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Business Schools Try Palm Scans To Finger Cheats

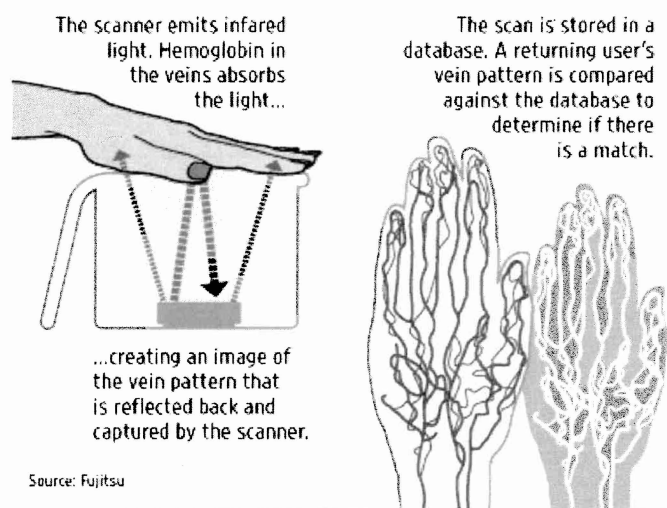
By JOHN HECHINGER

In a sign of increasing concern about cheating, the nation's top business schools will soon require a high-tech identity check for standardized admissions tests.

Aspiring corporate executives taking the Graduate Management Admission Test, or GMAT, will have to undergo a "palm vein" scan, which takes an infrared picture of the blood coursing through their hands. The image -- which resembles a highway interchange in a major city -- is unique to every individual. The scans are used widely in Japan among users of automated teller machines but only recently have appeared in the U.S.

Hands Down

How palm-scanning identification works:



Palm-vein scanning on GMAT test takers will begin next month in Korea and India, with U.S. centers starting as early as this fall and a world-wide rollout by May.

The technology targets "proxy" test taking, a fraud in which applicants hire high-scoring imposters to take the exam in their place. Five years ago, federal authorities broke up a ring of six fraudsters who took more than 590 exams, including GMATs, for customers who paid at least \$3,000.

David Wilson, president of the Graduate Management Admission Council, which represents top business schools and oversees the test, won't disclose the level of cheating today but says the case underscored the potential. Since 2006, test takers have been required to undergo

digital fingerprinting to validate their identity. They are also photographed, and videotaped taking the exam. The council says the new vein-scan technology is superior and will be more acceptable to consumers, who often associate fingerprinting with the police.

With the palm scan, students will let their hands hover for a few seconds over the device -- a roughly 1.4-inch cube -- which captures the vein patterns in their palms for an image that is archived along with test results.

Raj Nanavati, a partner at International Biometric Group, a consulting firm specializing in identity-verification technology, says vein scans are "very accurate" and "difficult to spoof," especially when compared with cheaper fingerprinting devices.



Scan of a palm's vein pattern

About 4,000 business programs at 1,800 universities, including most top-ranked institutions, require the GMAT for admission. The business-school council gives 230,000 GMAT tests annually and says it won't raise the exam's \$250 price. Japan's Fujitsu Ltd., which makes the scanners, says the device typically costs \$1,000 or less. Including training, installation and other costs, London's Pearson PLC, which administers the business-school test for the council, expects to spend millions on the rollout of the vein-scanning technology at more than 450 test centers.

'Protecting the Integrity'

Donald L. McCabe, a Rutgers University professor of management, says it is understandable that business schools are now "protecting the integrity of their test, whatever it takes."

Professor McCabe has surveyed more than 200,000 students over 19 years and concluded that those in business school cheat more than their peers in other disciplines. He says business-school students often cite instances of corporations' "bottom-line mentality" and ethical lapses to justify their own dishonesty.

GMAT officials acknowledged that the new system would do little to deter other forms of cheating. For example, the business-school council recently won a \$2.3 million judgment against the operator of a Web site called Scoretop.com, which had been selling questions from recent exams. The council took over the site and now warns visitors that cheaters will have their scores canceled, won't be allowed to take the test again, and could be subject to a civil lawsuit or criminal prosecution.

Other admissions tests employ a variety of security methods. Last year, the administrator of the Medical College Admission Test, or MCAT, began requiring digital fingerprinting. Would-be attorneys who take the Law School Admission Test, or LSAT, submit to old-fashioned ink fingerprinting. Scholars seeking a Ph.D. and sitting for the Graduate Record Examinations, or GRE, need only show a government-issued ID.

Resisting Fingerprinting

High-school students sweating the SAT and ACT, the two main college-entrance exams, don't have to submit to fingerprinting. They are required to show only standard ID. The test administrators say many parents would resist the fingerprinting of their kids, and high-tech solutions would be too costly given what families can afford. Students pay \$45, less than a fifth of the cost of the business-school exam, to take the SAT.

Ray Nicosia, head of security for the Educational Testing Service, which administers the SAT, says the Princeton, N.J., nonprofit relies on several other procedures to catch cheating. ETS collects handwriting samples and relies on high-school teachers to identify test takers. Mr. Nicosia says the company also uses computer analysis to flag possible fraud, a practice also used for the ACT. He says ETS has considered more high-tech methods, but "right now, we feel like we've got the right checks and controls in place." Cheating occurs in about one-tenth of 1% of SATs, he says.

Privacy Fears

Beth Givens, director of the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, a San Diego nonprofit, says any digital fingerprints or vein scans should be discarded after a reasonable period so that they can't be used for other purposes. Privacy advocates fear that fingerprints and other identifiers can be used improperly by authorities, catching innocents in government dragnets.

The Law School Admission Council says it discards its paper fingerprints after five years, in part because of privacy concerns. However, the business admission council says it expects to make the palm-vein scans part of students' permanent records. Joel Hagberg, a vice president at Fujitsu's computer-products division, says

students shouldn't be worried because the police can't use palm-vein scans in their investigations. "You can't leave a vein pattern at a crime scene," he says.

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