



[<http://images.moviepostershop.com/payment-on-demand-movie-poster-1951-1010242330.jpg>]

Interestingly enough
This movie's title in English
was
Payment On Demand

Ambition

Ambition is the problem guest at the party that is the **MBA Admissions Race**. To be fair, ambition covers some complex psychological territory. But for our purposes here, let's divide it into two functional sections or components: interior ambition and public ambition.

Interior Ambition is what is at the core of the conversations you have with yourself. It is tied up with aspirations. With expectations (of you(rself) by parents, fiance or long term partner, friends) and with feelings of self worth and belonging and self-actualization or realizing your potential. In this zone of interior ambitions I say: ***give yourself free reign***. Nothing is taboo because there really isn't an argument to be made against understanding yourself as thoroughly as possible. Those Greeks were on to something in 5th century BCE Athens.

Self-awareness is at the core of a successful application. And though I'm technically discussing interior ambition, in practice, Ideally you should also open up a bit and share some of that with your admissions consultant (from Veritas or a different, reputable shop -- and beware: there aren't that many of them. But enablers v/ moralists is a fight for a different day.

Give your consultant a window into that knot that drives you. Untangling that knot is critical for your application as a whole. For remember: at the core of any sound application is an adult trying to communicate with other adults. Besides, your consultant is paid not to judge you. Unless you, of course, ask for it. But similarly we are paid to prevent you from making any mistakes in your application strategy. And ambition is a subject rife with mistake-making potential. Thus, do I turn to the next part of the argument...

It's the part of your ambitions that you share with the public that is so very tricky, for what you

share with others is also subject to their judgment. □ Business school is all about success, right? So it might be slightly surprising to learn that improperly handling ambition in the application brings down many an accomplished applicant. In reality, business school is a little more complex than “success worship.” The gap between inner and public ambitions -- and if there is **not** a gap, you have a huge, huge problem -- is masked by the lovely psychological tool that I’ll call filtering (“compartmentalization” has gotten a bad rap in “pop-psychology”, but is not unrelated).

First off, **we filter out of social necessity.** Furthermore, the reasons for this are deep and significant, likely rooted in our evolutionary past as a species. It’s part of the social pact; a total lack of filtering would be one of the things a clinician would look for in diagnosing a sociopath. The word’s etymology is translatable as “diseased social sense.” To make my point, let me draw your attention to a phrase.

Language is so often revealing, and I wouldn’t be calling your attention to it if it weren’t exceedingly so in this case. Take the phrase “naked ambition.” **It’s never a compliment.** You’ve probably even seen some people acting it out, to greater or lesser extent, at the office: I should add, if you were unlucky. It’s not pleasant, watching someone trample on others or humiliate themselves decrying the injustices that prevent their talent from assuming its rightful place.

Worse, naked ambition can pose awkward and uncomfortable questions that we’d prefer to leave unspoken. Witnessing naked ambition can even be scary, for so often it involves deliberately trampling on someone else’s humanity. Examples include:

- someone who talks a good game of caring but never quite manages to put it into practice. Adults tend not to respect other adults who don’t address the gaps between words (cheap) and actions (harder - but therefore more effective at signalling)
- someone who -- comically if you are inclined to interpret the human condition thus-- perhaps admits to naked ambition, under the influence of alcohol, in an ill-advised moment of candor
- someone who makes a grab for power, a palace coup.

Unseemly. Direct. Uncomfortable to behold. But sober and calculated. Sober ambition is so chilling to witness for its practitioner knows well the stakes: if one strikes at the king, one cannot afford to loose. That truth drives out all sentiment. All.

So there is no getting around it: naked ambition has negative connotations. One never admires the person exhibiting the behavior; it’s always a rebuke, a reprimand. We wish that the person might atone, though they rarely do. At best you might witness a sheepish retraction from that inebriated person who mistook your gathering and your confidences for a confessional.

To end this point with a flourish, the importance of filtering naked ambition is persuasively demonstrated with this question: **would you undertake each workday morning a naked commute? Most certainly not.**

Thankfully, we have social expectations (aka filters) that prevent such a tragedy.

Back to filters. They not only vary by country and culture, but also by many segments of class or ethnic stratification or geography -- Texas versus Connecticut: even if you read a transcript so as to lose the accent, you would likely be able to identify who is from where.



[<http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-pZdbTY8-eQQ/TrI4eAfD2RI/AAAAAAAAAAt0/48hUF9y7snc/s1600/imgres.jpg>]

Consider this parallelism with a social networking product making headlines, Google+. Our identity is not unitary. We construct it from parts whose weighting and importance are rarely static and almost meaningless in the absence of their context.

(Practical note: this is why context is so important to explaining yourself in your career essay!)

We define ourselves in relation to many concentric social **elipses** (for concentric circles cannot overlap -- thanks, Euclid!) If you've set up circles on Google+ you've likely been thinking about this insight, at least implicitly -- something of a proof of how central filtering is to our lives.

Back to ellipses, we are embedded in arrangements that are close and intimate (domestic/family space; college dorms); public but structured --where your reputation really matters-- best example: the office; friend of a friend (you start to care less, unless your an ambitious social climber); the so-called familiar stranger of your commute (clothed, thank you very much!); to strangers in the airport you'll never see again.

The closer the distance, the more you can let down your guard.

I'll go revise my example before: if you're the proverbial pajama clad blogger, perhaps others in your home wouldn't be quite so troubled by a (nearly) naked commute.

Clearly filtering is important and supremely useful. But how does it relate to applications? I'm glad you asked. **The rules governing filtering aren't codified. Anywhere.** There is nowhere to go look up standards of appropriateness. It's not objective or definitely truly settled, like the chemical composition of water. This is not the same as saying the shared social expectations and norms governing filtering are completely random or inscrutable. Though you're unlikely to be able to ask the question of a real admissions officer, were it to happen you would likely get at least a modestly usable set of notions.

But this tour of the terrain is what leads me to my perhaps counter-intuitive --or at least somewhat surprising - point

You would think that b-school admissions officers would implicitly share your view of capitalism and competition and merit (and to be sure: I do believe they have professional understanding of those and other key areas that are no doubt **central to their ability to analyze your reasons for applying**, just as surely as I believe that they are not closet Marxists sleepers have been planted there so as to gunk up the ultimate capitalist education). But to assume familiarity or agreement is very risky and frankly presumptuous (another attribute with no possible positive connotations)

Remember this: their daily work centers on interpreting words, so you can be sure that the best admissions officers are careful readers with a strong undergraduate education in the liberal arts.

After six years and tens of hundreds of essays, I do firmly believe -- even if one can't prove these social insights -- that **admissions staff behavioral norms are guided more strongly by their identities as staff of major global educational institutions than by the "business" part of business school**. Think about where they spend their days. Magnet campuses. One can't say that a cosmopolitan person is **better** than a someone from deep in the rural provinces. But one can likely say that the cosmopolitan person is **better at** (or at least *less uncomfortable with*) navigating differences in politics, faith, and worldview.

University professional staff **tend** to adapt a "live and let live" attitude because to do otherwise would be exhausting. I'm not saying that admissions officers are homogeneous or that they rise to a stock character, the b-school variant of that most potent of straw ean in US political discourse: the liberal college professor. But it never does hurt to remember their daily commute through campus, and their adherence to policies and norms which are designed to minimize any campus member's likelihood of feeling overly disenfranchised (an **certainly** not in any legal actionable sense).

So what is the key takeaway for you?

Universities are fundamentally different from the private sector. NEVER loose sight of that.

That's it for now. Rest assured the balance is forthcoming.

Posted 3rd November 2011 by [Darren Kowitt](#)

Labels: [MBA Admissions Race](#), [Filtering](#), [Ambition](#)



Add a comment

A continuation of [this posting](#).

To recap: In my experience of 1,600+ essays I've reached the contrarian's corner. **The less your application says/treats explicitly of your ambition, the better off you are.** (And note that i am NOT saying you career planning is futile: the more well thought-out your plan, the more persuasive it will be. But that's precisely the point: career planning is cognitive. One's ambitions are emotive.)

I've already approached it from the sociological perspective -- in the **MBA Admissions Race** one rarely make a faux pas, a mis-step after considering the ergonomic and throughput structure of the reader's day. Let me now turn to strategic considerations that in their fullness bolster my hypothesis (feeling/wants -- less impressive; solid planning -- your only hope.)

All essays are attempts at bridging a communications problem. The reader doesn't know about you, but wants to. You, in response, must figure which subset of your attributes is the best configuration for catching the reader's interest. But essays are a narrowband pale approximation of your fullness as a person. And I say that as --or because -- i'm an essay editor by trade.

Essay limits are designed to force you to evaluate the opportunity costs of one set of choices over another; and given what you know about permutations from GMAT, it should be clear that there is no formula for content that could adequately address the possibilities. And I'll tell you: an even-handed self-assessment of how your experience and individuality -- something that most ASUREDLY does not equate to "uniqueness"-- reinforce each other is a great way to let the configuration speak for itself.

If you try to address Ambition explicitly, you'll be reduced to trying to convince the reader of the authenticity of your feelings and inner self. But here's the rub: How do you prove that? It's a morass, which in turn leads to some pretty poor arguments, often the howlers traded in shop talk among denizens of the Admissions Race ecosystem.

History is so often instructive. Elizabeth I of England, in trying to finesse the raging conflict between protestants and catholics (and not wanting to give one side a basis for using violence against the other), said wisely "I have no window into men's souls". She added that she and her government would judge men by their actions. To that infinitely rich historical vignette, add a dash of modernity:

- the narrative arc of how your professional judgment has evolved
- restraint in discussing your accomplishments too boastfully
- complex causation in a globalizing world

and voila: a frame shift, as political consultants would say, to the MBA Admissions Race.

Back to poor Elizabeth's dilemma. Think of her power, her access to the greatest minds of the day. Our technology evolves quickly. **The software of our social and inner selves --- not so much.** World literature suggests this strongly. Mean-spirited put downs from half way around the world and 1200 years ago can be spot on. **It's a delicious phenomenon when you encounter it. If Elizabeth I of England concluded it was hopeless to judge someone's inner authenticity, it's pretty presumptuous of you to suggest you can manage it.**

Coming back to a directly practical argument. . Everyone else applying is ambitious -- so the mere fact of it is not in the slightest a differentiating attribute. Zero value-add. Seriously. Huge opportunity cost. No payoff. Do the math.

Worse still, in terms of validating ambition, only time will tell. It's unlikely, but not impossible, that some of you may even come to regret having broadcast your ambitions too widely. **Success is a funny beast, eluding even those who prepare.** In careers as in life, sometimes the wrong place at the wrong time is a misfortune that can take decades to shake. Even for an HBS graduate.

My ring-side seat at the Admissions Race has convinced me that **MBAs don't confer success.** Rather, whether by accident or design (and I'd argue for design) **MBAs simply make success more probable.** Success is part timing and part the cumulative, aggregate, long-run result of better, fuller decisions arising from robust and nuanced multidimensional considerations. You know the stuff you're going to learn about in the core. It's a good functional, mechanistic principal to keep top of mind, and of course there are exceptions -- see Columbia's William Dugan and his Strategic Intuition. Still how can you argue sustainedly that ill-considered decisions will tend to outperform well-considered ones?

Skip ambition. Keep your vision of a hockey-stick-shaped career path to yourself, no matter how much you'd love to describe your effortless moves --at least as you imagine them -- among the peaks of the global corporate class. Understand yourself and your ambitions; but conjure a stoic's strength in refraining from discussing them.

Native New Yorkers might remember Syms, a clothing retailer whose strategy centered on price tags that indicated when and by how much the price would go down. That actually entails a fair amount of consumer cognitive engagement. So their tagline was "an educated consumer is our best customer". It's an apt strategic consideration for your application essays.

Instead of the cliched morass of ambition and its authenticity -- go mechanistic. Convey you understand how and why the MBA works -- that you're an educated applicant who has figured out for yourself how the MBA works, how it will help **you**, and how it fits into **your** well-reasoned plan (and not the plan you've lifted from the Warren Buffet playbook: such a cliché!)

Furthermore, be sure to present your plan in great detail. And rather than titles and pay ranges, focus on conveying your satisfaction drivers. A subject I'll return to in a subsequent installments.

And, in self-deprecating style, I'll concede in retrospect that this is not a blog posting. It's a pamphlet.

Posted 9th November 2011 by [Darren Kowitt](#)