Ahead of the Curve: Two Years at Harvard Business School
by Philip Delves Broughton
Penguin, 2008

Reviewed by David W. Gill  www.ethixbiz.com

Philip Delves Broughton attended Harvard Business School for two years, from 2004 to 2006. What he has done since graduating with his MBA is a mix of journalism and modest entrepreneurship if I understand correctly from his web site (www.philipdelvesbroughton.com). What he did before the MBA was be born in Bangladesh to Church of England missionaries, be raised in the UK and graduate from Oxford, and work as a journalist for ten years, including a nice gig as Paris bureau-chief for The Daily Telegraph.

Broughton was one of about 900 entering HBS MBA students in fall 2004 (out of 7000 or so applicants). Ahead of the Curve is a wonderfully-written account and interpretation of the experience. So many big business leaders (like Enron’s Jeff Skilling) and even political leaders (like President George W. Bush) have been Harvard MBAs. Broughton had a wife, Margret, and, by the time he finished, two small children during the experience. The two years cost him about $175,000. In the big job search at the end, Broughton failed to connect in the usual HBS way with a high paying finance, technology, or business leadership position but he seems to believe the experience was worth it nonetheless.

Broughton gives great descriptions of the diverse international group of students in his class, most of them incredibly driven and ambitious. He describes the curriculum --- challenging financial material, case study methods throughout, first year core, foundational courses, second year elective specializations. His accounts of faculty member personalities, styles, and contributions are wonderful. I especially enjoyed reading about what he calls the “guru” --- strategy expert Michael Porter. Porter’s course showed Broughton “that business was not the sole driver of a society and that it was possible to come out the other side, to have an MBA, to put competition at the center of one’s beliefs, and yet not be a completely heartless scumbag” (p. 214).

It was interesting to get Broughton’s take on the way the Myers-Briggs Temperament Analysis was used along with a personal development exercise called “My Reflected Best Self.” Some insight accompanied by modest groaning, chafing, and skepticism.

Broughton’s writing is sometimes pretty hilarious: “The company presentations on campus slid me into an even deeper funk. The low point was a presentation by a big publishing company from New York, led by a large woman in a blousey suit emblazoned with orange flowers. She had the complexion of a forty-a-day smoker and a sour smile, and spoke in such a stilted corporate way that I imagined her getting home each day and unleashing her frustration with a string of violent expletives and punches to the kitchen wall. ‘We are passionate about our work,’ she said in a listless monotone. ‘Passion affects everything we do.’ The fruits of this passion were laid out on a table before us: financial information, educational and business books, some of the most sleep-inducing magazine titles I had ever seen” (p. 211).

Broughton concludes with some personal reflections and recommendations on MBA education. Visit his web site to browse through his substantial collection of reviews in all the major publications. It’s a great story about a great and influential institution --- but by no means the only or the best way to get a good MBA education.