ScoreArchitect

FLAGSHIP GUIDE

Why the GMAT™ Matters Even More in the Age of AI

What employer surveys, admissions research and school policies reveal about reasoning skills, AI-assisted applications and the value of a proctored test.

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Executive summary

Generative AI has changed two things at once for MBA applicants. It has changed the skills employers say they need, and it has changed how application materials are produced. This guide looks at the evidence on both and sets out Score Architect's argument: in an admissions file where essays and CVs can now be drafted with AI help, a proctored reasoning test carries more information, not less.

69%
of employers call analytical thinking a core skill, the top-ranked skill in the WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025[1]

59%
of recruiters in GMAC's 2026 survey value data analysis and interpretation, up from 42% a year earlier[4]

56%
of applicants to one US master's program in 2025 submitted at least one essay flagged as primarily AI-written[9]

What the evidence shows

- **Reasoning skills sit at the top of employer demand.** Analytical thinking is the most cited core skill in the World Economic Forum's survey of more than 1,000 employers, and AI is described as driving the rising importance of analytical and systems thinking[1,2]. GMAC's 2026 recruiter survey ranks problem-solving second and data analysis fourth among skills valued today[3].
- **Employers want people who can check AI, not only use it.** GMAC reports that the ability to analyse AI output, adapt and communicate a new approach matters more than AI tool skills alone[3]. In a September 2026 pulse survey, US recruiters' top AI skills were synthesising information (68%), understanding AI limitations and risks (64%) and analysing data and interpreting outputs (64%)[6].
- **AI use in applications is now widespread.** A 2026 study of 7,462 applications to a US public policy master's program found AI-flagged essays rose from 1.4% of applicants in 2022 to 56.1% in 2025, despite an explicit ban[9]. Most business schools still have no formal AI admissions policy, and those that do mostly ask for disclosure[8].
- **Selective institutions have moved back towards tests.** MIT, Dartmouth, Yale, Brown, Harvard and Stanford reinstated undergraduate testing requirements between 2022 and 2026, citing predictive validity[26,27,28,29,30,31,32]. Harvard Business School, Stanford GSB and Wharton require a GMAT or GRE® score[11,21,22,24].
- **Test-optional remains common.** In April 2025, only 8 of the 27 programs ranked in the US News top 25 required a test[23]. Even so, 75% of test-optional schools in a 2025 Kaplan survey said a competitive score helps an application[11].

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The GMAT Focus Edition was redesigned around "higher-order critical reasoning skills and data literacy"[16], the same family of skills employers rank highest.
- When written materials can be AI-assisted, a proctored, identity-checked score is one of the few signals that is comparable across all applicants (Score Architect's view).
- A test is one input among many. Prepare for it as evidence of how you think, not as a box to tick.

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PART 1. THE SKILLS

1. The skills that matter as AI spreads

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025, published in January 2025, is based on a survey of 1,043 companies employing more than 14.1 million workers across 22 industry clusters and 55 economies, with data collected from May to September 2024[1]. Its findings on skills are the closest thing to a global employer consensus currently available.

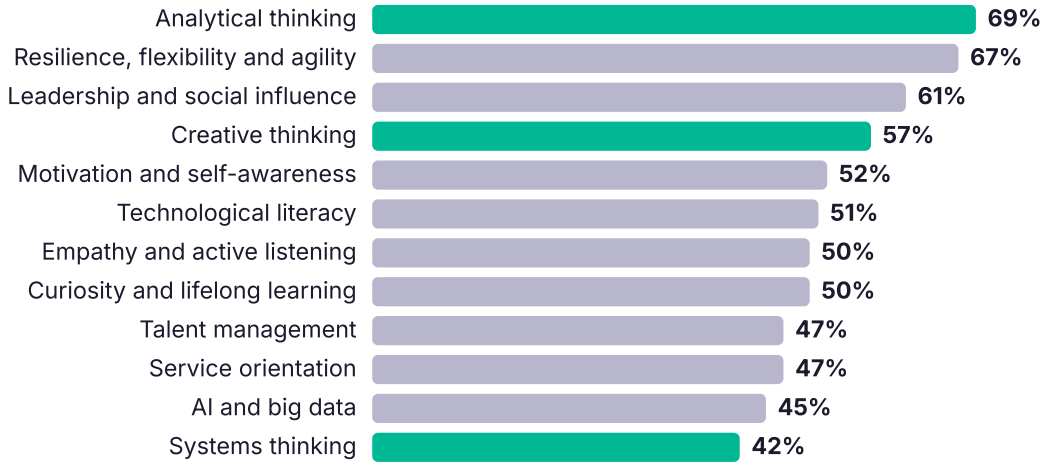
Analytical thinking is the top core skill, with seven out of 10 companies considering it essential, the same result as the two previous editions[1,2]. Creative thinking ranks fourth[2]. Technology is the main force reshaping work: 86% of employers expect AI and information processing technologies to transform their business by 2030[1].

The report does not present AI as a substitute for thinking skills. It states that AI and information processing technologies are driving "the rising importance of analytical thinking and systems thinking", and that these shifts highlight "the increasing complexity of decision-making and the need for critical problem solving in a data-driven world"[1]. It also suggests the primary impact of technologies such as GenAI on skills "may lie in their potential for 'augmenting' human skills through human-machine collaboration, rather than in outright replacement"[1].

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Core skills employers say their workforce needs in 2025

Share of employers surveyed who consider each skill a core skill (top 12 of 26). Reasoning-related skills highlighted.



Source: World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025, Figure 3.3 (Future of Jobs Survey 2024).[1]

Skills on the rise to 2030

Looking ahead to 2030, AI and big data is the fastest-growing skill, followed by networks and cybersecurity and technological literacy[2]. Thinking skills remain in the top 10 skills on the rise. Employers also expect that 39% of workers' existing skills will be transformed or become outdated over 2025-2030[1].

Skill	Net increase in expected use, 2025-2030	Rank (of 26)
AI and big data	87	1
Technological literacy	68	3
Creative thinking	66	4
Analytical thinking	55	9
Systems thinking	51	11
Reading, writing and mathematics	-4	25

Net increase = share of employers expecting a skill's use to increase minus share expecting a decrease. Source: WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025, Figure 3.4.[1]

SCORE ARCHITECT'S VIEW

The pattern is consistent: as AI takes on more routine production, employers place more weight on the ability to frame problems, weigh evidence and decide. Note the small expected decline for basic "reading, writing and mathematics" alongside rising demand for analytical thinking. The value is shifting from producing an answer to judging one.

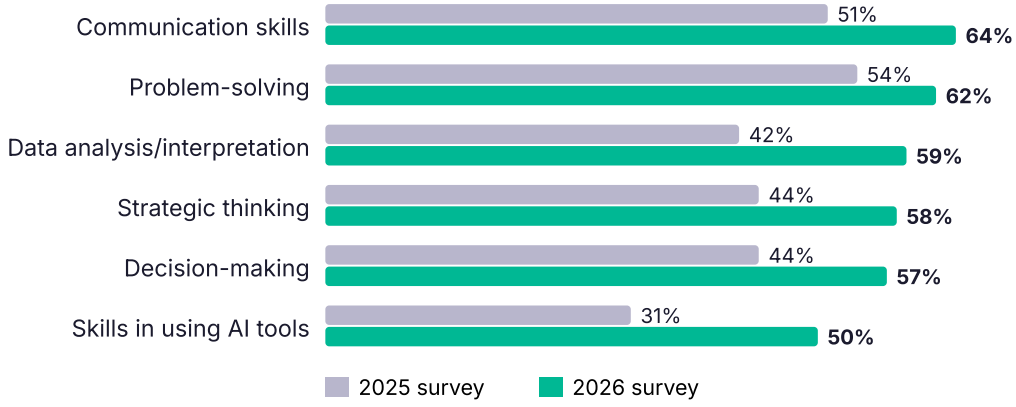
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2. What recruiters of MBA graduates say

GMAC's Corporate Recruiters Survey asks employers of business school graduates which skills they value. The 2026 edition was fielded from January to May 2026 with GMAC's partners EFMD and the Career Services and Employer Alliance, and drew 621 recruiters and hiring managers from 39 countries, 53% of them from Global Fortune 500 companies[3]. The 2025 edition had 1,108 respondents, fielded January to March 2025[5].

Skills recruiters consider most important for current business school graduates

Share of employers selecting each skill, 2025 and 2026 surveys (selected skills).



Source: GMAC, Corporate Recruiters Survey 2026, Deans Summary.[4]

In 2026, communication skills (64%) and problem-solving (62%) top the list, followed by adaptability (60%) and data analysis and interpretation (59%)[3]. GMAC notes that data analysis "surged the most in employer value over the past year", moving from 10th to fourth place, and links this to generative AI: organisations "may need their employees to have even sharper capabilities to review the output and understand technology-enhanced data analysis"[3].

Skills in using AI tools ranked only 14th among current skills in 2026 (16th in 2025), but first among skills expected to matter in five years (53%), ahead of strategic thinking (50%)[3,5]. GMAC's reading is that AI is "an increasingly valued but still supportive capability rather than the defining skill employers seek", and that "more important than skills using AI tools themselves are the ability to analyze the output, adapt based on the new information, and effectively communicate a new approach"[3].

Which AI skills recruiters actually want

A follow-up GMAC pulse survey in September 2026 asked 89 US corporate recruiters and 61 program directors and deans to rate 24 AI-related skills[6]. The results favour judgement over production.

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AI-related skill (US recruiters of MBA graduates)	Share rating it important
Summarizing or synthesizing large volumes of information	68%
Understanding AI limitations and risks	64%
Analyzing data and interpreting outputs	64%
Using AI ethically and responsibly	64%
Drafting written content (emails, memos, reports)	48%
Writing effective prompts	44%
Performing quality control checks on AI outputs	42%
Writing or debugging code	23%

Source: GMAC, Corporate Recruiters Pulse Survey 2026 (150 respondents, fielded 1-25 September 2026).[6]

The labour market signal is sharpened by entry-level change: one in three employers in the 2026 survey reported already replacing at least some entry-level roles with AI, most often in technology (40%) and manufacturing (36%)[3]. Across industries, more than half of employers agreed that a graduate business degree is more important than ever as businesses adopt new technologies, although US recruiters were less convinced (40% agreed, 40% neutral)[3].

Candidates broadly agree. In GMAC's 2026 Prospective Students Survey (4,253 respondents from 145 countries), half of candidates said using AI tools is part of their ideal curriculum, up from 17% in 2022, yet GMAC finds candidates and employers "aligned on the value of strategic thinking and problem-solving"[7].

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Analytical thinking is the top core skill globally (69% of employers)[1]; problem-solving and data analysis rank second and fourth with MBA recruiters[3].
- Recruiters rate the ability to interpret, synthesise and question AI output above the ability to produce content with it[3,6].
- These are reasoning skills that can be practised and measured, which is where an admissions test comes in.

PART 2. THE APPLICATIONS

3. AI in applications: the evidence

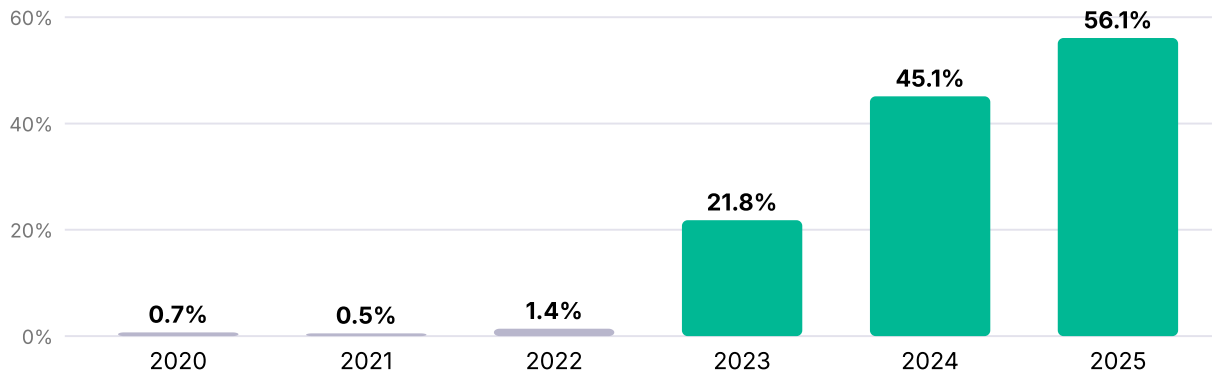
Reliable data on how MBA applicants use AI is still limited, and we found no published GMAC figure on the share of business school applicants using generative AI to write essays. The strongest evidence available comes from a graduate professional program in a neighbouring field.

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A 2026 study by researchers at Harvard University and New York University analysed 7,462 applications to a competitive two-year US public policy master's program across six cycles, 2020 to 2025, using the detection tool GPTZero and replicating results with Pangram[9]. In the 2025 cycle, 56.1% of applicants submitted at least one essay classified as primarily AI-generated, "despite an explicit prohibition against using AI"[9].

Share of applicants with at least one essay flagged as primarily AI-generated

US public policy master's program, by application cycle (GPTZero, "AI only, high confidence").



Source: Isley, Gaebler and Goel, "AI-written admissions essays are widespread but penalized", arXiv, September 2026. Single program; detection tools are imperfect.[9]

Three further findings matter for MBA applicants. AI availability "substantially improved the quality of applicants' essays", particularly for international applicants[9]. Use was higher among international applicants (69.3%) than domestic ones (38.6%), and was "mostly uncorrelated with performance on standardized tests"[9]. And applicants who submitted AI-written essays were admitted at lower rates than otherwise similar applicants, with an estimated penalty of 1.5 to 2.6 percentage points per AI-flagged essay depending on the model[9].

SCORE ARCHITECT'S VIEW

If essay quality rises across the board and AI use is uncorrelated with test performance, then polished writing tells a committee less about an individual's reasoning than it once did. A proctored test score is not affected by who, or what, helped with the essay.

Policy has not kept pace. In Kaplan's 2025 survey of admissions officers at 220 top US colleges, only 2% had a policy allowing applicants to use GenAI to write essays, 30% banned it and 68% had no policy at all; 50% of officers viewed GenAI use in essays unfavourably and only 14% favourably[10]. These are undergraduate figures, but they show the uncertainty applicants face everywhere.

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4. How business schools are responding

GMAC's 2026 Application Trends Survey (1,162 programs at 314 schools in 39 countries, fielded June to August 2026) found that formal policies on candidates' use of AI "remain the exception rather than the rule", though they have become more common since 2025[8]. A plurality of programs reported no formal policy; where policies exist, "fewer now prohibit AI outright" and the most common approach is conditional, typically requiring candidates to state when and how AI was used[8]. A separate tracker of 117 business schools found 45 with explicit AI policies as of September 2026[13].

School	Published or reported AI position for applications
Harvard Business School	AI use permitted but must not be claimed as independent work; applicants are asked whether they used AI and, if so, to explain how and where in up to 75 words[12]
Stanford GSB	Having another person or tool write an essay is improper and can lead to denial or revocation of admission[12]
Wharton	AI may guide, but must not substantially complete a task such as writing an essay; Wharton may use AI tools to identify AI-authored elements[12]
Columbia Business School	AI allowed for idea generation and editing; generating complete responses violates the Honor Code[12]
Northwestern Kellogg	AI may supplement, not replace, the applicant's effort; use must be cited at the end of the essay[12]
NYU Stern	Essays must be written entirely by the applicant[12]
Michigan Ross	AI-assisted essay content must carry an APA "personal communication" citation[12]
London Business School	AI use must be referenced in a footnote to the essay[12]
Chicago Booth	Not listed with a published policy in May 2026[12]; by August 2026 reported as having an explicit AI statement in the application, expecting all content to be authentically the applicant's[14]
MIT Sloan, INSEAD	No AI-specific admissions policy published as of May 2026[12]

Policies change each cycle. Summaries are from Poets&Quants' compilation of school application materials (May 2026) and Clear Admit (August 2026); always read the current application instructions.[12]

Schools are also redesigning the parts of the application AI can easily produce. Chicago Booth introduced a 300-character limit on application essays, Emory Goizueta increasingly asks for video rather than written essays, and NYU Stern describes its six-image "Pick 6" essay as "relatively AI-proof"[15]. In Clear Admit's August 2026 webinars with 23 schools, the common line was that AI may support writing but must not author it; schools also cited timed video essays and interviews as ways to hear applicants' own responses, and London Business School said AI is not allowed in its interview process[14].

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- AI-assisted writing is now normal, and essay quality has risen as a result[9].
- Most schools ask for honesty and disclosure rather than banning AI, and many have no formal policy yet[8,12].
- Schools are adding formats that are harder to outsource: short limits, video, interviews[14,15]. A proctored test is the oldest of these formats.

PART 3. THE TESTS

5. The return of the test in higher education

Many US universities dropped testing requirements during the pandemic. Since 2022, several of the most selective have reinstated them, each citing internal research on predictive validity. These are undergraduate decisions, not MBA policies, but the reasoning is directly relevant.

Institution	Announced	Stated rationale
MIT	March 2022	Considering tests, "especially in mathematics", significantly improves prediction of academic success; a requirement is "more equitable and transparent than a test-optional policy"[26]
Dartmouth	February 2024	Faculty study found grades plus testing are the most reliable indicators of success, and that scores help identify high achievers from lower-income backgrounds[27]
Yale	February 2024; May 2026	Scores were the single greatest predictor of performance in Yale courses; in May 2026 Yale returned to requiring the SAT or ACT specifically[28,32]
Brown	March 2024	Analysis found SAT and ACT scores among key indicators of whether students succeed[29]
Harvard	April 2024	Scores are predictive of college success and help identify talent across the socioeconomic range[30]
Stanford	June 2024	Faculty review confirmed tests are an important predictor of academic performance[31]

Independent research points the same way. A May 2025 Opportunity Insights study of Ivy-Plus colleges found test scores four times more predictive of first-year college grades than high school GPA, with no calibration bias against students from less advantaged backgrounds[33].

The trend is not universal. When Brown announced its change, Cornell and Vanderbilt said they would extend test-optional policies and Columbia had already made test-optional permanent[29]. On AI specifically, the Common App, used by more than 1,000 colleges, prohibits submitting "the substantive content or output of an artificial intelligence platform", but says it does not use AI detection software[35].

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6. The MBA testing landscape today

Business schools are more test-flexible than the selective undergraduate colleges above. Of the 27 programs ranked in the US News top 25 in April 2025, only eight required a standardized test; the rest granted waivers or were test optional[23]. Waivers were then available at schools including Chicago Booth, Dartmouth Tuck, NYU Stern, Virginia Darden, Michigan Ross, Cornell Johnson and Carnegie Mellon Tepper, while MIT Sloan and UCLA Anderson were among those reporting test-optional MBA programs[23].

At the top of the market the requirement holds. Stanford GSB states that a GMAT or GRE score "is required for admission"[22]. Wharton requires all applicants to submit GMAT or GRE results and notes that "all at-home tests are monitored by a human proctor online"[21]. Clear Admit's May 2025 review reported that HBS and Stanford GSB have never offered waivers, and listed Wharton, Columbia, Berkeley Haas, INSEAD, HEC Paris, IMD, Oxford Saïd, Esade and CEIBS as not offering them[24].

8 of 27
US News top-25 MBA programs required a test, April 2025[23]

75%
of test-optional business schools say a competitive score helps an application (Kaplan, 2025)[11]

7,700+
programs at 2,400+ institutions in 114 countries use the GMAT, according to GMAC[20]

Test-optional does not mean test-irrelevant. In Kaplan's 2025 survey of 86 US full-time business schools, 75% of test-optional schools said a competitive GMAT, GRE or Executive Assessment score helps an application, and Kaplan concluded that a strong score "can still serve as a powerful differentiator"[11]. GMAC's own guidance is that a score matters most when an applicant's undergraduate record is weak or contains limited quantitative coursework[25].

For balance: GMAC's 2026 Prospective Students Survey found that 17% of candidates see the standardized exam requirement as a barrier to applying, and 18% cite their test scores[7]. Tests impose real costs in time and money, and waivers widen access for some candidates.

PART 4. THE ARGUMENT

7. Why a proctored test matters more now

This section sets out Score Architect's argument. It is analysis built on the evidence above, not a finding of any survey.

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SCORE ARCHITECT'S VIEW

1. Comparability. An admissions committee reads applicants from dozens of education systems. Essays, CVs and recommendations are written in different styles, with different levels of outside help, and now with varying degrees of AI assistance that disclosure rules capture only in part. A standardized score is produced under the same conditions for everyone.

2. Verifiability. GMAC describes "advanced identification procedures and standardized test administration conditions", and a computer-adaptive format that "makes it extremely unlikely that any two candidates will see precisely the same questions"[20]. Wharton notes that at-home tests are monitored by a human proctor[21]. Few other parts of an application are produced under supervised, identity-checked conditions.

3. Relevance. The skills the GMAT Focus Edition targets (critical reasoning, data literacy, judging when information is sufficient) are the skills employers rank highest and the ones most needed to supervise AI output (sections 1 and 2).

4. Signal value. When essay quality rises for everyone[9], a strong essay differentiates less. When fewer applicants submit a score, a strong one differentiates more, which is consistent with what test-optional schools themselves report[11].

GMAC states that the Focus Edition provides "a significantly more valid prediction of a candidate's ability to succeed in the business school classroom than other tests available" and that the GMAT "predicts equally well for all nationalities"[20]. These are claims by the test's owner; we did not find independent public validation of the Focus Edition specifically, and readers should weigh them accordingly.

8. Mapping the GMAT to AI-era skills

GMAC introduced the Focus Edition in November 2023 with three 45-minute sections and said "higher-order critical reasoning skills and data literacy are the focus"[16,17]. GMAC said the redesign was meant to assess "the most relevant and in-demand skillsets like data analytics, problem solving and critical reasoning"[17]. The exam totals 2 hours 15 minutes and is scored from 205 to 805[19].

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Section	What GMAC says it measures	Matching employer demand	Why it matters with AI (our view)
Quantitative Reasoning 21 questions, 45 min, no calculator[18,19]	Algebraic and arithmetic knowledge and how you apply it to solve problems[18]	Problem-solving, 62% of recruiters[3]; analytical thinking, 69% of employers[1]	Number sense lets you spot an AI-generated figure that cannot be right
Verbal Reasoning 23 questions, 45 min[18,19]	Reading and comprehending written material, and reasoning and evaluating arguments[18]	Understanding AI limitations, 64%; quality control of AI outputs, 42%[6]	Critical Reasoning trains you to find the unstated assumption in a fluent, confident argument
Data Insights 20 questions, 45 min, on-screen calculator[18,19]	Analysing and interpreting data and applying it to business scenarios; digital and data literacy[18]	Data analysis, 59%[3]; synthesising information, 68%[6]	Integrating tables, charts and text is how most AI-assisted analysis reaches a manager

Two Data Insights question types map especially closely to working with AI. Data Sufficiency measures the ability to "recognize which data is relevant, and determine at what point there is enough data to solve the problem"[18]. Multi-Source Reasoning asks candidates to "recognize discrepancies among different sources of data", draw inferences and judge relevance[18].

> SCORE ARCHITECT'S VIEW
>
> Deciding whether you have enough information before acting, and noticing when two sources disagree, are exactly the checks a manager must run on an AI-generated analysis. Data Sufficiency rewards stopping at the right moment, not computing more. That habit is rare and valuable.

9. Limits and counterarguments

A credible case for testing has to acknowledge what tests do not do.

- **Tests measure a slice of ability.** The GMAT does not assess leadership, teamwork, emotional intelligence or communication, which recruiters also rank highly; communication tops GMAC's 2026 list[3]. Schools assess these through essays, interviews and recommendations.
- **Access and cost.** Nearly one in five candidates sees exam requirements or scores as a barrier[7], and test-optional policies were adopted partly to widen the funnel[11].
- **Holistic review.** Even institutions that reinstated tests describe scores as one factor in a whole-person review[27,32].
- **Evidence gaps.** The best data on AI in applications comes from one non-MBA program and relies on imperfect detection tools[9]. Most institutional validity findings cited here concern undergraduate tests, not the GMAT.

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- **Interested parties.** GMAC owns the GMAT, and test-prep companies, including Score Architect, benefit from testing. We have tried to separate sourced facts from our own argument.

None of these points undermines the core argument. They define its scope: a test score is a reliable, comparable measure of specific reasoning skills, and that specific signal has become harder to obtain from anything else in the file.

10. Practical actions for applicants

On the test

- **Take the test even where it is optional, if you can score at or above the class profile.** Most test-optional schools say a competitive score helps[11]. Compare your result with each school's published class profile using GMAC's score concordance information[25].
- **Prioritise the test if your academic record is weak or light on quantitative work.** This is where GMAC says a score adds most[25].
- **Plan realistic study time.** GMAC cites an average of around 120 hours of GMAT preparation[34]. Spread it over 8 to 12 weeks and include full timed simulations.
- **Train reasoning, not recall.** For every missed question, name the flaw: an unstated assumption, an irrelevant data point, a statement judged together when it should be judged alone. These are the habits employers say they need.
- **Use AI as a tutor, not a crutch.** Ask it to explain an official solution or generate drills on a weak topic, then verify the logic yourself. Treat its explanations the way Critical Reasoning teaches you to treat any argument.

On the rest of the application

- **Read each school's current AI policy before you write.** Rules range from full prohibition to required disclosure or citation, and they change each cycle[12,13].
- **Disclose where asked, and keep your drafts.** HBS asks a direct yes or no question on AI use; Kellogg, Ross and LBS ask for citation or footnotes[12].
- **Keep your own voice.** In the study discussed above, AI-written essays were penalised even though they read better[9]. Schools stress that ideas, experiences and voice must be yours[14].
- **Prepare for unscripted formats.** Video essays and interviews are expanding, and some schools say AI must not be used in them[14,15]. Practise speaking about your goals without notes.

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Timing	Action
9 to 12 months before deadline	Take a diagnostic, list target schools, check each school's test and AI policy
6 to 9 months before	Structured GMAT preparation with weekly timed sets across all three sections
4 to 6 months before	Sit the exam, leaving time for a retake; start essay outlines in your own words
1 to 4 months before	Draft essays, use AI only within each school's rules, rehearse video and interview answers

Timeline is Score Architect's suggested planning framework, not a GMAC or school requirement.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Employers want people who can judge AI output; the GMAT tests that kind of judgement.
- In an AI-assisted application, your score is one of the few pieces of evidence produced entirely by you, under supervision.
- Be transparent about AI in essays, and let the test show how you think.

Build the reasoning, then prove it. Score Architect offers Focus Edition practice and full simulations built around Quant, Verbal and Data Insights reasoning. Start free at mba.scorearchitect.com.

Sources

All sources accessed November 2026. Figures are reported as published by each source, with the survey year or cohort stated in the text. Analysis labelled "Score Architect's view" is our own interpretation.

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