GMAC

Connecting with working professionals



Understanding candidate interest in part-time, hybrid, online, and flexible delivery formats

About one in four prospective students in the graduate management education (GME) pipeline are considering alternative delivery formats (i.e., not full-time and in-person programs) that offer greater flexibility and accessibility. These individuals are often working professionals who must balance their educational goals with career, family, and finances. The purpose of this research brief is to identify the preferences, motivations, and career goals of candidates who want to pursue a graduate business degree while working full-time, drawing on the responses of nearly 5,000 GME hopefuls around the world to the GMAC Prospective Students Survey over the full calendar year of 2024.

In this brief, a "working professional" refers to an individual who pursues graduate management education while maintaining active employment. Because these individuals are predominantly drawn to more flexible GME formats, this brief is focused on an analysis by program delivery type--inclusive of both MBA and other business master's degrees—including part-time, hybrid, online, and flexible modalities. Such programs are often explicitly designed to accommodate the demands of a professional career, allowing candidates to earn a graduate business degree without requiring them to leave their full-time jobs.[1]

Defining program delivery types

- **Full-time, in-person:** program is designed for students to typically take classes full-time in classrooms
- **Part-time, in-person:** program is designed for students, typically employed, to take classes part-time in classrooms
- **Online:** program is designed for students, whether full-time or part-time, to take all classes virtually, excluding residencies
- **Blended/Hybrid:** program is designed for students, whether full-time or part-time, to take a combination of classes virtually and in classrooms
- **Flexible:** program is designed for students to be able to move between full-time, part-time, blended/hybrid, and/or online formats

1. "Part-Time vs. Full-Time MBA Programs: Pros, Cons, and How to Decide." Leland, June 18, 2025. https://www.joinleland.com/library/a/part-time-mba.

Program preferences

Interest in alternative delivery formats is greatest in Canada and Africa and especially among women and millennials.

Leading into the COVID-19 pandemic and in several subsequent years, preference for full-time, in-person learning slowly decreased in favor of alternative delivery options like part-time/in-person, blended/hybrid, online, and flexible formats (Figure 1). However, in 2024, there was a reversal of this trend, with a swing back toward preference for full-time, in-person program types as blended/hybrid and flexible programs dropped in popularity. Preference for part-time, in-person and online learning—which had previously seen relatively flat levels of interest from 2019-2023—also saw an uptick in 2024.

Preference for these different formats vary by demographic traits and geographic locations. For example, women tend to favor alternative program delivery methods more than men (though women also saw an increase in preference for full-time, in-person learning in 2024). In addition, millennials (born 1981-1995) have a much stronger preference for flexible program formats than Gen Z candidates (born 1996-2012), likely due to their greater professional and personal responsibilities as they are typically further along in their careers and family life. A candidate's region of residence also has strong implications for their program delivery preferences. Working professionals favoring alternative delivery options—especially fully online programs—are most popular in Canada and Africa, but least popular in Asia and Western Europe (Figure 2).

Figure 1: After several years of global GME candidates' declining preference for full-time, in-person learning, 2024 saw a swing away from flexible and blended/hybrid formats.
Preference for part-time, in-person and online learning increased in 2024 after years of relatively stable interest.

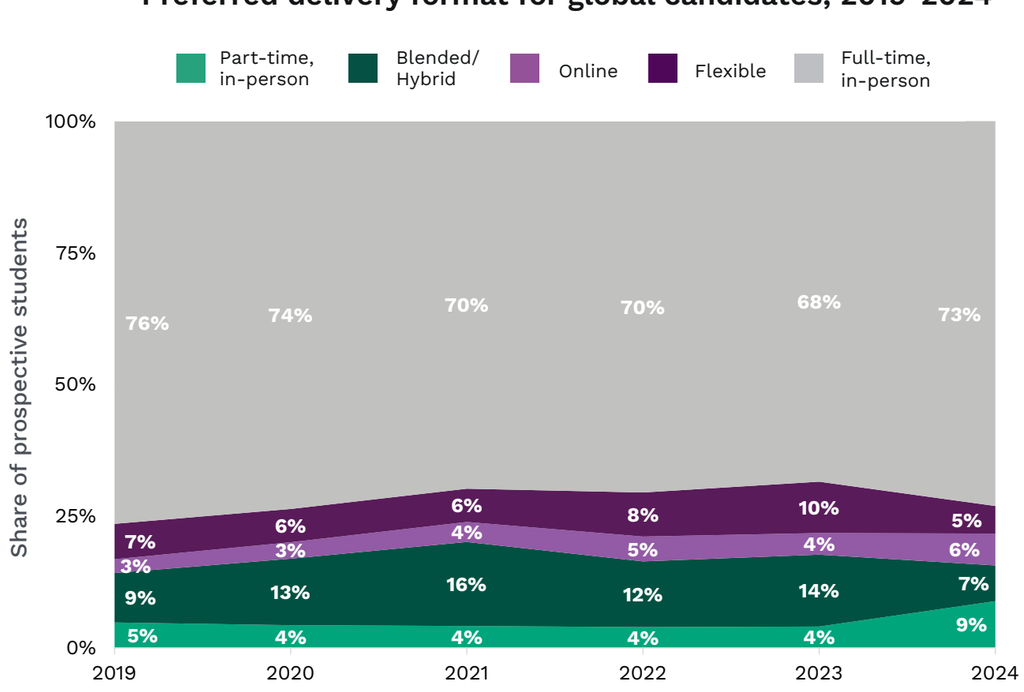
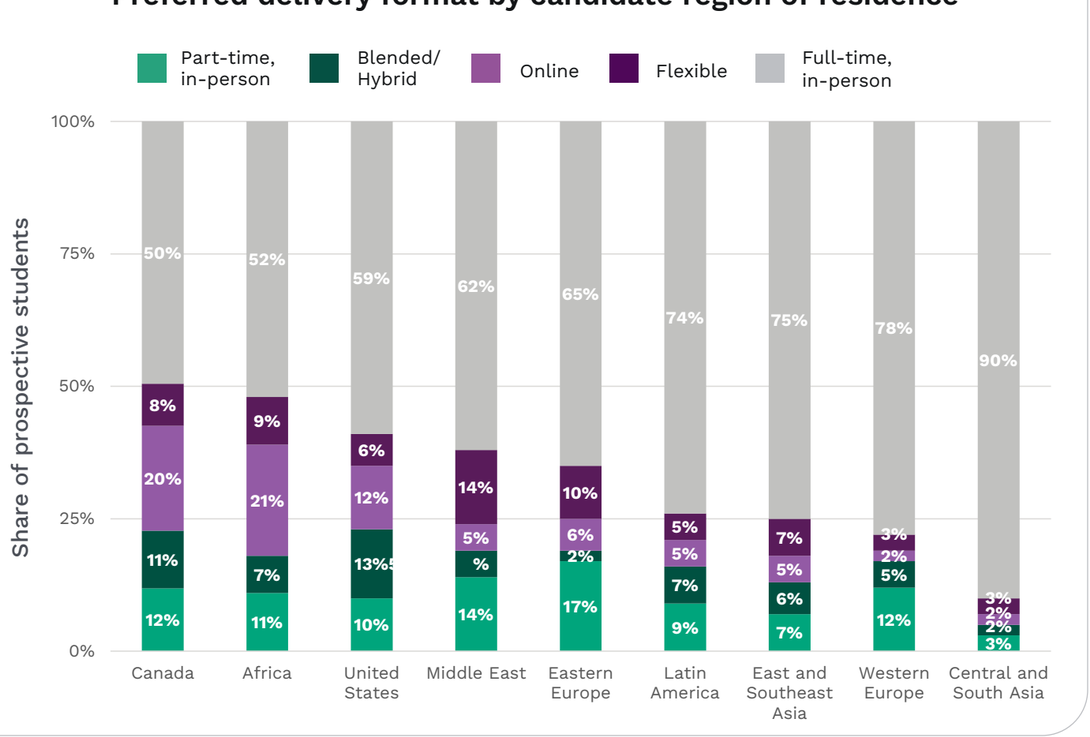


Figure 2: Alternative program delivery methods are most preferred among candidates in Canada and Africa—especially online programs.
Full-time, in-person programs are still especially popular in Asia and Western Europe.



Motivations and barriers

Flexible learners prioritize growth and knowledge but worry about the financial and personal costs of GME.

Regardless of a candidate's preferred program modality, the most common motivation for pursuing GME is to enrich their life and develop their potential (Figure 3). Gaining business knowledge is also an especially pronounced motivator among candidates regardless of their preferred delivery type, though to a lesser extent among candidates who want to study in blended/hybrid formats. Increasing income is also a top five priority across all modalities, signaling its broad but not dominant influence.

Figure 3: Regardless of a candidate's preferred delivery method, they are most likely to be motivated to pursue GME to enrich their life and develop their potential.

Though all candidates are deterred by cost, candidates who prefer non-full-time/in-person delivery are more likely to find demands on time to be a barrier.

Top five motivations and barriers for pursuing GME by preferred delivery type

Preferred Modality	Top Motivations	Top Barriers
Online	1. Enrich life and develop potential **(76%)** 2. Gain business knowledge **(68%)** 3. Increase income **(65%)** 4. Increase opportunity of a global career **(52%)** 5. Have a positive social/environmental impact in career **(51%)**	1. Cost of program **(44%)** 2. Demands on time **(27%)** 3. Lack of financial aid **(25%)** 4. Standardized exam requirement for admission **(24%)** 5. Future debt burden **(19%)**
Blended/ Hybrid	1. Enrich life and develop potential **(80%)** 2. Enhance network **(61%)** 3. Build wealth **(61%)** 4. Gain business knowledge **(59%)** 5. Increase income **(58%)**	1. Cost of program **(50%)** 2. Demands on time **(25%)** 3. Not getting into my preferred school **(22%)** 4. Lack of financial aid **(21%)** 5. Future debt burden **(17%)**
Flexible	1. Enrich life and develop potential **(79%)** 2. Gain business knowledge **(71%)** 3. Increase income **(63%)** 4. Increase opportunity of a global career **(62%)** 5. Build wealth **(61%)**	1. Cost of program **(53%)** 2. Lack of financial aid **(30%)** 3. Confidence in my ability to be successful in a graduate business program **(23%)** 4. Uncertainty around job prospects after graduation **(21%)** 5. Future debt burden **(20%)**
Part-time, in-person	1. Enrich life and develop potential **(80%)** 2. Gain business knowledge **(77%)** 3. Increase income **(66%)** 4. Increase opportunity of a global career **(60%)** 5. Enhance network **(52%)**	1. Cost of program **(53%)** 2. Demands on time **(27%)** 3. Lack of financial aid **(27%)** 4. My admission test scores **(19%)** 5. Family commitments **(18%)**
Full-time, in-person	1. Enrich life and develop potential **(81%)** 2. Gain business knowledge **(74%)** 3. Increase opportunity of a global career **(72%)** 4. Increase income **(65%)** 5. Enhance network **(58%)**	1. Cost of program **(47%)** 2. Not getting into my preferred school **(31%)** 3. Lack of financial aid **(26%)** 4. My level of work experience **(23%)** 5. Uncertainty around job prospects after graduation **(20%)**

Differences emerge more sharply with career-oriented motivations. Increasing the opportunity of a global career is a more common motivator among full-time candidates, reflecting their greater willingness to relocate or pursue international opportunities. It is notably less critical for part-time, flexible, and online learners—and not even a top five motivator for blended/hybrid learners—who are more likely balancing GME with existing careers. More than half of candidates who prefer full-time/in-person, part-time/in-person, and blended/hybrid modalities report being motivated to pursue GME to enhance their networks, whereas the opportunity to build new relationships is not among the top motivators for candidates who want to study online or in flexible formats. Overall, the data suggests that while core motivations like self-development and knowledge acquisition are shared, in-person candidates are more focused on networking and global career opportunities, whereas flexible learners seek programs that advance knowledge and income potential but integrate more seamlessly into their existing personal and professional lives.

Figure 3 also shows that the cost of GME is the most formidable barrier to entry—regardless of a prospective student's preferred delivery method. This is not merely a matter of tuition, but a confluence of factors, including program-related fees, living expenses, and the opportunity cost of forgone income. The tuition for an MBA can range widely, from as little as $20,000 for an entire program to over $100,000.[2] This immense range likely contributes to student anxiety and uncertainty, manifesting in candidates reporting lack of financial aid to be a top barrier to GME, too.

That said, online programs are perceived to have a cost advantage due to the elimination of commuting, relocation, and campus-related fees, with online prospects the least likely to cite cost as a barrier (44 percent). The other alternative modalities listed in Figure 3 are often designed with working professionals in mind, who can continue to earn income while pursuing their degree—ostensibly making them a more financially viable option than a full-time program. Yet, a large percentage of these candidates still view cost as a major hurdle. This suggests that the total cost of attendance, including fees and the incremental tuition payments over a longer program length, combined with the financial anxiety of a major investment, is still a significant barrier for working professionals.

Demand on time is also major barrier for candidates who prefer alternative delivery methods—and much more so than candidates who want to pursue GME full-time. While these non-full-time/in-person modalities are explicitly designed to offer flexibility, allowing degree-seekers to balance their coursework with employment and other commitments, working professionals are still likely to be budgeting their time even more judiciously than those who want to pursue GME full-time.

2. "Full-Time vs. Part-Time MBA Programs." The Best Schools, March 6, 2025. https://thebestschools.org/degrees/mba/mba-part-time-vs-full-time/.

Information Sources

Working professionals prefer school websites for quick, self-directed access to key program details.

Working professionals exploring GME often begin their search online, since school websites offer immediate, self-directed access to essential information such as program structure, costs, admissions criteria, and outcomes. School websites ranked number one when respondents were asked to select their top five information sources, regardless of their preferred modality (Figure 4). These candidates are balancing careers, families, and other commitments, so they likely prefer to gather information on their own schedule, compare multiple programs side-by-side, and filter for what's most relevant (e.g., flexibility, ROI, curriculum fit) in the early stages of exploration. The takeaway here is to see the school website not just as a digital brochure but as the first admissions conversation—a place where clarity, transparency, and authentic storytelling can build trust and pave the way for engagement. Interestingly, school networking sites and mba.com were the next most popular choice among candidates who preferred alternative program modalities, whereas full-time prospects were more likely to seek advice from their friends and family.



Figure 4: Regardless of a candidate's preferred program modality, school websites were their top source of information about GME.

Candidates who prefer non-full-time/in-person delivery formats were more likely to research cost in their GME research.

Top information sources and topics research by preferred delivery type

Preferred Modality	Top Information Sources	Top Research Topics
Online	1. School websites **(55%)** 2. Social networking sites **(35%)** 3. mba.com **(31%)** 4. Friends/family **(23%)** 5. School admissions professionals **(15%)**	1. Cost of the program **(43%)** 2. Return on investment of degree (skills, future opportunities) **(34%)** 3. Career outcomes (jobs, salaries) **(33%)** 4. Program eligibility requirements **(28%)** 5. Financial aid options **(27%)**
Blended/ Hybrid	1. School websites **(64%)** 2. mba.com **(39%)** 3. Friends/family **(30%)** 4. Social networking sites **(29%)** 5. Information sessions **(22%)**	1. Cost of the program **(43%)** 2. Return on investment of degree (skills, future opportunities) **(42%)** 3. Career outcomes (jobs, salaries) **(33%)** 4. Program eligibility requirements **(29%)** 5. Financial aid options **(27%)**
Flexible	1. School websites **(50%)** 2. Social networking sites **(37%)** 3. mba.com **(35%)** 4. School brochures/publications **(24%)** 5. Friends/family **(23%)**	1. Return on investment of degree (skills, future opportunities) **(43%)** 2. Cost of the program **(35%)** 3. Program eligibility requirements **(32%)** 4. Financial aid options **(31%)** 5. Specific schools/universities offering program **(29%)**
Part-time, in-person	1. School websites **(41%)** 2. mba.com **(36%)** 3. Friends/family **(32%)** 4. Social networking sites **(30%)** 5. GMAC Tours **(17%)**	1. Return on investment of degree (skills, future opportunities) **(35%)** 2. Cost of the program **(33%)** 3. Career outcomes (jobs, salaries) **(31%)** 4. Specific schools/universities offering program **(28%)** 5. Financial aid options **(27%)**
Full-time, in-person	1. School websites **(53%)** 2. mba.com **(44%)** 3. Friends/family **(37%)** 4. Social networking sites **(29%)** 5. Financial Times **(20%)**	1. Return on investment of degree (skills, future opportunities) **(43%)** 2. Career outcomes (jobs, salaries) **(41%)** 3. Program rankings **(31%)** 4. Specific schools/universities offering program **(29%)** 5. Program eligibility requirements **(27%)**

Return on investment (ROI) and career outcomes are important factors candidates consider when researching GME regardless of their preferred program modality. Working professionals often have careers, financial obligations, and/or families; ROI helps them assess if the degree improves their salary potential, career mobility, or skills. Though outcomes are important to all GME degree seekers, working professionals were more likely to research cost of the program and time commitment, whereas full-time, in-person prospects were more likely to research a program's rankings.

As discussed, online candidates were the least likely to be deterred by cost; however, they are still cost-conscious, and program cost is their most common research topic. Blended programs, which combine in-person and online elements, can also carry a higher financial investment compared with fully online options, likely explaining not just their outsized interest in understanding cost, but also making it essential for business schools to ensure that the benefits—such as skill development, career advancement, and salary growth—justify the cost and effort.



Career goals

Working professionals are seeking upward mobility in their salaries and positions post-GME.

For working professionals, the value of GME extends beyond immediate job placement; it acts as a catalyst for accelerated career progression and enhanced leadership capabilities within their existing professional trajectories. Earning a raise or higher salary consistently emerges as a leading post-GME career goal for professionals who remain employed while pursuing GME (Figure 5). Research by PayScale and Poets & Quants found starting salaries for graduates from full-time MBA programs rose by about 50 percent, and part-time MBAs saw a 41 percent bump at graduation and 56 percent over five years.[3] GMAC's Corporate Recruiters Survey also consistently finds that GME graduates experience a starting salary premium compared to bachelor's graduates.[4]

Other post-GME career goals are largely centered on advancement within their internal mobility and position rather than wholesale career changes. While some working professionals may use GME as a springboard for entrepreneurial pursuits or sector shifts, the dominant pattern reflects a desire for upward mobility, stability, and sustained career growth within their existing fields. Candidates who preferred non-full-time/in-person program delivery were typically less likely to report seeking a change in their job industry or function as well as less likely to seek out international opportunities through GME—instead setting their sights on executive and senior level positions.

3. Byrne, John. "The MBA Premium: What MBAs Earn Over a Lifetime Will Shock You." Poets & Quants, May 5, 2021. https://poetsandquants.com/2021/05/05/lifetime-earnings-of-mbas/.

4. Walker, Andrew. "Corporate Recruiters Survey – 2025 Report." GMAC, July 2025. https://www.gmac.com/market-intelligence-and-research/research-library/employment-outlook/2025-corporate-recruiters-survey-report.

Figure 5: Candidates who prefer non-full-time/in-person program delivery are more likely to seek higher level senior and executive positions post-GME.

They typically are also less interested in careers that facilitate international opportunities.

Top post-GME career goals by preferred delivery type

Preferred Modality	Top Post-GME Career Goals
Online	1. Get a raise/salary increase **(47%)** 2. Obtain an executive level position **(40%)** 3. Manage projects **(36%)** 4. Change job functions/occupation **(36%)** 5. Obtain a senior level position **(34%)**
Blended/ Hybrid	1. Get a raise/salary increase **(50%)** 2. Obtain an executive level position **(42%)** 3. Obtain a senior level position **(36%)** 4. Doing work that contributes positively to society **(33%)** 5. Manage projects **(32%)**
Flexible	1. Get a raise/salary increase **(48%)** 2. Be self-employed/entrepreneur **(45%)** 3. Work for a company where I can travel internationally **(44%)** 4. Doing work that contributes positively to society **(42%)** 5. Manage people **(42%)**
Part-time, in-person	1. Get a raise/salary increase **(42%)** 2. Obtain an executive level position **(39%)** 3. Manage projects **(33%)** 4. Obtain a senior level position **(30%)** 5. Manage people **(30%)**
Full-time, in-person	1. Get a raise/salary increase **(37%)** 2. Work for a company where I can travel internationally **(37%)** 3. Manage projects **(35%)** 4. Work outside my country of citizenship **(35%)** 5. Manage people **(32%)**

Conclusion

This research brief highlighted the dual role of GME as both a career accelerator and a transformative personal journey. These findings reaffirm that the working professional segment is defined by pragmatism: they seek programs that can deliver measurable career and financial outcomes while also providing flexibility to fit within their complex lives. For institutions, success in engaging this segment will depend on aligning program design, marketing, and value propositions with these intersecting needs for flexibility, affordability, career impact, and personal growth. By doing so, GME institutions can effectively meet the dynamic needs of both learners and the evolving global marketplace.



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