

# Transcript of Manage-A-Bull Podcast Episode featuring Shannon Alexander

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Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hi, I'm Vish Gopalakrishnan, and this is the Manage-A-Bull podcast, where we have in-depth conversations with students, faculty, staff, and alumni to give you a comprehensive picture into the life at University at Buffalo's School of Management. In today's episode, we speak with Shannon Alexander, a student in UB's full-time MBA program from Buffalo, New York. In our conversation, we talk about her first-year experience in the MBA program, her summer marketing internship with Fisher-Price, and some tips and tricks on managing stress as an MBA student. Shannon, welcome to the show.

Shannon Alexander:

Thanks for having me, Vish. It's good to be here.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hey, great to have you. Shannon, before we get into the crux of the interview, I wanted to ask you about a very interesting thing that we learned about you in our research for this podcast. You are an accomplished musician who went to graduate school with a focus on vocal performance. Tell me, where did this interest in music come from?

Shannon Alexander:

Well, I have always loved music, always loved singing. My mom always says that my first solo happened when I was maybe about four years old. I was performing a Christmas concert with a church choir, little kids up there singing, and apparently everyone else got scared and stopped singing, and I kept singing. So, I think it's just been something that I've always loved to do and that interest has just carried throughout my life. And then when it came about time for me to go to undergrad, I still had that love for music, still had that love for performing and thought, "I think I'll get a degree in this." So that's what I did.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

That's such an interesting way to start, on a Christmas carol, being the only one on stage who kept

singing. I remember my own interest in classical music was influenced by my parents. My mother is a pretty good Indian classical singer, my father loved listening to Western music, so that was an interesting childhood growing up. Come to think of it, I heard my very first opera on our family's Sony boombox. It was the Italian opera singer, I think Luciano Pavarotti, I'm pretty sure that I'm butchering that name. Pavarotti?

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Performing a song and I was just blown away by this new genre of music that I'd never heard of. So yeah, we all have an interesting way we start with the passions in our lives. So, music is your first love. Tell me a little bit about your pre-MBA work experience in music? Because you mentioned you did your undergrad in it.

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah, so I got my undergrad degree in vocal performance. I actually have another graduate degree in vocal performance, so I got that. And then I knew that in the US I needed to move to New York City in order to pursue that career because there are a lot of opportunities there. So, I moved to New York and I was doing a lot of auditions, but I wasn't getting paid to audition, and I was taking a lot of unpaid performance gigs, so I had to also get a daytime job. So, I kind of fell into a job working for Hunter College, was doing fundraising for them. And so, while working at Hunter, was still trying to pursue that opera singer career and was auditioning like crazy and getting roles, but just after a while it was really grinding me down. And then I ended up getting a full-time job at a classical music artist representation company.

And that really let me see the other side of music as well, the business side of classical music. And I just saw that that road was going to be really grueling, it's really tough for opera singers. I give the ones that stick with it so much credit because it's a tough life. Even when you make it, you're just grinding away always to try to make a living. So, I figured out that that's not what I wanted to do anymore as a career. I still want music in my life on the side, but not as a career. So, I then ended up back in the nonprofit industry, and that's where I got my first taste of marketing and communication. And I really, really love that role, but it was a small nonprofit and there wasn't a lot of room for growth, and I was kind of hitting

a wall on my job hunt. So that's what led me to pursuing an MBA degree.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

So, part of the music industry, trying to make it as an artist, it's a tough gig. I completely get that. Eventually start to see the business side of things through the various opportunities you had. But how was that shift in your head? Because it's often you don't see a lot of people who are artists wanting to get into the business side of things. They're treated as very separate things. There's almost an animosity between the two. Like, "Oh, the business people are the dirty people." In the end, they get a bad rep. So talk to us a little bit about how did that switch happen for you and why an MBA? There are other things that you could do, other degrees to pursue, even if it's just business. So how did that switch happen and then why an MBA?

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah, so I've always been interested in behind the scenes and how things work, and so maybe I think that was where my interest in the business side of music came from. And so that got me in the door to that one job. But then as far as an MBA goes, so like I said, after that musical artist representation company, I went on to this nonprofit and I was working in this marketing role, and I really felt like I wasn't getting the full scope of what marketing looked like. And I started talking to a friend and I had this idea, maybe I should get my MBA so I can learn more about marketing.

And she had been thinking about going back to school as well. And my friend actually went and got her MBA before I did. She went abroad to get her MBA and just loved her experience. And that was really what pushed me and to finally doing it, because I had thought about it for a really long time. And then also the pandemic hit. So, it felt like the right moment. I was ready for a change and I had been in New York for so long, I wanted to come back to the Buffalo area. It felt like all these events were culminating, telling me that an MBA would be the right decision for me.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. It's interesting that you had someone close to you who went through the experience. It's almost like they were the experimental one, and if they had had a pretty bad experience with it, maybe we wouldn't have Shannon in our program. But it's interesting how her endorsement almost of, not even UB's program, endorsement of just MBA as a general degree was enough to compel you to pursue it yourself. Now, a full-time MBA is a long commitment. It's two years for many people, and perhaps that's

the reason why so many students think long and hard about what is it exactly that they're looking for in their ideal MBA program. I'm sure you also had a long list of requirements of what you were looking for. Obviously marketing and focus and marketing and marketing curriculum clearly would've been one of them. What was your criteria and how did UB's MBA program fit into that requirement?

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah, well, I thought it was really important to pick a school, kind of having my career on the other side in mind. So picking a school where I wanted to end up geographically, that made sense to me. So, I was looking in the Western New York area, but then what really struck me, what I thought was really special about this program was all the people that I spoke to. So, Gwen Appelbaum from the Career Resource Center, I got on a call with her just as a prospective student, I don't think I had applied yet. And I was just struck by how kind she was, how she carved out time for me to speak to me just as a prospective student. And then all of the alumni I reached out to were so responsive. I had all these questions and all of them were like, "Let's get on a call, let's talk about this."

So, I thought, "Wow, this is really special if the alumni from this school, again, are just helping out a prospective student." And I feel like for an MBA program, the alumni network you're tapping into is really important. And so those were the two biggest factors for me. It was like the people, that was huge. Not only the people that work for the program, but the students graduating from the program were so kind and so warm. And then also just knowing that at the end of the day, I wanted to end up back in the Western New York area. I've been in New York so long, and it just made sense to go to school here. And then of course, UB has an amazing reputation. So, it just made sense.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And I think you hit it on the nail when you said the program at UB is definitely very people-centric. The experience for a lot of our students is also there's this tremendous focus on team building and teamwork and working together. So you're right. And I think that culture gets instilled in people for two years. And once you graduate out of the program, there is this sense of, "I want to help out anybody else who's thinking about this commitment of two years." And in the conversations I've had with other students too, this is a very constant theme that, "I reached out to student ambassadors, I reached out to staff, I reached out to alumni, and everybody was so responsive."

So, it's such a common theme in the conversations I have here now. A lot of people have a focus on soft skills. They want to become better leaders, they want to learn leadership skills, communication skills.

Obviously, those things are critical and one of the reasons why people select an MBA, especially those with a non-business background. But there's also this need to understand core business concepts and subjects. And I think that that rings true for you too. What have been some of your favorite classes in the program so far, and why?

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah, I loved Organizational Behavior with Professor Maynes.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right, again, a people-centric course.

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah. So that was a great course. But in terms of the harder skilled classes, loved Data Modeling. And again, when I was speaking to alumni, they said, "You got to take this class. It's one of the best classes in the program." And so, I signed up last semester and I was a little apprehensive because I don't come from a business background and was a little scared, but it ended up being just such a rewarding experience. It was challenging, it really pushed me out of my comfort zone, but I learned so much. And I feel like I used those skills this summer at my internship, and I know that I'm going to use them throughout my career. So that's really a class that's stood out to me.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah, Professor Tim Maynes' class, it's one of the first classes we take in the MBA program, and truly, he's an exceptional teacher. And that class is so interactive and you learn so much just by attending those one-hour sessions. Definitely, definitely a great learning experience. And yeah, data modeling, evergreen. This is a class that I think a lot of internships actually look for. People do ask questions about it during interviews, like, "Okay, what is your data modeling experience? What are some of the projects that you've done?" And the class is structured in such a way that you actually solve actual business problems using the skillsets that you're learning in class. So, it's really well-structured that way for sure. Now, those are great classes. Coursework is definitely one way to learn core business concepts, but the UB program also focuses quite heavily on experiential learning. What have been some of the opportunities you have taken advantage of, let's say, outside of classes, and why did you choose them?

Shannon Alexander:  
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Yeah, so I'm a member of Consulting Club. I joined last semester and I'm actually on the E-board now. I'm the director of marketing for Consulting Club. And I joined that club because I thought it would be a great way to work with other students in the program, because in our first year we do a lot of work with our core team, our Corporate Champions team. So, it was a good opportunity for me to work with some other students, get to know them better, but it was also a great opportunity to network with business leaders in the area. And just some really interesting projects. Like this past semester, we did a project with Rich's Products, helping them reexamine their performance evaluation system in their HR department. So, it's just really fascinating. And like you said, you're getting that experiential experience, because you have your coursework.

So now with Consulting Club, I got to really apply a lot of those skills that I had learned in the various classes. So that was really, really fulfilling. And I'm really excited about this coming semester because we're going to be admitting some more second years and first year. So, we'll get to know first year students, which again, often we don't have a lot of contact with students from another year. So, I'm really excited about that. And I'm also part of Leader Corp, and I joined that because, again, that was another program that alumni that I spoke to just really spoke highly of, said it was such a great experience and that local employers really look for leadership skills. And this is a great way to show that I've worked on those skills. So yeah, I'm really glad that I was able to carve out time for those two things.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Those are great examples, by the way. And it's wonderful how you've taken advantage of so many opportunities that are available. Another thing that's pretty unique to the program, I think, is the emphasis on collaborative competition. I know that sounds like a oxymoron in some sense, but even though you are competing with other students, you are encouraged to problem solve together, study together, even solve some of the assignments together. Tell us a little bit more about your cohort. What have been some of your favorite things about your peers in your cohort?

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah, just going back before I applied, I got this really good sense the program's full of really supportive, warm people. And that has been my experience with my cohort. We're all looking out for each other. I had a specific memory of the finance midterm. I was panicking, I will admit, it was not my strongest course. I really struggled in that class. But I told a member of our cohort, I confided in her, just saying, "I'm really nervous." And she said, "I feel pretty confident in this class, and if you want, I can help you."

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We can go through some problems together and study." And so it was like she wasn't really getting any discernible benefit out of helping me out-

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And I'm guessing this is not someone who was in your team?

Shannon Alexander:

So yeah, it wasn't someone on my Corporate Champions team. This was just another member of our class that helped me out. And it was so nice. And she sat with me, I think it was two full days almost, of just going through problems and her explaining them. And I walked into the midterm and that dread went away. I felt ready. I was so prepared. I walked in there. I definitely did better than I would have if I hadn't had her help. So there's just moments like that where, I'm sure you feel this way too, the people in our class have just been so lovely, just so willing to help.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah, absolutely. But that's also true for you. And you have been helping your fellow students too. I hear that you love practicing and teaching yoga and have actually held a few free relaxation and meditation sessions for fellow students. Now, I'm sure that was much appreciated by a lot of students in the cohort. Tell us what have been a few things that have helped you manage and what I'm sure was a busy and stressful few semesters in the program?

Shannon Alexander:

Well, I practice yoga too, so see if I'm a teacher, but I also, every morning before class, I do a short yoga and meditation session. I think that really helps set the tone for the day. This program, as you know, Vish, it can be stressful at times.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Oh, yeah.

Shannon Alexander:

It's good to have those things that you know are just going to help you better deal with that stress. So

yeah, my yoga and meditation practice is really great. I always tell people, "Get outside," because sometimes it feels like we're stuck in Alfiero all day, because we have back to back classes and we're meeting with our groups. But just even for a few minutes, I need for myself and I recommend it to others, I have to get outside, breathe some fresh air, even when it's cold out, feel the sun on your face. You have to do things like that. It really does help sometimes to just step away from your work just for a few minutes and take a walk outside.

And then I would just say another thing is to lean on people in the program. They're going through the same thing as you, probably. We're all in the first year of the program, we're all taking the same classes. And even in the second year, a lot of us will be taking the same electives. So yeah, really just lean on your fellow students because they know exactly what you're going through, and then you don't feel so alone. So that makes the stress feel more manageable.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And speaking of stressful things, one of the most important things that students are encouraged to focus on, along with classes, is looking for a summer internship. How is the experience of internship search for you and any suggestions for students on conducting a successful internship search?

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah. I would say really take advantage of the CRC. They were really great. Pam was such a huge help to me in my internship search. She was urging me to apply to certain internships, and I did a ton of mock interviews with her leading up to my interview for my internship this summer. So I would say just really, really take advantage. They're there to help us. And then also reach out to alumni. If there's a place that you're targeting for an internship, then have some networking calls, because again, our alumni really, they want to help.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And all that hard work and all that networking certainly paid off. You recently completed a summer internship with Fisher-Price, a very well-known brand and company in Western New York. Tell us a little bit about the organization and what was your role with them over the summer?

Shannon Alexander:



Yeah, so sure. As everybody knows, Fisher-Price is a toy company. It's owned by Mattel. And I was working on the global branding team for Baby Gear this summer. And so the interesting thing is actually Baby Gear is very different from the other departments at Fisher-Price because it's kind of like a furniture company within a toy company. So, yeah, it's really interesting. And I found out too, that each department at Fisher-Price is almost its own mini business under this bigger umbrella of Fisher-Price. But it was just a really great experience. They really brought me on and treated me like a full-fledged member of the team. And I got a lot of great learning opportunities, I got to do this capstone project where my group and I presented in front of the entire business of Fisher-Price. So they really value their interns and they really try to give you the fullest experience. So it was just wonderful.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow, that's wonderful to hear. And Fisher-Price definitely looks for interns from UB. I think they highly value the students in the MBA program in particular. So you've completed your first year in the program and have now completed a successful internship in marketing, slash, branding. What are some ways in which you feel that you've grown over the past 12 months?

Shannon Alexander:

Oh, wow. Well, I mean, I'm delving into subjects that, because I don't have a business background, that I had no prior experience with.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Finance being one of them?

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah, Finance being one of them. I've never taken a finance class before or an accounting course. And then even my prior experience in marketing for that small nonprofit, just the class we took with Chuck and even this internship over the summer, just showed me that there are many other facets to marketing. There's so many different roles and opportunities out there, which I didn't even know were available. So it's kind of the program and the internship have really broadened my horizons and just taken me places where I didn't know I could go or just shown me things that are available that I just didn't know about. So that's been really great. It's really stretched me.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah. So at the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned that there were certain criteria and ways in which the UB program fit what you were looking for out of your business school experience. How has the program been a good fit for you now, after having gone through a year in it? Have your feelings changed? If they haven't changed, have they improved? What are your thoughts on that?

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah, I don't think my feelings have changed. I still think it's a really good fit for me. And just as I thought when I applied, the people have been, the people in the program I feel like really make it. So the professors, and the CRC, and our fellow students have just been so great, so supportive. I think maybe it just solidified and reinforced what I had thought in the beginning. It's just been a good experience.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Well, that's great to hear. And I think that's something I hear a lot, thankfully, on this podcast. So now that you're starting your second year, you will be able to select courses that help you concentrate in a field of your choice. I think it's safe to say marketing is on the horizon as a concentration, but what else in addition to marketing?

Shannon Alexander:

Maybe consulting, I'm not sure. Consulting Club, I also decided to join because I thought, here's a way to explore that career field that I'm not super familiar with. And I've really enjoyed my experience in that club as well. And in looking at the course booklet, it seemed like a lot of the consulting classes, they peaked my interests. So perhaps also a consulting concentration. We'll see.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow. And what would be your advice to our listeners, especially career switchers, people with a non-business background who are considering an MBA, who are also considering options for which MBA a program to apply to? What would be your advice to those people?

Shannon Alexander:

I would say think about where you want to go, because at the end of the day, it's a degree, it's school,

it's going to end. So it's hard to know exactly what you want to do, but maybe have an idea of a direction you want to go in and let that inform you in which program you're going to choose. And I would say too, make sure that you find a school that does have a strong alumni network, because a lot of times that is how you find a job, is through other people. Because otherwise, sometimes your resume just falls down a black hole. So I would say those are my two biggest pieces of advice. And talk to people that went to school there when you're applying. Talk to them, that'll give you a really good idea of what it's like to go to school there.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. Those are great pieces of advice, and I think it'll definitely help a lot of our listeners. And finally, Shannon, I think I would be doing our listeners a disservice if I don't ask you to at least sing a verse or two of your favorite song for us here on the podcast today. So here I am asking, would you mind serenading us with just a little tiny, tiny bit?

Shannon Alexander:

Sure. So I have a lot of favorite songs, so I'll just choose one of them.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah.

Shannon Alexander:

I don't know, it's hard to choose, but I'm happy to sing a few lines from it. Okay, here we go. (Singing).

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow. Tears in my eyes. I am crying. Such a beautiful voice. Shannon, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today and sharing your experiences. If our listeners want to follow your journey, where can they find you?

Shannon Alexander:

Yep. So I'm on LinkedIn. I'm Shannon Alexander. I go to UB, obviously, but I believe my handle has my middle name in it too. So Shannon Ritchie Alexander, if there's a ton of Shannon Alexanders and you

can't find me.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

All right, great. Well, Shannon, this has been an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for taking the time, and I'm sure our listeners are going to benefit from this conversation a lot.

Shannon Alexander:

Yeah, thanks for having me, Vish.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Thank you.

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