AN INTERNET-BASED MBA PROGRAM

Introduction
The GVnext is an Internet-based MBA program from one of the Fundação Getulio Vargas schools, the FGV-EAESP, which is a pioneer in the teaching of Business Administration in Brazil and is one of the principal Brazilian centers of teaching, research, publication and consulting in the field of Administration.

The main focus of the program is the specialization and knowledge actualization of business people. The class profile includes professionals from a variety of backgrounds, but in general, executives with at least 10 years of working experience. The majority of students are supervisors, managers, and company directors. The desistance rate ranges between 5% and 10%.

The GVnext program requires students to complete 502 hours of course activities within a period of 18 months or three semesters. A combination of technologies and advanced teaching and distance learning methodologies integrated with some face to face practices are used with the purpose to maintain the personal relationship essence. The students relationship is also reinforced through traditional face to face seminaries.

General Objective of the GVnext program
The GVnext MBA program is in syntonization with the skills that an executive has to acquire to beneficiate from the deep transformations of the business environment:

- The methodology stimulates the development of the student’s autonomy on problem solving, enabling the students to create his own ways to solve business issues;
- There is a strengthen on the team building skill, which privileges the interdisciplinary capabilities. As a result, the students are able to elaborate comprehensive analysis with more depth, which includes the better understanding of factors that influence the business environment;
- There is the fostering of team collaboration in virtual environments;

The main goal of GVnext is to stimulate the students to achieve and pursue critical requirements for today's professional success as well as enlarge and strengthen the relationship network.

**Program Conception**

The content and learning activities in each course aims the application of concepts and theory into a business plan. The business plan will be elaborated through the activities and interactions proposed on the face to face thematic seminars. The GVnext is a distance learning program that uses modern educational technologies and advanced teaching and distance learning methodologies. At the same time that the students have the benefits of the flexibility through the technology resources, the program proposal preserves the personal contacts among students and professors. The relationships strengthens the group and stimulates the process of learning through the exchange of experiences. The students that are located in São Paulo are able to take their classes at the school facility e the students that are in other locations can take their classes through the Webcast (live classes in video streaming through the Internet). The class can be attended through any computer, home, work or Coffee Shop.

The program presents a model in which two face to face sessions are mandatory, one at the beginning of the program and one at the end. Those sessions represent a great opportunity for students to meet and interact, which enables them to build a network of relationships, one of the most important benefits of today's business world.

Besides the opening and closing face to face session, the students have to participate in three thematic seminars, which are offered in specific moments of the program (after the conclusion of a set of key courses). The thematic seminars' objectives are the consolidation of lessons learned along the courses' learning process and the participation in applicable activities to contribute for the students' abilities and skills' development. On those encounters, students are able to acquire progressive control on the main vocational abilities, tendencies, and
resources that are modifying the methods of the professional setting in organizations in general and specifically in their own. Those skills will prepare students to understand and acquit the transformations of a knowledge based society. In order to achieve the learning objectives proposed in the seminars, the students are guided to reflect and analyze about a specific topic and develop an activity that is related to the business plan, in which they apply concepts, theories, experiences and skills.

The thematic seminars are divided into two parts. In the first part, the seminar is conducted by a facilitator (a professor who has the whole understanding of the business administration area), a business man or a professor with broad experience in the corporative world, and a professor specialized in a specific area (SME – the subject matter expert). The facilitator will build a bridge between the study case presented by the business man and the content and experiences the students acquired during the semester and the SME will explain and work with the students specific key-themes. In the second part, the students will receive orientations from the facilitator and will elaborate a paper (part of the business plan) base on lessons learned, which can be implemented in the student’s working environment. The thematic seminars were created from the reflection on the following paragraph of “The Modern Firm” from John Roberts:

Figure 1 – The project problem is to select the strategy and the organization to achieve maximum performance in the environment.
Format and Learning Activities Details

The learning strategies are the means developed to transfer facts, ideas, concepts, abilities, attitudes and skills for the student’s cognition and action process. The learning process take place through the activities and material developed by the academic coordination and faculty. The activities and learning materials are elaborated considering the target audience, teaching and learning methodologies, and the mix of guided strategies – faculty centered, such as lectures, questioning, demonstrations, and student centered, such as discovery learning, group collaborative work and guided research.

1. Videoconference / Webcast

The classes through videoconference resource or webcast are similar to traditional classes, but the students participate at a distance, in real time. The differential of this program is how classes are designed, the interaction in those classes is very intense. The faculty presents the content and interacts the whole time with students in the classroom or with the students at a distance. The students are encouraged by faculty and tutor to post questions, answer, make observations and share experiences with their classmates as if everybody was in the same classroom (but at least 30% are at a distance).

2. Learning Objects for self-study

The self-development or self-study through the Internet is an asynchronous activity. The learning objects are well-structured and the students can follow the activities through a learning guide. The students can also make a deep study through selected readings and websites research. The student can freely choose the best time and best location to access his learning activities through the Internet. All the exercises and content from the learning objects are fundamental for the participation in the discussion board and collaborative chats.

3. Collaborative Chats

Collaborative interaction through the Internet: in this synchronous activity the students are encouraged by the professor to discuss a specific topic. In the discussion the professor ask questions related to theory and practice, or post statements and the students answers them through analysis and sharing of their
own experiences. The collaborative chat dynamic acts directly on the development of three critical competences: 360 degree thinking, autonomy and virtual teamwork. The students can download all chat sessions that are saved in html file format any time and used a reference for further studies.

4. Discussion Board Activity
In this activity, the student will participate in a written debate. The activity is asynchronous and aims the deepen and exploration of selected topics. The students are encourage to participate many times during the week in order to discuss the topic proposed and exchange experiences with their classmates. The activity is monitored by the professor and tutor.

5. Course Final Exam – (mandatory and taken at school facility)
A new methodology to take exams was developed for the program. The students receive with a couple of days in advance before taking the exam, a set of questions that will guide him to study. On the exam day, one of the questions will be drawn and he will elaborate on it, without consulting on books or notes. All questions are always related to the application of facts, concepts, applied theories learned in the classroom. The questions are stimulating and help the students to understand the applicability of lessons learned. The preparation for the exam demands great efforts from the student, that besides learning the concepts and theory, has to research about his own organization/corporation and exchange ideas with co-workers.

6. Individual or group papers
The students work individually or in groups under faculty supervision. All papers’ subject focuses on practical aspects of the daily business context with the objective of exploring concepts and their contextualization and applicability in the business environment.

7. Business Simulation
The business simulation is an internet based learning game. In the last semester of the program, students in teams can apply what they have learned during the course of three semesters. The simulation environment is ludic and proposes a dynamic and challenging process, which will improve the students’ decision making
and analytic skills context. During the process of creating the business simulation’s three critical abilities were taken into consideration: autonomy, 360 degree thinking and virtual team work.

8. **Theses – final paper**

In the last stage of the program the students have the opportunity to elaborate a paper about a topic or problem related to his own organization/corporation which can be used to improve a business process, procedure or project. The theses has the purpose not only to enrich the student’s learning process, but it will serve as a rich source of concrete proposals that will bring gains in the management process of the organization;

Figure 2: Face to face and distance learning activities from GVnext

The classes hold between 80 and 90 students. The program consists of 15-course curriculum and a business simulation that provide students with management fundamentals, time-proven business knowledge and managerial decision-making tools based on theories and best practices of the market. Each course is compound of 32 hours of activities divided into 5 modules.
The students have five weeks to complete five modules, one module per week. The completion of a course module means students have reviewed all online course content, read all assigned textbook and supplemental readings, participated in and completed the required online interaction exercises.

Two courses always take place simultaneously. During the course, students will work in virtual teams, supervised and oriented by distinguished faculty who possess deep understanding of the national and global business environment.

The program methodology includes a mixture of practices derived from the traditional classroom and from the distance education, which has the purpose to take advantages such as flexibility from the distance learning technologies as well as preserving the benefits of personal contact through the face to face meetings.

Two course formats are offered, for students who have access to videoconference facilities, 35% of the activities take place face to face and 65% is through distance learning; for students that are away from the facilities, the program can be done totally online (only exams must be taken at school facility).

The faculty teaches the classes face to face, which means that during one module, depending on the location of the student, he will attend the class either face to face (taught by the faculty on that location), via videoconferencing (if the student is in another location with videoconference facility) or through the Webcast (if the
student is in a remote location), video streaming through the Internet. The GVnext program has already had students taking classes from Austria and Portugal, who did the program totally online. Complementary to that, students interact with other students and faculty through chat rooms and discussion boards, in which specific themes are proposed to discussion. Most of course materials are available through the LMS Blackboard and another part is printed and distributed to the students during the face to face classes. At the end of the course, the students receive a CD-ROM with the reading material indicated and developed by the faculty and all the exercises (knowledge – content from discussion board and chat sessions) developed by the students during the course.

The LMS used for the program is Blackboard which is integrated with the school’s academic management system, where grades, presence, curricula are controlled. Blackboard was evaluated by students and faculty as a very friendly tool that enhances and encourages collaboration among participants. Through the system adopted, FGV-EAESP was able to consolidate a virtual community where students can build long-term relations.

Students are evaluated through their presence in the synchronous activities, which must be at least 80% of participation and the final course grade of combined activities (papers, interaction, exams, chat and discussion board discussions) has to be equal or above 6 in each course, but a grade 7 has to be achieved in program average grade (in a scale of 0 to 10, being 10 the highest grade). At the last module of each course, students have to take a final exam at the school facility.

In March 2004, GVnext was accredited by the Ministry of Education.

**Innovation**

The webcast, system of video streaming transmission through the Internet, was implemented in 2004. The webcast enabled the offering of the GVnext program for students who are totally online and are not able to come to the videoconference facilities. This innovation proved to be much more efficient for the learning process
of the student because the students are also able to interact through chat while watching the class in real time through the Internet. Before the implementation of the Webcast, students received through the mail the class recorded in a video cassette.

In 2004 the version 1.0 was implemented and in a short period of time, many innovations were done in order to offer more flexibility and quality to the students at a distance. Among the results, one can mention:

- More knowledge retention, because the student can access and review past classes as many times as he wants;
- Larger flexibility to participate in classes without depending on a videoconference facility;
- Substantial decrease on absence and an increase of real time participation in class to around 60%;
- Cost reduction, because VHS videos are not sent to students anymore;
- Cost reduction with employee that was in charge of making arrangements for students to watch past classes.

**Best Practices**

The mix of teaching and learning methodologies and technology resources are considered part of best practices implemented at the program, as well as complete capacitating and training for faculty members, tutors and technical support.

Flexibility: considering a module based-model in which is possible to create a variety of formats and programs according to specific needs. Considering the three elements: autonomy, interdisciplinary and virtual groups, we created a model that integrates many methodologies that can be used to implement a diversity of programs. Depending on several factors, such as students profile, geographical locations and others, it is possible to work with more or less online content, with or without videoconferencing sessions or even with our without face to face seminars, etc.
The structure of a specialized team, compound of people that understand and have experience in educational technology, pedagogy and that work integrated was built to guarantee the best learning performance of the student. The integrated work from the pedagogical team, technical team and faculty has shown to be fundamental for the innovation process that the program went through. It is essential the analysis of distance learning models in this process as well as the consideration of their vantages and limitations. Each model uses distinct educational technologies and teaching and learning methodologies that can be applied to different target audience and programs.