

Transcript of Manage-A-Bull Podcast Episode featuring Marvel Ibrahim

Podcast was recorded on 8/8/2022

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hi, I'm Vish Gopalakrishnan, and this is the Manage-a-bull Podcast where we have in-depth conversations with students, faculty, staff, and alumni to give you a comprehensive picture into the life at University at Buffalo's School of Management.

In today's episode, we speak with Marvel Ibrahim, a student in UB's full-time MBA program from New York City, New York. In our conversation, we talk about her entrepreneurial venture, BOSQ pumps, and how the UB MBA program has helped her develop her business acumen and leadership skills.

Marvel, welcome to the show.

Marvel Ibrahim:

Thank you, Vish. Thank you so much for having me on your show today.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hey, it's wonderful to have you.

Marvel, before we get into the formal part of the interview, I wanted to ask you about a very interesting thing that we learned about you during the very first few days of our classes and the MBA orientation.

You are a voracious reader who has read more than several thousand books, if I remember correctly.

Tell me, where did this interest in reading come from?

Marvel Ibrahim:

Reading? Reading is something that started pretty early on. As a kid, my parent used to buy me normal classics, so things like The Little Red Shoes, Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. I started out reading those kinds of books, and then from there I progressed into the more novel type books. I read things like Jeffrey Archer, Dan Brown, Sue Grafton depending on my mood.

Now with the MBA program, I read more self-developmental books. Overall, reading is something I've done from the beginning, I would say. It's something I enjoy, and I hope to continue doing that in the future as well.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right.

And it's interesting that you bring up parents used to encourage you to read because that's how I got my start with reading, too. I remember my own interests in reading, especially reading fiction, which were influenced by, you mentioned Jeffrey Archer. Big fan. Kane and Abel one of my most favorite books.

Marvel Ibrahim:

That is my most favorite book ever, Kane and Abel.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Incredible book, and obviously the Harry Potter series as I started getting a little older. But I must say it's impressive that you have continued to nurture this passion considering just how busy the MBA program can be.

Tell us, what are some tips and tricks that you use to find the time to pursue hobbies outside of your busy classroom schedule at UB?

Marvel Ibrahim:

I'd say time management is a skill I've improved upon over the years. If I have a task that I have to complete for the MBA, I try to get those out of the way pretty early just so I have time for my own hobbies, which are reading, maybe a rock climbing one weekend or the other.

Basically, that the MBA is definitely a very involved program. We have a lot of tasks we have to do. But if you have hobbies that you definitely want to pursue outside of the MBA, finding that balance between getting your task out of the way pretty early, just so you have that time for yourself, it's something you definitely have to work upon in the MBA program. I want to say I've pretty gotten that down at this point.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Great.

That's certainly a very important point. Time management is key because so much is thrown at you. And

it's not just one class, it's multiple projects, multiple teams for some of those projects, too. That's

certainly helps.

It is a different experience from a normal undergraduate experience, where a lot of the projects tend to be individual.

Let's talk a little bit about your undergrad experience, too. I know that you pursued mechanical engineering as an undergraduate at UB. What prompted you to switch from the hard sciences into the business side of things? I mean, essentially why pursue an MBA?

Marvel Ibrahim:

I wouldn't really call it switching. It's more like me just learning new skills at this point.

In the mechanical engineering degree, we had a project we had to work upon that touched on the customer side of things, which led me to understand that I know nothing about business. My skills are much more technical, and I realized in today's world you need to know at least a little bit about how the business side works. Which is why I felt like it was the right time to add on MBA to my mechanical engineering degree, which is how I got interested in MBA.

When it was time to look around, I figured I want to stay at UB. Do I want to go to a different place? But looking at UB's MBA program, it just worked well into my schedule. I liked a few of the programs they already had that I wanted to get into, so just continue with my MBA I just made perfect sense at that point.

Yeah, right now everything works well. I like the fact that my skills are much more diverse than they were a year ago. A year ago, I knew only things like coding, CAD drawings. But with the MBA, I'm building more leadership skills and those sub skills that employers are looking for. Yeah, definitely not a switch, more like an add-on, quite honestly.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right.

It's a great point that you mentioned that one of the key interests was to develop your business acumen. That's certainly something that we hear a lot from a lot of students that we talk to on this podcast.

But developing their leadership potential is a key reason why a lot of people are drawn to the MBA, too. You mentioned that briefly. Now, the program offers our students many opportunities to take on leadership roles, both in team projects and in roles outside of the class.

But leadership is something that you are quite familiar with. Just a year ago, if I remember correctly, you co-founded a very own very own startup venture, BOSQ pumps, and have been very, very heavily involved in the product management, product development side of things.

Tell us a bit more about the company and what your role in the company is.

Marvel Ibrahim:

Like you said earlier, BOSQ pump did start a year ago. It started actually out of a class project. In the school of engineering, you have a senior design project. We get to work on one big project for the whole semester. For us, I and a team of six came together. We're going to redesign the breast pump just because the whole design hasn't been changed for the last 200 years, and we thought it was something we could work on.

And so, we worked on that project for that our final semester, and we got really good reviews. Then found out about the Panasci Competition, so we got into that. We did not win that, but we ended up with the People's Choice Award, and from there entering to a lot of other competitions, like the empowHER Pitch, the Health Futures Challenge one. A few of those came second in the other one.

But overall BOSQ pumps is very much alive. I work as product manager for the company, so basically I'm in charge of... We're trying to build a prototype right now. I mean, I'm in charge of thinking of ways in which we can build a prototype that's viable for market use.

But yeah, overall, we're hoping that in the near future we have something that's good enough that we can bring into the market for mothers to be able to use, and hopefully change the way the breast pump industry currently works right now.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

You mentioned a couple of competitions. We'll definitely circle back to those a little later in the conversation.

Now as an entrepreneur and a leader, why do you think it's important for students to take a focused and action-oriented approach to their leadership development?

Marvel Ibrahim:

I feel like leadership is something you have to learn as you go. It's not something that can exactly be taught, although there are classes that will teach leadership skills. But overall, it's something you have to

try to work at at building.

And so taking active response and trying to build those leadership skills is definitely recommended. So when you have programs at UB that help you foster those kind of skills you, like I said earlier, you have Blackstone LaunchPad that helps you with competitions that you can get into to get into the startup space.

Overall, working on that kind of entrepreneurship competition competitions or programs in general, its what employers looking for right now. Because most employers want to see on your resume that you know how to take initiative. Working as part of an entrepreneurship shows that definitely how to take initiative. You know how to sit down and create your own ideas and work on those ideas from start to finish.

Leadership skills I feel like is already a big deal and will definitely be a much bigger deal in the near future. Companies want students who know how to lead teams, who know how to take charge of things. Building a leadership skill is definitely important for future work in the MBA industry, and in business in general.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And that's such an interesting take on it, that leadership is something that you have to do in order to actually learn. There are courses and classes offered, not just at UB, at so many other outside the school of management resources. But it's certainly true that unless you take on leadership roles, those are just going to be skills on paper. You have to take the opportunities to actually implement those skills and hone them and learn from mistakes.

You did talk a little bit about why employers are looking for leaders when they hire students. Why do you think it's important to develop these soft skills, especially for someone interested in entrepreneurship?

Marvel Ibrahim:

I mean, soft skills are definitely important because even though you have those hard skills that you're good at, maybe using this kind of program. But soft skills are still very important because soft skill helps you build relationships with people is what I believe.

If you're at a job, you definitely need to find out how you can integrate yourself with the rest of the team, and soft skills definitely help you with things like that. Those are not things where your hard skills

really go a long way. You definitely need soft skills to be able to integrate yourself into whatever company you end up. Either it's an entrepreneurship that you own or a company you work for. Your soft skill would definitely take you that extra mile.

During the MBA program, or whatever program in general, working hard at building those soft skills would definitely make things much more easy in the future. Just because these are skills that will help you talk to other people more confidently, lead teams, work well as part of a team in making sure that you integrate well with the rest of whatever company it is you end up with.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right.

It's certainly true that the program is structured in such a way that it pushes you and allows you to take on a lot of leadership positions. There are clubs that students participate in. There are team projects as we talked about earlier.

But there are also competitions. There's challenges that happen regularly. There are even classes that have competitions weaved into the coursework. You competed in some of these challenges, namely the Blackstone LaunchPad's empowHer Pitch Competition and the Health Futures Challenge.

Tell us a little bit about what they are and how your experience was of competing in those challenges.

Marvel Ibrahim:

Let's see. The empowHER Pitch is more focused towards women entrepreneurship. So for that particular pitch, you need to be a female to be able to participate. You can have a male on your team, but whoever gets to pitch that particular, they have to be a female.

That one's a little bit different because they take entrepreneurs of all kinds. It's not centered to one kind of entrepreneurship industry alone.

But for the other one, the Health Futures Challenge, that's more targeted towards how to improve the healthcare industry, which was how we got into that because we work with breast pumps, which technically is in the healthcare category. For that, you have to be in the healthcare category to be a part of that competition. It's more the whole goal of that project is how can you change the way healthcare is being done right now. Whatever product you're trying to pitch at that competition has to be something that's going to revolutionize the healthcare industry.

For both competitions, it's more on the spot. For when we did Panasci, Panasci was a series of rounds. I think we have five rounds in general. I'm not exactly sure about that part, but I think that is it.

But for empowHER Pitch and Health Futures, it's a one-day event. You get picture about three to five minutes, and then a winner is announced at the end.

But for the Panasci, it's over a couple of months. I think it's starts in January and ends sometime in May, if I'm correct. They do have different ways this program runs, but at the end of the day it's all about building those entrepreneurship skills.

Even if you don't end up winning, I feel like you definitely do learn a lot because you get feedback from the judges who have been in the entrepreneurship field for so many years. You get to hear the feedback, which you can take back and work and improve on the whatever product is you're working on.

The Blackstone LaunchPad has a lot of competitions that I feel like it's very essential for whoever's interesting into getting into the entrepreneurship space. Because you get to meet connections who know everything about entrepreneurship at this point, and so they can point in the right direction, whatever it is you're trying to make.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And am I right in assuming that the empowHER Pitch Competition, you competed with BOSQ pumps as the idea?

Marvel Ibrahim:

Yes.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right, so-

Marvel Ibrahim:

All three competitions were the BOSQ pumps.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right, and that's such an interesting thing. It's one business idea and three different competitions, and empowHER Pitch is more focused on women entrepreneurs. Then you have the Health Futures Challenge, which is more healthcare tech. Then there's Panasci, which is hardcore technology competition. It's more about there's so many new ideas in software, in new kinds of technologies that come up in their competition.

It's interesting how a single business idea can be taken and developed over the course of so many different competitions and then honed into an actual potential business. That's an incredible insight there.

Now I know this could be hard, because you have such a wide plethora of experience in competing, but if I had to ask you to choose or mention one greatest lesson that you learned about yourself from competing in these challenges, what would that be?

Marvel Ibrahim:

I would say it's definitely be bold and take initiative. Because Panasci was the first competition we went into, and at that point BOSQ pumps was literally just an idea. We had a prototype that barely functioned, so it wasn't something that was good enough to show anybody else.

But we still felt like we were good enough to get into Panasci, and so we applied, so definitely being bold. And taking initiative is something I've learned over the years working in the entrepreneurship space. No matter how little you think your product is, you definitely won't know until you go through those competition and get feedback from the judges.

I mean, Panasci was our first ever entrepreneurship competition and we still came out with winning the People's Choice Award, which was something we definitely didn't think was going to happen because we had teams on that competition who had competed at the previous year. We were the new people in the entrepreneurship space at that time.

But we all took initiative. This was an idea we believed in and we thought really good somewhere, and we went forward with that idea and ended up winning a prize. Definitely taking initiative, to not [inaudible 00:16:32] on yourself no matter how bad you think your idea is, it might not just be as bad as you think until you actually try.

Do not try to downgrade yourself. Believe in that product you have and go forward as far as you can with that idea is my advice I would say or give to anyone who's interested in getting into entrepreneurship.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Be bold. That's such great advice, and certainly something that a lot of students can agree with because the MBA program especially is not easy. It definitely throws a lot at you. Unless you have that self-confidence and belief and you're pushing yourself, it can get hard.

Let's focus on your first two semesters in the MBA program. The one question that I wanted to ask you, before we jump into the experience itself, is how has the experience of the MBA been different than the experience of an undergrad at the same institution?

Marvel Ibrahim:

It's definitely a different level of tasks. So for undergrad, you're taking a couple classes. But then you have tasks that I feel like are within your range to complete.

But in the MBA program it's almost like they're giving you just a little bit extra. You have tasks that's almost overwhelming in some ways. I feel like they do that just help you build those skills. Because of course when you're out in the business world, no one's going to give you the tasks that you know can exactly complete. They're going to try to push you a little bit, which is what I feel like the MBA also does.

They give you tasks, or projects I should say, where you basically have to almost work that extra step to complete it, which I'll say is the big difference between the undergrad and the MBA program.

And overall, I'll say teamwork also works differently. Because normally in undergrad you have maybe projects you have to work on, and you have a team for a couple of weeks or a semester at most.

But in the MBA program we literally had the whole team for one year, which was the longest time I had to work in a team. In that kind of case, you have no choice but to work with that thing because you'll literally stuck with that team for a year. Even if there's a conflict, you have to resolve that conflict because these are the people you're going to work with for the whole entire year. Having conflict in that kind of situation just makes working on the projects that extra difficult.

Yeah, I would say that's also main difference between working in the MBA program and how the way the undergrad program's run.

But overall, I'd say yes it was a bit stressful. But looking back right now and knowing the things I do know now, I'd say it works well. I don't know how, but for some reason they formed the teams in ways where you each have skills that complement the other person on your team, which makes competing tasks very easy because you don't have to do everything. There's someone else on your team who knows how to do that one team you don't know how to do.

Which for the undergrad, let's make your own teams, or the professor makes teams, which just changes the way projects work and how projects run generally.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right.

And what have been some of your favorite classes so far in the program?

Marvel Ibrahim:

I would say organizational behavior was definitely an interesting one for me. I definitely liked the psychology aspect things. Data modeling was also very interesting. I didn't know you could do as much with Excel as I found out we could through that class.

I also like communications, was that in class? I believe communications I think was the name of that class. For communications, communications was pretty interesting because we had to read that book on persuasive skills and social interactions, which is interesting because I have an interest in that. When you put people in certain situations, you get to see how they react differently. I thought that class helped you hone those skills.

And for an MBA, we're all learning leadership skills. The idea is in that is that in the near future we're

going to lead teams. You definitely want to know how putting people in different situations shapes how they react to what's happening around them.

Communication was definitely a big one for me. Yeah, I definitely enjoyed that class.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Well, communication is certainly a great class, especially the impromptu presentations that we were asked to make in that class, which I think a lot of students struggled with.

I think you mentioned the book. If I remember correctly, it was Influence by Cialdini, right?

Marvel Ibrahim:

Yeah, that was the book.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right, and a great book. Certainly, highly recommended to anybody if you want to understand the ins and outs of how to influence someone.

Now, one of the things that students need to focus on along with classes is looking for a summer internship. How was the experience of the internship search for you, and are there any suggestions for students on conducting a successful search themselves?

Marvel Ibrahim:

The internship search process was pretty long, I would say. Which I guess is expected because you know need to apply and apply and apply before you find that one company where there's a perfect match.

But overall, I'll say my advice looking for internships to start as early as possible. Because depending on the company you want to get into, if it's super big company, they start looking for interns pretty early in the year. You want to make sure exactly when they start putting those in job postings on the net just so you're there when it starts.

If you're looking for something that's pretty much more local to Buffalo, those ones take a lot longer before they're put out. Just knowing the timeline because for when internships come out is super important.

I'll tell you one big thing is to not get discouraged. Of course, you cannot get that first internship you applied to, but knowing that you need to keep applying and not letting those rejections pull you down is something that's super important to know. It's a skill that you also need to learn for business in the future. You definitely will get rejected, but that one company that's meant for you would definitely say yes if it's the perfect match and the skills all line up.

But for me personally searching for internships, I knew right from the beginning that I was going to be in the aerospace and defense industry. Those were the companies I focused my search on.

And there, there's a few aerospace companies in Buffalo, but the ones I really were interested in were outside of Buffalo. I had to start my internship search pretty early in August. As soon as we actually started our first semester just because I knew that the company started looking for interns pretty early. And so, I did that also and applied for different companies before I ended up at the one I'm currently at right now.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And all that hard work certainly paid off.

You did it a summer internship with, if I remember correctly, Pratt & Whitney, a very well-known, globally recognized brand and company in the aerospace and defense space.

What was your role during the internship, and how was the experience of working with such a well-known organization?

Marvel Ibrahim:

Yeah, so for my summer internship I worked for Pratt & Whitney, which is under Raytheon Technologies. That's the current company. I worked in the supply chain department under the strategy sourcing team.

The experience was definitely an interesting one just because prior to my internship taking a few supply chain classes. But coming into the internship here, the experience was so very different than I thought it was going to be. I worked with full-time employees here in the supply chain department and got to see

exactly how they picked suppliers for different parts for the engines and how you qualify suppliers for parts and things like that, which was something I definitely had no idea about previously.

But the experience was a very enlightening one. You get to see things from a different standpoint because now you're taking all those things you're learning in class and bringing them to the real world. Because of course there's a difference because nothing happens exactly the way you're thought in school.

There's definitely a difference with how things from the classroom to the real world. That was something I also had to learn when I started my internship at Pratt. But it was definitely a good experience.

Overall, I was trying to see if supply chain was something I wanted to do full-time after my MBA program. If there was a way I could marry my skills from mechanical engineering and my skills from supply chain into a role that would be perfect for me, which was why I try to stick as much as possible to aerospace and defense industry while I was looking for an internship.

Working here you get to see that a lot of the people here are all engineers of some sort. But then you also have them doing things like supply chain, or doing things that are not exactly considered technical. But then you find out that at the end of the day your technical skills are still needed because most of the times I have to look up part drawings just for parts supply information. And of course, if you've not done an engineering degree, you don't exactly know how to read a part drawing.

Even though I'm not doing something exactly technical, those technical skills as length as mechanical engineers. You get to transfer them over to my supply chain role, which really, really helps with the projects I worked on over the summer here at Pratt.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow. It's wonderful to hear that you had such a comprehensive experience with such a large company. Because generally if you're an intern at a large organization, maybe the experience isn't that great, maybe the projects given to you aren't that great, but it seems like you had a great experience there.

Now starting fall of your second year, you get the chance to select courses that help you concentrate in a field of your choice. Is supply chain the concentration you're going for still after this experience, or have you changed your mind about that?

Marvel Ibrahim:

Yeah, I'm definitely sticking with supply chain. After my internship experience, I definitely feel like it's a space that I want to stay in for as long as I can.

And so for my first semester my second year, I'll be taking a few of those supply chain classes. I'm doing things like negotiations. I have a class on project management and one on... I can't remember right now. But yeah, I will be doing almost all of the supply chain electives this semester that's coming in August.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Well, that's great.

Looking back to a year ago, how has the UB MBA program helped you grow both as a person and as a leader?

Marvel Ibrahim:

I would say I've definitely grown. I mean, I can definitely see the changes. Before the MBA program. I used to, should I say... As much as possible, I try not to stand out in a group. But that's something the MBA program try very hard to take away from you. The MBA program is very competitive. You need to figure out how you can stand out in such a large number of students input the program. That's something I've seen. I've definitely worked on this last one-year experience in the program.

Taking leadership roles has of course become much more easier than it was before the MBA program. Now even public speaking is so much more easier now just because you have classes that teach you how to handle all those presentations and conversations around public speaking, which is something I'd say wasn't something I was exactly the best at for the MBA. Yeah, there are definitely changes.

Something that's actually pretty interesting is that before I actually got into the MBA program, I'd always thought business was definitely something that wasn't for me. I thought I was going to be an engineer all my life, go back for my master's in aerospace engineering.

But with the MBA, you get to see that although there are differences between engineering and the MBA, they're also similarities. There are skills that you can definitely pull from engineering into the business world. You definitely need to know how to be creative as an engineer. Being creative also something that's encouraged in the MBA program just because you get to lead teams and you don't want to be the one person on the team that doesn't exactly know what's happening just because you're the leader of the group. You want to be as knowledgeable as those under you.

Knowing how to learn from those under you and how to guide them as they go forward is something I would say the MBA has definitely helped me hone in the past one year.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And it seems like your reason for getting an MBA, which was to get business acumen, you're certainly making lots and lots of strides forward in that direction.

Final question, what would be your advice to our listeners who are also considering options for MBA, which MBA program to apply to or attend?

Marvel Ibrahim:

Advice would be to not to underestimate yourself. Because prior to coming into the MBA, I always figured, okay, all I know is engineering. Is the MBA program the right program for me? Will I fit in with the rest of the people that are there?

But spending the last one there, I felt I realized now that that was something I definitely shouldn't have worried about. It doesn't really matter what your background is in: engineering, music, whatever it is in your undergrad. The MBA, a program is very inclusive. Anyone will fit right in as far as you know exactly what it is you want to get out of the MBA program.

I'll say for anyone who's interested in getting MBAs to not underestimate yourself, to not underestimate those skills you have from your undergrad. Even though the MBA is more business focused, I'm sure in some way or form you can move those skills you've learned from your undergrad into the MBA and work on getting new ones would be my advice for anyone coming in.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Well Marvel, this has been a very insightful conversation. I for sure have learned a lot about your experience and the depth of thinking that's involved in every decision that you've made throughout the first year of your MBA.

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us and sharing your experiences. If our listeners want to follow your journey, where can they find you?

Marvel Ibrahim:

You can find me on LinkedIn. That's pretty much the only social media I have at this point. You can find me with my name, Marvel Ibrahim. If you're also interested in learning more about the company we founded, it's also on LinkedIn. Look for BOSQ pumps, B-O-S-Q, POSQ pumps. You can definitely reach out to me if you have more questions on my LinkedIn. I'm always willing to connect with anyone who's interested about learning more about the UB MBA program.

And thank you, Vish, for having me on your show today. It was really nice to chat with you.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Great, Marvel. Thank you so much.

Marvel Ibrahim:

Thank you.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

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Thanks, and we will see you in the next one.