

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book has been written to address the legitimate questions raised by experienced managers considering engagement in a DBA (*Doctorate of Business Administration*) journey. What does it mean, and what does it involve, for a manager to undertake doctoral studies? What is the purpose of a doctoral thesis in a managerial context? What distinguishes a DBA from a PhD? How should one choose a DBA programme, a thesis supervisor, or a research topic? How can a doctoral project be effectively structured and managed over time?

This second edition has been enriched by reflections on the use of artificial intelligence (AI). We view AI as a powerful tool, one that manager-researchers are encouraged to mobilise thoughtfully and responsibly, in combination with the human intelligence, critical judgement, and reflexivity that characterise doctoral work at the DBA level.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is intended for managers who, at a particular stage in their professional lives — whether mid-career or approaching retirement — wish to mobilise their accumulated skills and experience in order to produce and transmit knowledge. On this basis, two professional profiles are particularly likely to be interested in a DBA.

The first group comprises active managers seeking to give new impetus to their careers by stepping back from day-to-day action and engaging in structured doctoral reflection. The second includes managers with extensive professional experience who wish to gain critical distance from their practice and to formalise, capitalise on, and transmit the outcomes of their managerial experience to other managers or to students¹.

In both cases, this motivation is often accompanied by an underlying aspiration to share knowledge, frequently through part-time teaching in a business school or university.

By contrast, this book is not intended for young graduates who wish to pursue a traditional PhD immediately after completing a Master's degree, nor for those whose primary objective is to embark on a full-time academic career following the completion of their doctoral thesis.

GROWING INTEREST IN THE DBA

Why has interest in the DBA increased so markedly? Why has the number of DBA programmes continued to grow over recent years? Several interrelated factors help to explain the sustained and increasing appeal of these programmes.

The first factor relates to the historical development of MBA programmes, which have trained hundreds of thousands of managers worldwide. Over the past three decades, the market for both generalist and specialised MBAs has expanded rapidly and has now reached a stage of relative maturity. Among managers who already hold an MBA or an equivalent qualification, some develop a growing interest in reading, reflection, and conceptualisation, and seek to extend their intellectual engagement through doctoral-level work. Traditional PhD programmes, however, are generally designed for early-career researchers with little or no professional experience and are therefore largely unsuited to the realities of practising managers. This mismatch is evident both in programme organisation — particularly seminar schedules

1. A recent survey of our alumni indicates that 44% are involved in teaching activities in higher education.

that are incompatible with professional responsibilities — and in theoretical and methodological approaches that may remain disconnected from managerial cultures, concerns, and constraints. By contrast, the DBA responds directly to managers' increasing interest in gaining perspective, conceptualising practice, writing, publishing, and transferring knowledge.

The second factor concerns the progressive questioning of long-standing distinctions between research and managerial practice, academia and the business world, and management theory and action. This evolution reflects a growing academic interest in managerial practices and is visible in the development of research currents such as the *practice turn*, *strategy as practice*, and the *pragmatic turn*², all of which are grounded in concepts derived from practice. In this context, Alain-Charles Martinet has notably argued for a pragmatic epistemological approach to management research³. Who, then, is better placed than the manager — situated at the heart of organisational action — to contribute to this reflection, when appropriately supported by academic supervision? This evolution in management research has created fertile ground for the development of DBAs. In the same spirit, the growing emphasis on research that not only seeks to understand and explain organisational phenomena, but also to inform and transform action, has encouraged the development of action research approaches that are particularly well suited to DBA thesis projects⁴.

A third, more contextual factor relates to increasing pressure from accreditation bodies, which encourage business schools to recruit faculty members holding a PhD or a DBA. For experienced practitioners who choose to move into teaching roles in a business school or university after a substantial professional career, the DBA is often more appropriate than the PhD, both in terms of programme structure and in the central role granted to professional experience within the doctoral project.

2. *Pragmatic strategy*, I. Nonaka, Z. Zhu, Cambridge, p. 10.

3. See: *La création de connaissance par les managers*, Chapter 1, P. Beaulieu and M. Kalika (eds.).

4. M. Bonnet, "Action Research in the Context of a DBA," in P. Beaulieu and M. Kalika (eds.), *La création de connaissance par les managers*, Chapter 13 (EMS).

Taken together⁵, these factors help to explain the growing interest in DBAs. More fundamentally, they reflect a broader movement to bring management research closer to managerial practice, to demonstrate its relevance and usefulness, and to strengthen its impact on organisations and society⁶.

THE AUTHOR

A university professor⁷, the author has extensive experience in executive education and long-standing involvement in the development of managers at senior level. He has created and led numerous MBA programmes in different parts of the world.

In response to the growing demand from MBA-qualified executives wishing to undertake doctoral research, he founded the first Executive DBA programme within a French university in 2008, at Université Paris-Dauphine. Subsequently, in order to address international demand from managers seeking a DBA programme grounded in managerial experience, he founded the Business Science Institute in 2012⁸.

Today, the Business Science Institute is supported by an international faculty of more than 150 professors, brings together 230 manager-researchers (as of March 2026), and has seen 232 doctoral theses successfully defended before international examination panels. In parallel, the author has supervised around sixty traditional doctoral theses, several of which have received thesis awards.

He is the co-author of *Comment réussir sa thèse* (4th edition, Dunod, 2024) and of *La création de connaissance par les managers* (EMS, 2015). He also initiated the White Paper *DBA, Management Research for the Benefit of Organisations*, aimed at promoting wider recognition and understanding of the DBA.

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5. A final, more contextual factor concerns institutions which, in a context of declining financial resources, may view the DBA as a potential source of additional revenue.
 6. See: Kalika, M. *BSIS: A Decade of Impact*. Caen: Éditions EMS, Business Science Institute Collection, 2022. The book emphasises the need for management research to demonstrate tangible managerial impact.
 7. See: <http://michelkalika.com>
 8. See: <https://en.business-science-institute.com/>

The author remains available to respond to any questions concerning the DBA⁹.

THE TONE OF THIS BOOK

This book is deliberately written as a source of practical guidance, grounded in the shared experience of DBA participants and professors engaged in the creation of knowledge by managers. Its primary purpose is to support managers in making a major personal and professional decision: whether to embark on a DBA programme.

Applying for a doctoral programme involves a double investment, with the second dimension ultimately outweighing the first. The initial commitment is financial, encompassing tuition fees and, where relevant, travel-related costs. More importantly, however, undertaking a DBA requires a sustained and long-term investment of time, energy, and intellectual engagement.

THE DBA THESIS AND AI

The growing power of artificial intelligence tools, whose capabilities continue to evolve rapidly, makes it necessary to clarify their role within the DBA process. Just as no thesis supervisor today would advise a doctoral candidate to write a thesis with a fountain pen, it would be unrealistic — and counterproductive — to ignore the potential of the tools now available or to deprive DBA candidates of their use.

That said, one point must be made absolutely clear: AI will not write your thesis for you, and it is your own human intelligence that will enable you to become a Doctor of Business Administration. AI remains a tool, nothing more. Used appropriately, it can help you save time and, crucially, use that time to deepen and strengthen your research. It should never be forgotten that a DBA thesis is fundamentally a work of reflection, creation, and innovation. AI tools, such as ChatGPT, Mistral AI

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or DeepSeek, operate on existing texts and data, that is, on past knowledge. They do not think, innovate, or exercise judgement.

Nor should DBA candidates underestimate the cognitive capabilities of their thesis supervisors, who themselves use these tools and are fully able to assess how they have been mobilised.

That said, AI can be useful at every stage of the DBA thesis process, provided it is used critically and responsibly.

– **At the stage of defining the research question**, AI tools may be queried using prompts such as:

“What are current research questions in the field of international logistics for a manager preparing a DBA?” or “Which research topics could have significant managerial and societal impact for a DBA candidate working in the healthcare sector?”

These prompts can of course be refined by specifying a geographical area, professional role, or the managerial issues you are facing.

– **During the literature review phase**, you may submit a provisional title or research question and ask, for example:

“Which theoretical perspectives could be applied by a DBA candidate to the following topic: ...?” followed by “What are the key academic publications associated with this theoretical perspective?”

From there, it becomes easier to identify leading authors and foundational texts.

– **When choosing a methodology**, AI tools can be used to explore alternatives by asking, for instance:

“What methodological approaches could be considered by a DBA candidate working on the following thesis topic: ...?”

For each approach, further prompts may address implementation processes, interview guides, or questionnaire design.

– **At the data analysis stage**, collected datasets may be submitted to AI tools to generate preliminary analyses or syntheses. This does not, however, absolve the researcher from mastering

the methods employed, understanding their assumptions, or recognising their limitations.

– **Research findings** may in turn be used to generate visual representations, explore interpretative avenues, or formulate managerial and societal recommendations — always subject to critical validation by the researcher.

– **Finally**, the completed text may be submitted for the correction of typographical or linguistic errors, which inevitably persist in any substantial manuscript.

If you remain uncertain about the usefulness of AI for a DBA candidate, you may wish to examine the response generated by the following prompt in ScholarGPT:

“Can you provide a synthesis of how AI can support a manager preparing a DBA thesis?”

Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) Thesis and AI

1. Literature Review and Scientific Monitoring

AI can help automate and structure academic literature searches by facilitating:

- The identification of relevant scientific articles based on keywords
- The synthesis of large volumes of texts (abstracts, articles, reports)
- The creation of a semi-automated literature review
- Automatic alerts on new publications via AI tools connected to databases such as PubMed, arXiv, Scopus, etc.

Examples of tools: Semantic Scholar, Elicit, ScholarGPT.

2. Data Analysis (Qualitative and Quantitative)

For DBA managers conducting surveys, case studies or performance analyses:

- AI can process complex datasets using natural language processing (NLP), semantic analysis or machine learning
- AI tools can extract insights from surveys, customer feedback, and internal interviews
- For quantitative data, AI can help model scenarios, identify non-obvious correlations, or perform data mining

Examples of tools: GPT combined with Python, Orange Data Mining, Power BI with AI functionalities, RapidMiner.

👉 3. Support for Writing and Structuring the Thesis

- Assistance with drafting thesis sections (introduction, research question, methodology) through AI-based review and improvement suggestions
- Rephrasing, improving academic style, and correcting language errors
- Generating structured chapter outlines in line with academic standards

Be careful: AI must be used as a support tool, not as the author — this is a matter of academic ethics.

🧠 4. Idea Generation and Research Problem Formulation

- AI can support assisted brainstorming by suggesting alternative research angles or hypotheses
- It can help formulate an original and relevant research problem by cross-referencing sectoral trends and academic research

📅 5. Doctoral Project Management and Time Optimisation

- AI can help organise tasks, generate executive summaries, and automate periodic literature reviews
- It can support personal productivity through AI assistants such as Notion AI, ChatGPT Pro, or other cognitive agents

🎯 6. Strategic Decision Support Related to the DBA Topic

By providing predictive or prescriptive analyses, AI can offer insights that managers may integrate into their DBA work on topics such as digital transformation, strategy, or innovation.

Example: A manager preparing a DBA thesis on “The impact of AI on talent management in European organisations” could use AI to:

- Analyse internal HR data (turnover, engagement, satisfaction)
- Collect recent academic publications on the topic
- Simulate the impact of AI-assisted HR policies

You have used ScholarGPT — discover what comes next. The Scholar Deep Research Agent is revolutionising your doctoral research with: Explore Scholar Deep Research

In summary, and without claiming to be exhaustive, it is important to emphasise that:

- You remain in control — this is your thesis.
- You are the author and bear full responsibility for the written work.

- You are the one who interacts with AI tools, using them in an active and critical manner.
- You are responsible for citing all sources; our recommendation is to include, as an appendix, the most significant prompts and AI-generated responses used during the research process.
- You are the one who will defend your thesis orally.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The structure of this book is designed to address the key questions typically raised by managers at different stages of their DBA journey. It begins with the questions that arise before deciding to embark on a DBA programme, then turns to those relating to the choice of a doctoral thesis topic once enrolled, and finally addresses issues associated with managing the DBA over time.

Accordingly, the book follows the chronological sequence of questions that managers commonly ask themselves:

- I. Choosing a DBA
- II. Choosing a DBA thesis topic
- III. Managing the DBA