

2023 MBA To Watch: Umar Mujeeb, IIM Ahmedabad

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Umar Mujeeb

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“An Idealist in values and Pragmatist in execution, I am an ex-military officer audaciously making a move to the corporate sphere.”

Hometown: Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

Fun fact about yourself: My biggest pet peeve is the awkward silence in an elevator run. Myself and others crammed in a tiny space, who believe that the elevator journey is too small for a meaningful discourse, opt to stand quietly as Kenny G paints a love song in the background.

Undergraduate School and Degree: An engineer by profession, I attended the Krishna Institute of Engineering and Technology in Ghaziabad, India where I earned a Bachelor of Technology degree in Electrical and Electronics engineering.

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Where was the last place you worked before enrolling in business school? I was a military officer in Indian Navy and retired at the rank of Lieutenant Commander. I was fortunate to have held a multitude of responsibilities. They included leading the electrical department of a frontline warship, chartering a strategic road map for a new missile unit in Karnataka, and procuring and supplying weapon spares to afloat ships and submarines of the Indian Navy's Western fleet.

Where will you be working after graduation? I kickstart my corporate career at a multinational company which specializes in information technology services and consulting with leading capabilities in digital, cloud and security. My new role will see me leading client businesses through transformation and strategy to ensure operational excellence. As part of the operations excellence team, my job will entail providing consulting support to solve strategic and operational business problems for global clients leveraging transformation methodologies and assets.

Community Work and Leadership Roles in Business School: When it comes to doing communal work or contributing to clubs and extracurricular activities, I have had a modest contribution. I have, however, been part of many vertical groups such as sales and marketing, operations, and public policy group, albeit more as a keen student and participator than in an active leadership position.

Away from the rigours of an IIMA classroom, I devoted much of my time to my family and the hometown where I grew up. In the latter half of 2022, my wife and I were blessed with a healthy baby boy, and the majority of my MBA journey was about me oscillating between my duties as a business student and taking care of her and our soon-to-be-born son. I would utilise my weekends and vacations, and go home and be the doting and supporting husband my wife deserved. Hence, although I had good intentions of making a constructive contribution to IIMA's clubs and socials, time and effort had to be redirected to where they were needed most, which was with my family back home. However, in the penultimate term, it was highly gratifying when IIM-A accorded me a scholarship based on my distinguished profile and past career achievements.

Which academic or extracurricular achievement are you most proud of during business school? Among my many accomplishments in school, submitting a business start-up case for the Strategy in Emerging Markets (SEM) class is one of my proudest moments. My business plan was to sell bottled mineral water to consumers, free of cost. I would generate revenue through a cost plus pricing model by leasing out space on the bottle label as a marketing space to clients who intend to advertise their products and services to target customers.

In India, an emerging market, the availability of clean and safe drinking water to the general population remains a challenge. Amidst concerns regarding the safety of water available through public facilities, private companies have earned a fortune by commoditizing clean water. Water, in my opinion, is an essential requirement for livelihood and deserves to be free. Hence, the above-mentioned business case would solve three problems. First, it would provide safe and clean drinking water to the general public at

zero cost, putting water back to where it ought to be – free and easily accessible. Secondly, it would provide a new medium of marketing for clients from a B2B perspective, thereby creating a unique advertising platform for brands. Third, it would provide an interface or a channel between clients and end consumers for interaction.

What achievement are you most proud of in your professional career? I was leading the Procurement division of the Western fleet region of the Indian Navy during the Pulwama attack scenario in early 2019, which had rattled the nation and coerced the military wings into a state of alert and urgency.

The Indian Naval Western fleet was required to deploy all warships, frigates and corvettes to the frontline and be ready to engage in battle as and when commanded. However, 17 ships were in a state of repair and overhaul and required the acquisition and positioning of over 20,000 weapon spares and auxiliaries at the earliest to ensure the operationalization of critical navigation and weapon equipment onboard. Along with my team, I analysed all projected requirements and formulated a ship-wise plan to procure the spares and operationalize the equipment and put the newly-adopted slogan of “Beg, Borrow, and Steal” into action. Some were bought from domestic and international resources; others were sourced on loan from liaison public sector units on goodwill; and the rest were even unearthed from a scrapyards. Working through early mornings ending in late nights, our primary goal was to ensure that our warships leave the harbour at the earliest. These were precarious times with high nerves running through the air and yet we were expected to make sound managerial decisions; any unwarranted delay or operational lapse could set us back days, further jeopardizing the mission. Through continuous efforts and unwavering dedication, we were able to deliver the results that were expected of us. My team and I held the other end of the line and carried out duties to the best of our ability to ensure the safety and security of our coastal waters. This event was a tremendous learning curve for me and something that I am to-date still very proud of and wear like a badge of honour.

Why did you choose this business school? This last decade for me has been replete with enriching experiences in the service of my country. While all my military roles had me take up a range of responsibilities which helped me to become a better manager and an officer, my attempt at grasping the corporate world required a more in-depth understanding of the nuances of business. I felt no other business school as mighty as IIM-A will be able to successfully provide me with the requisite opportunity and platform.

To a distant observer, IIMA may seem to be mere bricks and stones. However, it is everything but that. It is not a business school; it is a way of living. Surrounded by peers and a remarkable pedagogy, IIMA encourages deliberations and celebrates heterodoxy. An institution preceded by its legacy and the extolling by incumbent torchbearers, IIMA's case-based approach to teaching and the rigour and atmosphere it pervades provides an essential learning podium for any budding corporate aspirant. IIMA provides a wholesome familiarity with the nuances of a business firm which we can take from a classroom to a

boardroom. That runs from the foundation courses in finance, marketing and operations to the specialized courses offered in ESG and business ethics, to the experiences of your peers and cross-functional knowledge sharing,

You are a changed man from the time you enter IIMA to when you exit the gates of this institution ready to take on the world, armed with the arsenal IIMA has equipped you with.

Who was your favourite MBA professor? Two professors have left an indelible impression on me – Professor Vishwanath Pingali and Professor Balagopal Gopalakrishnan. Professor Pingali equipped me with a critical macro lens to look at economics from a holistic vantage point and taught us how the market behaves the way it does. An excellent orator and staunch supporter of Adam Smith, he can exhume the spirit of even the most disenchanting and fashion interest and curiosity in a subject which may seem overwhelming and mundane to some. The learnings and takeaways I received from him are life-long lessons I will carry with me in my forthcoming evolutions.

I was a novice to the finance world, having no idea how to interpret even the most basic profit and loss statement. Professor Bala's style of combining colloquial language and real-world situations to convey the basics of finance was a tremendous help to me. A persistent instructor who challenges and motivates you to jump into uncomfortable territories, Professor Bala transformed the naïve freshman in me into a more competent and self-confident management student with a burgeoning interest in finance.

What was your favourite course as an MBA? The course on Negotiation Strategy for Managers (NSM) was by far my favourite course in the curriculum. NSM assessed your persuasion and bargaining abilities as a manager by pitting you against your classmates in a simulated role-playing game. These roles mirrored a real-life scenario, which we may encounter in the corporate world. NSM gave a more pragmatic outflow of all our to-date learnings and ideas and assessed us on our ability to successfully drive a negotiation to fruition.

What was your favourite MBA event or tradition at your business school? The syndicate meets and discussions were probably a tradition that helped me understand life on the other side of the fence. Our late-night discussions were charged on caffeine and energy drinks as we fought the vanguards of slumber in order to finish the assignments and submissions due in the next few hours. My syndicate was my other family here on the campus. Coming from a close-knit military environment, I learned a lot about the affairs of civilian life through my syndicate batchmates. They not only helped me bridge the gaps and shortfalls in my business acumen through their own experience and craft but also beyond the confines of business, gave me valuable life lessons which I can hark back on in my succeeding appointments.

The syndicate camaraderie is an essential part of IIM-A. The voyage is arduous, and we are required to burn many midnight oils to succeed in our daily matters. Having a syndicate you can depend on, who act not only as your instructors but also as your supporters and well-wishers, helps to ease the drive ahead.

What is the biggest myth about your school? Before enrolling at IIM-A, an urban legend or a fallacy I had heard was that engineering and science students excelled in academics. In contrast, nothing could be further from the truth. I was taken aback to find my classroom full of students coming from diverse backgrounds, learnings, and professions, equipped with their own set of fables and flavours to contribute to the classroom. I remember the technical acumen displayed by peers from finance backgrounds; the loquaciousness displayed by students belonging to the discipline of journalism; and the command over business ethics and values exhibited by students coming from a non-profit, who provided guidance to solve a tussle between two contrary morals positions in a business situation. The chefs, the bureaucrats and yes, the engineers – each individual was my teacher in some sense or the other and nudged me to not just go ‘forward’ but ‘fare well’.

What did you love most about your business school’s town? Ahmedabad is a city rich in history and tradition but has a modern and industrial purview. A heritage city blessed with multifarious architectural magnificence and steeped in history, culture and tradition, Ahmedabad is one of the most modern cities in the country – a city which successfully bears the claim of having the best of both worlds.

What surprised you the most about business school? The most surprising thing about IIMA was the atmosphere that it created for each individual to instill in themselves a sense of professional skepticism and interrogation. IIMA, with its rich culture of promoting a penchant for questioning and deliberation, motivates every student to become an essential part of every activity and lecture. Each student is inspired to contribute in a class where questions are encouraged and celebrated, no matter how small and feeble they may seem. Any observation that may charter a sharp departure from the orthodox school of thought is rewarded. IIMA always believes that a defeated question that lingers in a classroom deserves to be pondered upon.

What is one thing you did during the application process that gave you an edge at the school you chose? My unconventional past may have been my Achilles’ heel in the application process, but I used my military experience and background to my advantage. Having served ten years in the military and bearing a sharp focus on my future goals and aspirations, I was able to chart a map that linked my expertise and knowledge from my previous career to my long-term goals. I have had the requisite experience on many platforms and designations in the armed forces, which gave me a comprehensive and holistic grasp of the many facets of an organisation. I could articulate how my seaman instincts can work to the benefit of my fellow peers and how I stand to gain from them as much as I could contribute to the growth and development of my fellow batchmates through cross-functional knowledge sharing.

I convinced them about the uniqueness of my profile for an IIMA classroom, and yet harped on the parallels that I may have that would assist me to readily comprehend the core ideas of a business school. I insinuated that the discipline and military bearing I

acquired during my prior decade in the Navy would be the most valuable asset I could provide to IIMA, and discipline beckons consistency, and discipline beckons perseverance.

Which MBA classmate do you most admire? One classmate of mine who inspired me to push myself harder and who, in my opinion, exemplified the model business school student is Rishi Hisariya. He was not only able to tackle the mammoth academic rigour, but was also able to pursue his entrepreneurial vision while still being a student at IIMA. While having extended conversations with him, he taught me the craft of devoting time sporadically between core subjects and tending to your passions and personal interests beyond the walls of a classroom. I learnt the importance of having a penchant for taking risks and challenging yourself on a daily basis. His performance during the course and his discharge of pursuing his start-up firm was admirable and I was inspired to emulate his work ethic in my endeavours.

What are the top two items on your professional bucket list? My bucket list includes two aspirations which are of paramount significance to me. Firstly, building on the experiences and skills gained in the armed forces and my training at IIMA, I aspire to pivot my career to the corporate sector and rise in the ranks to a senior management position or leadership position. Here, I would like to independently lead a large team that has a major onus towards the firm. I want to continue developing my skills such that I am in a position to impart direction and mentoring to the business. I call this a 'for-mentor' goal.

Secondly, beyond the goals of profit and loss, I would like to be a part of an organisation that directly helps the government in solving some of its pressing challenges and issues. It is imperative to me to ensure that my work and contributions fare beyond generating revenue. In one way or another, I would put my business knowledge to use in the service of my country leading to a more rewarding and meaningful role for the betterment of society. I call this a 'for-value' goal.

What made Umar such an invaluable addition to the Class of 2023?

“To me, Umar represents some of the key skills the Navy nourishes in people – discipline, respect and humility – and he brought them in abundance to the classroom (and the batch at large). During the highly demanding and rigorous coursework for this program, I have seen Umar cope with some personal issues without ever letting the smile on his face waver. This resilience will help him significantly in facing some of the challenges in the coming days, as he transitions from his Navy days to civilian life. My initial impression of Umar was that of a Navy officer, gingerly trying to make a mark in corporate life, but one year later, I see him as a confident young man who is ready for the leadership challenges the world has to throw at him. I have no doubt he has a great career in front of him.”

Viswanath Pingali
Faculty, Economics Area
Chairperson PGPX

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