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Demystifying the GMAT: Repeat Testing

By Lawrence M. Rudner

The GMAT exam has been shown to be a reliable indicator of academic potential for graduate management study. By reliable, we mean that randomly selected test takers would perform similarly over repeated testings. But, in practice, who sits for the test over and over again? And why? And how do they perform?

The GMAT exam is given more than a quarter of a million times each year, and approximately a fifth of those tests are being taken by people who have taken the exam before. Although there are no meaningful differences in the gender, average Quantitative scores, and undergraduate GPAs among repeat test takers, there are some other key differences between those who choose to retake the exam and those who don't.

Repeat test takers are far more likely to have failed to finish either the Quantitative or Verbal portion of the exam. They are also more likely to have a lower GMAT Total score than their self-reported undergraduate GPA would typically indicate. In other words, those who take the test again are a self-selected group that is more likely to think they did not do as well as they could have the first time they took the GMAT exam. After all, if a test taker is happy with his or her score, he or she will most likely not take the test again.

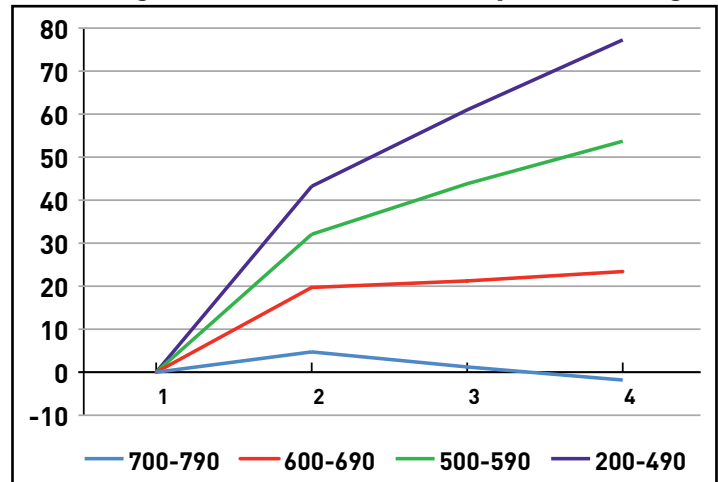
Average Gains Are Modest

Among this self-selected pool of repeat test takers, the average gains are relatively modest. The overall average gain was 33 points (on a 200-800 scale) on a second testing, with increasingly smaller cumulative gains in successive test sittings. It is worth noting that nearly 25 percent actually score lower the second time. Interestingly, although repeat test takers have slightly lower average Verbal scores than first-time test takers, they gain, on average, 2.5 points on the Quantitative and 2.1 points on the Verbal score (on a 60-point scale) when taking the test a second time. It is also worth noting those who failed to finish the test the first time nearly always finish during repeat testings.

There are notable differences by score group. Those who score 700 and above gain, on average, only about 8 GMAT Total scaled score points on their first retest. Those who score between 600 and 690, 500 and 590, and 200 and 490, gain, on average, about 20, 30, and 40 points respectively. Individuals who score 600 and above typically gain very little in their third and fourth attempts.

There are some cultural differences between those who retake the exam and those who do not. Non-white, non-native English speakers, and non-US citizens are more likely to retake the exam. We have learned that some sit for the test the first time fully intending to retake it later, viewing the first sitting as sort of a baseline to see how they'll do and where they need to focus their study efforts.

Average Score Gains Over Repeat Testing



Source: GMAT Research

Format Should Be Familiar

Although the GMAT exam has evolved over the years, it has always been designed to measure academic skills necessary to succeed in graduate management study. Some of the question formats, such as Data Sufficiency and the upcoming Integrated Reasoning, were designed specifically for the GMAT exam and remain unique to this test. Therefore, it is important that the test taker be familiar with the question formats before sitting for the exam so the questions measure what they are supposed to measure. Equally important, because it is a timed exam, GMAT test takers also should know how to pace themselves to ensure they finish each section in the allotted time.

For this reason, GMAC provides GMATPrep free software, which contains two full-length computer adaptive tests with retired questions, so all test takers can be familiar with the test content and format and can practice pacing themselves before they sit for the test.

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