

# B-Schooled Podcast by Stacy Blackman Consulting

Episode #23

## Speaker 1: [Narrator]

Welcome to B-Schooled a podcast by Stacy Blackman Consulting, bringing you tips, advice and insight into all aspects of the MBA admissions process and business-school experience. And now, here's your host — writer, author and Harvard MBA, who's been an MBA admissions consultant for over a decade — Erika Olson.

## Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]

Hi there, everyone. Today we're going to talk about things MBA applicants are worried about overall — in any year, but especially this one — as well as admissions-test anxiety, specifically. This topic is near and dear to my heart, not only because of my own experience back when I was applying to business school, but also because I have seen many of the MBA applicants I work with let their nerves get the best of them in the application process, and especially when their big Test Day arrives and it just breaks my heart. So, I really want to help our listeners stay calm, cool and collected in their MBA journeys and rock their admissions tests. So, I'm excited to have with me today, Jay Bryant, who's spent a combined 16 years overseeing business school admissions, recruiting, financial aid, international students and student affairs at Thunderbird School of Global Management and Rady School of Management at UC San Diego.

He now works as a liaison between business schools and ETS, which is the education-focused nonprofit that, among many other things, develops and administers the *GRE*<sup>®</sup> General Test, which is, of course, very relevant to business school applicants. In preparing for this episode, I was thrilled to find that Jay is just as passionate as I am about personal and professional development. And because of his role, he has a really unique perspective and expertise on the admissions process that complements what I do and, you know, what the whole Stacy Blackman Consulting team does as admissions consultants. And so basically, I just can't wait to throw a bunch of questions at him. So, thanks so much for joining me, Jay.

## Speaker 3: [Jay Bryant]

Yeah. Thanks for having me. I'm excited to share what I know about MBA applications and hopefully ease some of the listeners' anxiety about this whole process.

## Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]

Great. Well, before we go any further, I did want to mention to our listeners that if you have any questions whatsoever about anything we cover today, and specifically the *GRE*<sup>®</sup> test or taking the test at home, please send them to us at [podcast@stacyblackman.com](mailto:podcast@stacyblackman.com), because Jay's going to be back later next month for a Q&A session to answer all of your questions. So once again, that email address is podcast, singular, at [stacyblackman.com](http://stacyblackman.com). OK, so let's get into it now. Now obviously, Jay, 2020 has given everyone a lot of things to legitimately worry about. And for

those thinking about applying to business school in the future, or those who know they're definitely going to apply this year, there are some really unique and specific fears and worries that people have. So let's start by talking about the overall state of MBA admissions right now. People are freaked out about how COVID is affecting things, as I covered extensively in Episode 11 in early July, but now we're into September and you've been talking to all the admissions committees — what are some of the things you've been hearing and the common themes that are coming up this year?

**Speaker 3: [Jay Bryant]**

All right, well, in my position I get to spend time speaking with admissions professionals from all over the country at a wide variety of different types of business schools — everything from, like, the top 10 ranked schools to more regionally focused business programs — and they're all trying to figure it out this year. Lots of things have changed. You know, the first thing that I always talk with them about is their recruitment process. And that's a big part in the business schools because they're reaching out and making sure that you get the opportunity to know who they are and what the schools are about and those sorts of things. And you know, we were used to, when I was in admissions, always going out and doing info sessions or having you come visit campus. I personally, I've gotten to travel all over the world and go to events and meet with my future students in their own homes, or not “own homes,” but their cities around the world.

And that's just not possible right now. So, the recruitment process is very much gone to an online sort of situation for the most part. And so, just learning how to change all of that. And you know, as you're going through and learning about these schools, you're going to learn about all the different types of events they have and different ways to visit campus virtually. So that's kind of the first thing that the schools had to figure out is how in the world are they going to be in contact with you guys as the applicants? Now the next thing, obviously, is going through the actual admissions process itself. You know, most schools do conduct interviews, and quite frankly, for students that were really far away, we've done things like Zoom<sup>®</sup> interviews, Skype<sup>®</sup> interviews, different tools over the years.

But now basically you could live a block away and most likely you're still going to be interviewed online. So that's a big change. Now, the one thing I will tell you that every single admissions director that I've spoken with has said, is that they really need to make sure that they're maintaining admissions standards. They want the quality students in their programs that they were able to attract before; they don't want this COVID era that we're going through to change anything about that. And a big part of that is still the admissions tests. You, you want to perform very well on the GRE<sup>®</sup> test if you're applying to school because that's going to show them a lot of your current capabilities academically.

You know, one of the great things that we were able to do at ETS actually is we were able to roll out the GRE<sup>®</sup> and TOEFL<sup>®</sup> — which, the TOEFL<sup>®</sup> being an English test that international

candidates are taking. We were able to roll those tests out for the majority of the world within just a few weeks of going into the lockdowns and situations that we had around the world. So, quick reaction to that and for the most part at most schools, meant that we were able to provide those assessments to continue on with the 2020 admissions cycle.

Another thing I'll say in speaking with admissions directors, is that more than anything, this COVID-19 thing has been an accelerator in business schools. You know, online education, when I first entered the industry was brand new, something we didn't know much about how that would work, how it would go. It's certainly grown over the years, but man, this year in a matter of a few days, classes literally had to go online and new technologies that I would say had been kind of fringe in the classrooms — like maybe the really technologically savvy professors would use — suddenly all the faculty were having to use. So that's, that's been a big change in the classroom.

But you know, I've also worked, I have my degree in international business and my position has always been working with global teams, and I've found that what is actually happening in the classroom right now is actually very reflective of working in a global environment. You know even now, ETS is located in New Jersey, and I'm in California. What we're seeing, the business schools are having to do, as far as classrooms and actually this experience of not necessarily being right there, is reflective of what a lot of us are experiencing in our work environment right now. And quite frankly, even outside of this time working in a global environment, you find that as well.

So, you know, I asked the schools, is now the right time to go to business school? What should we be looking at? Do you expect it's going to get smaller? What's going on? And what I've heard back from almost every single school was that the application volumes have grown and the classes that they have sat this fall have also grown. It's really a good time to go to business school. The world's in a lot of change right now. It's like I said, this has been an accelerator; these changes are coming fast. Business schools are really a great place to be learning and experiencing what these new technologies and new ways of working together and all those sorts of things; you know, business schools are teaching you about all sorts of industries and functions and how they're all changing during this time. And probably going to be that way once you graduate from your MBA. So we're really seeing that the market for MBAs has not gone down in this time.

Another thing I throw out there is, make sure that you're getting your information directly from the admissions office — get on their mailing list. That's a big thing. I've certainly been out there on the web, as other people have, and seeing blogs and different things of people who aren't actually from the admissions office that sometimes, you know, don't know the specifics of what's going on there, what they're looking for, things like that, but if you're on their mailing list, you're getting information directly from the source. You know, we're all in this together. The admissions people are trying to figure this out. They're doing webinars and you can meet or see

or hear from members of the admissions committee. You can, you know, a lot of the admissions directors will have videos or interviews or blog posts or podcasts like this one, where they're sharing with you, what it is they're looking for. Make sure you're listening to those things; make sure you're paying close attention and know what's going on. I highly recommend attending admissions webinars at the schools that you're applying to, in addition to diving deep into their websites, as they'll keep you aware of all the changes that have occurred in their programs and in their admissions processes.

**Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]**

Yeah and you know, I was actually just talking with some friends about how all of the brilliant minds around the world are focused on solving problems specific to COVID-19 right now, whether it be trying to find a vaccine or treatments, or whether it be creative solutions in education or communication or transportation or entertainment or hospitality services. And of course, the brilliant minds of business schools across the globe are focused not only on those sorts of problems, but also on how to make things work better at their own institutions, including admissions, as you were saying. And then there's testing — if you had told me last year that there would be a way to take business-school tests in the comfort of your own home, I would have said you were crazy. But here we are. So that does lead me to my next question, because tests of this sort have been taken in testing centers for so many decades, it's hard for people to wrap their minds around this new option. To me, an at-home test seems like a natural next step that perhaps COVID just accelerated into being a little bit faster. As you were talking, it's an accelerator, but as with anything new, there's some apprehension and confusion about it. So, the question we're getting a lot is, is the at home test the same thing as the one you take in the testing center. I think some people might have anxiety about the at-home tests because they're not clear on how it all works. So maybe you could shed some light on that.

**Speaker 3: [Jay Bryant]**

Sure. Let me start by saying, I wish this was around when I was applying for my MBA, a number of years back. I remember driving to the testing center; at the time I think I had to drive like 45 minutes. Everything seemed rushed. It was a new environment. It wasn't a place that I had been to before, et cetera, et cetera. And then to top it all off when I got back to my car after the test, I had a very expensive parking ticket because I was so nervous, I had parked in a spot that I wasn't supposed to, so I had a couple hundred dollars extra to pay on my testing day. It would have been nice to be able to do it from home.

So yeah, the *GRE*<sup>®</sup> test at home is actually the same test. We've not added anything, we've not removed anything. It's the *GRE*<sup>®</sup> test. It's identical in content, length, format and even the onscreen experience as if you were in a testing center itself. Nothing's changed with the scoring criteria or the process that it's scored with or the scale. When you send them to an admissions office, there's nothing that's different there. And they're actually at the same price as in a testing center. So we haven't really changed any of that part, it's literally just where you're taking it. I've also talked as I said to lots of the admissions folks out there and none have questioned the at-home process or the test. They know that ETS is known for having a high commitment both to

the testing quality and security, and therefore it felt very comfortable in shifting over to taking those.

**Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]**

This is all fascinating to me. And I truly wish, like you said, that this had been an option for me back in the day as well. So, taking the test at home has been available for how long now?

**Speaker 3: [Jay Bryant]**

The at-home tests launched on March 28<sup>th</sup>, so it's been about five months as of the date we're recording this podcast.

**Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]**

OK, so what is the response been like? Are people weirded out by having somebody monitor them while they're taking the test?

**Speaker 3: [Jay Bryant]**

Well, it's true that there's a proctor who watches you via camera as you take the test, and that makes some people nervous. I get that. But remember, when you're in a testing center, it's the same sort of thing — there are cameras everywhere, there's staff, there's other people in the room taking the same assessment. So, you do have this camera there, but you're going to have that in the test center. This really provides an opportunity for us to have good test security and [to see] that it's fair to everyone who's taking the test. So, from what I've heard back from test takers and from schools who've spoken with those who have taken the *GRE*<sup>®</sup> test, most test takers are appreciative of the ability to, you know, test in a comfortable and familiar place.

You don't have the added stress of traveling somewhere. As I mentioned earlier, I had to travel at least 45 minutes to a testing center. And you can take it at any point of the day. You know, some of you work best in the middle of the night. Some of you work best at early morning times, so you can sign up for the test at whatever time works best for you and you're going to perform best.

Now, there's some things you do want to figure out. You do want to figure out a nice, quiet and private location. I would suggest be in front of your computer well before your testing time to make sure everything is working properly. You don't want to get to test time and find out that some of the things aren't working like they need to. You need to make sure that your family, friends, your pets, your parents, everybody — they all need to stay out of the testing room. You need to create this isolated environment to take it for the entirety of the test. One of the things you can do is just Google "*GRE*<sup>®</sup> at home," and it will take you to all of the computer testing environment, ETS requirements and all the processes. So, become familiar with that. Don't wait until 30 minutes before the test to figure all that out; go look it all up, make sure you've got everything set. So that way, when you get to the day of the test, it's ready to go. Familiarize yourself.

**Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]**

Yeah. You're talking to somebody who's worked from home since 2007 and loves being at home. So, you are speaking my language right now about just creating that space. So, I feel like this is a great option. Even if a pandemic weren't ranging a raging around us right now, am I right?

**Speaker 3: [Jay Bryant]**

Yeah as an admissions director, I heard thousands of stories of the challenges of individuals that they had on their testing day. I mentioned my parking ticket, but there's traffic, there's difficulty in finding the location, there's temperature in the testing center, being in an unfamiliar location, all sorts of things. I've had lots of candidates say that they had to travel so far they had to make an entire trip out of going to the testing center. So that that may be affecting some of our listeners today. Again, I mentioned that you can take the test different parts of the day — morning, afternoon, evening, middle of the night, whatever works for you. And you know, other tests that are out there are limited on, you know, can you retake the test? Things like that. With the *GRE*<sup>®</sup> test, you are absolutely allowed to retake it. I don't ever want anyone to have to take the test more than once, but you should always build that in just in case you need to. You are on a schedule with the admissions office, so you want to make sure that you build that into your potential calendar, into your admissions cycle, so that you have that opportunity to retake if you need to.

**Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]**

OK yes, and that was actually something that my colleague, Caryn, and I were talking about in Episode 6, when we were sharing with people various strategies for improving their quantitative profile. Admissions committees like to see self-awareness and effort, and I think it's getting to be rarer and rarer that people are just "one and done" with their admissions tests. So we'll keep things moving here to answer another question that has been causing people some stress — and that is whether or not people should wait to take their tests, meaning should some people wait to take the test until they can actually take it the usual way at a test center instead of at home? Is there any situation where you would advise somebody to wait so that they could take it in a testing center?

**Speaker 3: [Jay Bryant]**

Honestly, I can't think of a real good reason to wait for the testing-center option. It's the same test, the same type of questions, everything. So why not take the opportunity to take it in a location that you know, in your own comfortable chair, and at the time of day that works best for your maximum performance. Also, we don't know what the situation will be in a few months. I personally hope that the COVID-19 pandemic comes to an end soon, but there's certainly no guarantee on that. As I said a minute ago, you're on a timeline that's set forth by the schools that you're applying to and you've got to stay in step with their schedule. Time moves on; the last thing that you want to happen is to have to take the *GRE*<sup>®</sup> test last minute, because you waited for the testing centers. Last-minute test taking is definitely not a good way to reduce the stress on your test day.

**Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]**

I could not agree with you more on that. OK so I've got two more questions for you. When I think back about my business school application experience a full 20 years ago, my anxiety got the better of me and my first attempt to did not go as smoothly as I would have liked.

Thankfully, I was able to regroup. I continued studying and preparing and then I took my test again, and I got a solid score . . . but what do you think applicants can do to help minimize those test day jitters?

**Speaker 3: [Jay Bryant]**

More than anything, be prepared. Both be prepared in, you know, if you're taking it at home, be prepared, as I said, to make sure that you've gone through all the instructions and know everything you have to do, but also be prepared and study. You don't want to put unnecessary stress on yourself by planning on just taking the test once, because then mentally you've got the weight of everything hinging upon the test and on this one day. One of the things I've seen happen far too often is that applicants wait until the very last moment to take their *GRE*<sup>®</sup> test. Plan your application process well in advance to take your *GRE*<sup>®</sup> with plenty of time to spare which will reduce your stress. You always want to build in the time for a second chance to take it, just in case. So, do yourself a favor and take it early and tell yourself that you can always take it again, if you need to. And, you know, also with flexible score- reporting options offered by the *GRE*<sup>®</sup> test you can send schools only the set of scores you want them to see. So, there's another benefit there too.

**Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]**

All great advice. And of course, you know, if people want to look into meditation or breathing techniques or other ways that are just helpful to keep anxiety at bay in everyday life, much less on test day, that's something they can check out too. But I strongly agree with you that preparation is the best way somebody can keep themselves centered and go into their test with confidence. So, my last question circles back to something we touched upon at the beginning, when you were talking about how MBA admissions committees have been pivoting and adapting the admissions processes needed in response to these uncertain times. How would you advise MBA applicants to think about their futures when it seems like every day there is something else in the headlines that just makes you want to crawl under a rock and give up trying to plan anything?

**Speaker 3: [Jay Bryant]**

All right, well, you know, life hasn't stopped. It's a little different, but it hasn't stopped. The schools are still there — lots of types of programs, lots of types of formats — and they're looking for you, too. They're figuring out how to, you know, best do their role in this as well. So be ahead of the curve, you know, the economy is going through significant changes right now. Again, none of us know exactly where that's going, but when it comes back, be ready and be tooled to be at the front of that wave as well. Finally, I found most of us have more free time than ever these days, whether you're watching you know, every movie that you never got to watch, playing video games, whatever it is, shift your time and start preparing for the *GRE*<sup>®</sup> test

and looking at schools. Educating yourself: it's a great way that you can keep moving forward while the world seems to be standing still all around us.

**Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]**

That is such great advice. Thank you so much for joining me, Jay, and I look forward to answering some listener questions with you again later in October.

**Speaker 3: [Jay Bryant]**

Yeah, definitely looking forward to seeing what sort of questions our listeners have for us.

**Speaker 2: [Erika Olson]**

That's right. So remember everybody, if anything we talked about today sparked a question, or if you have any specific questions about the *GRE*<sup>®</sup> General Test or taking the test at home, please send them to us at [podcast@stacyblackman.com](mailto:podcast@stacyblackman.com) and we'll do our best to answer them on a Q&A episode when Jay returns.

And now I have not one, but two quotes about overcoming anxiety to end this episode with, because I liked them both so much that I couldn't decide between them. The first is kind of harsh, but that's actually why I was drawn to it, and it's from author Seth Godin, who I actually saw speak before and he was great. He said, "Anxiety is nothing but repeatedly experiencing failure in advance. What a waste." Like I said, a harsh quote, but true. And the second quote is from former tennis pro turned professional speaker, Dennis Simsek, who said, "Anxiety is to allow your imagination to take over your intelligence and logic."

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