an ordinary university degree in the Czech Republic. Do you view it as a challenge, or is it irrelevant from your perspective?**

It is considered a university degree in most countries. The Czech Republic is one of few exceptions. MBA studies are not dealt with in the Czech legislation, and I think it's a pity, as this leads to non-transparency. The lack of standards and variances between schools are huge. Although personally it doesn't hinder us in any way, it has impacts. For example, we have to be registered for VAT, which is a disadvantage for some students. Foreign students of an MBA school are not entitled to a student visa, too.

*** You have a number of foreign students. Studies at your school are not cheap: 16 months cost some \$50,000. Would you be able to estimate how individual regions perform based on the interest of foreign students? Do you have more students from Asia for example, for whom Prague is closer than Pittsburgh or São Paulo, where the university has its other locations?**

We do observe a higher demand from Asia and the Middle East, like Iran for example. In most cases, though, this expressed interest is never followed with an application. It is also due to visa restrictions. Which is a pity, I think, because education is a sector with high added value and the Czech Republic could position itself in this field in the future.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC IS A RICH COUNTRY

*** Your mother is Czech of German-Hungarian-Polish origin, your father is Bulgarian, your husband is Dutch. You speak Czech, Bulgarian, English, Russian, and Slovak. Where do you feel at home the most?**

When I lived in Bulgaria, I had a feeling I belonged somewhere else. When I came to the Czech Republic, I had a similar feeling. I have been at home here, for 11 years already, I am happy here, I've got a house here, my children, but I feel as a Eurocitizen. Generally, I feel at home where there are internationally-minded people with international horizons.

*** Are there enough of such people in Prague?**

Yes. Prague is beautiful in this respect. It is a center of rich and magnificent culture and traditions that are highly esteemed by the people and whose historical monuments are wonderfully taken care of....

*** Not everybody would agree with you in this respect, I think....**

Well, from a foreigner's perspective it is true. I lived in Hungary for a year. Take a walk around Budapest and look at buildings, what they are like. Not to mention Bulgaria. Indeed, there is always more to do. But I have had an opportunity to observe various achievements and failures of post-communist countries, and in terms of preservation and reconstruction of monuments, I think that Czechs have done many things very well.

*** It looks like the Czech society has recently risen up against increasing prices, higher taxes, lowering real income. Demonstrations and protests are increasing. How do we live here in the Czech Republic, as seen from your perspective?**

It is natural for man to want ever more and to be ever disgruntled. It's alright in certain respects. At the same time, we are the richest post-communist country, leaving aside Slovenia, and one can see that. Certainly, one has to have primarily sufficient means to survive, then he can deal with other things. On average, people are doing well,

though. ***

“Czechs have grown up. Now, they have joined the group of those who seek where the future is, where to go...”

Ivana Goossen

Education: She graduated from the University of Economy in Sofia. Career: she was Director at CEE People Solutions, she worked as Director for special projects for Central and Eastern Europe at TMF. Currently she is Director of EMBA Prague for the Executive EMBA Worldwide program of the Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh. Private life: she is married, she has two sons. Her hobbies include arts—actively and passively—sports, psychology, and cooking.

The University of Pittsburgh celebrates 225 years of its existence this year. The Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business is among the five oldest business universities in the USA. In 1990, it opened its location in Prague, and in addition to its Pittsburgh headquarters, it also has an EMBA location in São Paulo, Brazil. They form the university's Executive MBA Worldwide Program, which was ranked 41st in the global ranking of the best EMBA programs by the *Financial Times*. The program has over 500 alumni in Central Europe, and globally, over 20,000 alumni.

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Photo title: “I can’t see into politicians’ minds but it can be expected that at the moment they were deciding to cheat, they thought, it was the right thing”, says Ivana Goossen.

Photo author: Jan Rasch