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ILLUMINATING THE LIFELONG LEARNING MOVEMENT

Online Higher Education Opportunities Wake the Corporate Giant

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University-based continuing education (CE) units face significant challenges in serving the education and training needs of corporate clients. The differences in the cultures of universities and corporations create many of these challenges. As corporations slowly accept education delivered in an online format, issues in university/corporate relations are both mediated and intensified. This article describes the problems endemic to these relationships and then discusses how online education can and will change the dynamics of those relationships.

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Online learning provides the opportunity for higher education institutions to overcome the challenges that are inherent to serving the corporate market.

Challenges Common to Online and Face-to-Face Delivery Methods

It is often difficult for universities to differentiate themselves from the large number of corporate education and training providers willing to bid on corporate education. The first challenge for universities is to break through the vendor/vendee model to become "partners" or "preferred providers" over a long term. Such a long term relationship allows universities to fully understand the educational needs of the corporations and continuously improve the educational programs offered.

In many cases, corporations don't know what they need or hope to accomplish through an education/ training program. A "gatekeeper" HR department may gather input from management and supervisors, but rarely completely assesses employee needs, capabilities and wants. These gatekeepers fail to identify the "pain points" around which corporate training must be developed and do not clearly define the gap between capabilities and learning goals. This means that they often underestimate the time and effort required to achieve the stated goals, seeking, for instance,

to compress into two weeks a learning pathway that requires a month. This results in a departure from the learner centeredness to which universities aspire and attempts to influence content, teachers and format.

Finally, the corporate market is the most volatile of the many markets served by university CE units. Education and training budgets are usually the first to be reduced in a downturn of business prospects. In

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addition, changes in management, regulatory environment, technology or ownership are all common "triggers" for sudden switches in the direction of corporate education.

The Effect of Online Learning

Although corporations use online learning for compliance and product information training, they have been somewhat slow to accept and adopt online learning for employee education. These contradictions may be linked—"cheap and easy" is usually the unspoken goal of mandatory training, a goal inconsistent with university values. This negative model, combined with positive experiences with face-to-face learning, has slowed the adoption of online learning in corporations. Indeed, bringing people together from different corporate locations or from different functional areas (marketing, production, IT, administration) inside and outside the classroom is a very important goal for corporate education.

To overcome these barriers to online corporate education a number of strategies can be employed.

1. Encourage full costing:

By far the greatest cost of corporate education is employee time away from the office. When travel time and costs are added to this calculation, the direct cost of the educational treatment usually becomes a relatively small proportion. Some of these cost elements can be avoided through online education, particularly if employees can do some of the online education during their personal time.

2. Describe the pedagogical advantages of online education:

Online education has many pedagogical advantages over classroom based education. Learning materials can be delivered in less expensive non-print form at exactly the right point in the individual learning process. Online learning allows for the systematic collection of data on individual and group learning performance. This data can provide an early intervention for students that need help and aids in program evaluation.

3. Use virtual teams and learning groups in online learning:

It is common for corporations to rely on technology for group projects, forming virtual teams to advance projects. Universities can design programs that emphasize web-based group work and interaction found in these increasingly common workplace situations.

4. Offer hybrid programs:

The advantages of both methods of delivery (classroom and online) can be captured through "hybrid" course design which delivers learning experiences best suited to online delivery (information conveying, knowledge creating), and shortens face-to-face delivery learning experiences to those best suited for the classroom (group interactions, project presentations, direct coaching from the instructor).

5. Describe the time-to-completion advantages of online education:

The learning process can be accelerated through a combination of effective instructional technology and the ability of online learning to take place during employee "downtime" or personal time.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges presented by corporate education, most successful CE organizations have robust corporate education programs, providing income to the university and creating positive relationships that can lead to corporate giving, student internships, research funding and political advocacy.

Creative CE organizations will use the inevitable shift by corporations to online education as an opportunity for greater service and "preferred provider" status.
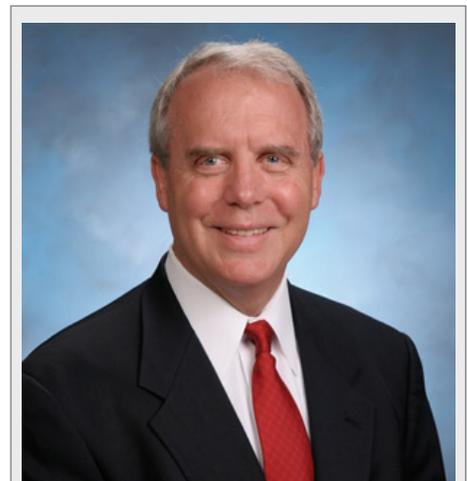
AUTHOR PROFILE

Current Position and Past Experience

Gary Matkin serves as dean of Continuing Education, Distance Learning and Summer Session at the University of California, Irvine. Additionally, Matkin directs the University's contribution to the Open Educational Resources movement.

Prior to becoming dean at UC Irvine, Matkin was associate dean of University Extension at UC Berkeley, where he was responsible for instructional technology initiatives, including online courses and various technology-assisted distance education programs.