

CAREER COUCH

The Homework to Do Before Enrolling Online

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Q. *You want to continue your education, but as a full-time professional you can't spend the time going back to school. Are online degree programs worth considering?*



Chris Reed

A. Online degrees can be a boon to your career and your life, as long you choose the right program and understand the commitment that will be involved.

Before you make the leap, be prepared to spend at least 10 to 20 hours a week, for at least one or two years, on your online learning — and possibly more, depending on the degree. And be aware that this type of education requires much more self-direction and self-discipline than traditional classes would.

Q. *What does the online education process entail?*

A. A lot of time in front of the computer. In most cases, educators record lectures off-line and upload them to a password-protected Web site for students to view when time permits.

Independent of these sessions, students are required to read supplemental texts, many of which are also available in electronic form — and downloadable from the class site.

A majority of online degree programs also involve discussion groups, in which students post comments and feedback to a Web-based discussion board.

Trent E. Gabert, associate dean of the College of Liberal Studies at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, notes that a growing number of discussion sessions occur in real time — in chat rooms where students can interact with one another and, sometimes, with their professor.

“All of these interactions are about the dialogue,” Mr. Gabert said. “When people communicate and work together, they learn.”

Q. *How much do online degrees cost?*

A. The price varies widely, but in many cases tuition fees are comparable to those at brick-and-mortar schools — minus the added cost of things like room and board. In online programs affiliated with state universities, fees can be less expensive for in-state residents.

Richard Garrett, program director and senior analyst at Eduventures, an education-oriented research firm in Boston, noted that with gasoline prices on the rise, indirect costs of online education might be lower, because students who work on degree programs from home don't have to spend money on travel.

Q. *How do employers view these degrees?*

A. While every employer is different, Susan Kryczka, director of distance education at Boston University, said that most treat online degrees as equivalent to degrees obtained by attending classes in classrooms.

Ms. Kryczka said that many employers would cover online education as part of existing tuition reimbursement programs, provided that employees could prove that the online degree pertained to their current job.

Once employees have completed their degrees, she added, many are rewarded with additional compensation for advancing their education.

“Our students have reported very little pushback on the part of their employers,” said Ms. Kryczka, whose program offers eight graduate degrees online.

When employers are considering job applicants, online degrees are also becoming more accepted. Bob Leber, director of education and work-force development at Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding in Newport News, Va., says that when employers are evaluating prospective employees, most don’t ask applicants to specify how they obtained their degrees, just where they obtained them.

“It’s not like you have to put on your résumé that you got your master’s online,” Mr. Leber said. “All that matters is that you have a degree.”

Q. *What are the downsides to online degree programs?*

A. Professionals who opt for online degrees will almost certainly miss out on many of the impromptu lunches, barroom debates and other serendipitous learning experiences that occur on a college campus. You may also be less likely to make lasting personal and professional connections with your online classmates.

And be aware that your time-management skills will be put to the test. It won’t always be easy to concentrate on your schoolwork after a long day at the office.

But perhaps the biggest risk associated with online degree programs is that not all of the programs are created equal.

John Bear, co-author of “Bear’s Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning” (Ten Speed Press), said prospective students should consider working toward online degrees only from accredited institutions, and should contact the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (www.chea.org) to make sure that the accreditations are legitimate.

“The popularity of online degrees has made the bad guys swarm out of the woodwork to the point where there’s now a whole world of bad and fake degrees,” said Mr. Bear, an educational technology consultant in El Cerrito, Calif. “Before you invest time and money, make sure you’re putting it in the right place.”

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