



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The International Journal of Management Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme

Creating learning solutions for executive education programs

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Executive education

Learning solutions

Program design and delivery

Return-on-investment

ABSTRACT

Executive education is both a growing and increasingly competitive industry. The traditional business school, once a dominant player in this space, now faces competition from sophisticated and focused consultants and for-profit training specialists offering a variety of face-to-face and on-line instructional vehicles. An abiding question has become ever more prevalent for business schools – are executive education clients getting meaningful, long-term value for their significant investments? Demonstrating value and building capabilities is different for a generic, open enrolment course than for a custom program. This paper proposes a solutions-based approach to the development and implementation of customized executive programs, arguing that the tailored customer focus and the operational rigor of a solutions perspective leads to sustainable and measurable client value both at the individual and corporate level. A case study involving a global high technology company is used to demonstrate the steps required to apply a solutions roadmap. The results show that a solutions approach – carefully and collaboratively undertaken in selected settings – can provide considerable benefits to both client and provider. Further research is proposed to validate and develop the learning points.

1. Introduction

Traditional business schools must work hard to retain relevance in the current and future executive education climate. As Lorange (2005) points out, corporate audiences now have much more choice of program providers, including for-profit institutions and specialist consultants. He believes that the modern, visionary business school will evolve into a networked entity (inside and outside the academic fraternity), conducting cutting edge, thought leadership research undertaken by cross-functional and often cross-institutional teams. Such research will be “quickly added to the teaching agenda” to provide state-of-the art knowledge in the executive classroom. The remaining business schools must develop a range of new or modified capabilities to respond to these challenges.

An Association of Talent Development (ATA) 2013 *State of the Industry* report estimated that US organizations spent approximately \$164.2 billion on employee learning and development in 2012. Of this total direct learning expenditure, 61% (\$100.2 billion) was spent internally. The remainder was spent on external services, which accounted for 28% (\$46 billion), and tuition reimbursement, which accounted for 11% (\$18 billion).¹ Research by Deloitte (2015) shows that the principal area of spending on corporate training is in management and leadership (35%). Putting aside tuition reimbursement (mainly applied to MBA and similar professional degree programs), we pose the question of whether the remaining (and growing, according to Deloitte, at 10–15% per annum) institutional investment on business education is well spent. Although we were unable to isolate expenditure on business

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¹ Total direct external learning expenditure was globally estimated at around \$135 billion.

school services, a recent [UNICON report \(2016\)](#) indicates that demand has remained stable over the past decade while prices have steadily increased. The report argues strongly that schools need to make more space for risk taking, innovation and entrepreneurial ventures if they want to succeed in an increasingly competitive market.

Given the growing expenditure on executive education, what proportion of companies conscientiously measure the benefits of their investments? It was recently suggested that “less than 10% of organizations have any serious quantitative way of saying, ‘We spent this much on this executive, and here’s the ultimate return on investment we have.’” ([Swanson, 2011](#)). However, this situation is changing as companies become increasingly conscious of the need to ensure that executive investment dollars are efficiently and effectively benefitting both employees and their company. This is underlined by a recent report that shows the mean training budget for employee development at almost 6% of payroll in many leading organizations ([Bullen, 2014](#)). How then can business school program designers build carefully considered input-output models for executive education while avoiding the pernicious practices of programs resulting in one-way, faculty driven offerings or short-term perks for over-worked or under-motivated employees?

Given this industry setting, let’s start by categorizing executive education. We can think of programs in a number of ways. These may include the following linked classifications:

Customer need and perceived value – e.g., *functional knowledge vs. issue-based*. An example of the former may be a program on Finance for Non-Financial Managers while the latter might offer insights into Banking Challenges in the Digital Age. Resolving focused commercial or personal issues within a program is likely to provide participants with higher perceived value.

Target audience – e.g., *individuals vs. teams*. There is a tendency to create in-tact teams to explore very specific company issues from which learning and business impact can be created (e.g., cross-functional members of a venture group charged with devising a business unit innovation strategy).

Delivery mechanism. a) Teaching approach: a sample continuum may involve lecture → case study → role play/simulation → action-based project. These tools become increasingly client relevant as we move to the right (although there is a growing trend towards writing company-specific cases for use within customized programs). b) Remote vs. In-person: The choice of delivery mechanisms has been extended by the advent of distance learning, be it fully on-line or blended (a mixture of on-line and face-to-face). [Forbes \(Bersin, 2014\)](#) note that while people still need formal classroom education, this is now less than half the total “hours” consumed in training around the world. Among the most highly advanced companies, as much as 18% of all training is now delivered through mobile devices.

Delivery offering: open enrolment vs. customized. Open programs are driven largely by *horizontal* functional and/or cross-functional content (e.g., Strategic Market Planning across all industries) or, on occasions, *vertical* content (Strategic Market Planning within Life Sciences). Participants may attend from multiple companies. Customized programs are invariably *vertical* and offered to all or part of a single company (e.g., Strategic Market Planning issues within the medical device unit at GE) or a networked group of companies/institutions.

Evidence suggests that learning outcomes are heavily influenced by whether well-articulated objectives and metrics used to assess program performance are met. [Tushman, O’Reilly, Fenollosa, Kleinbaum, and McGrath \(2007\)](#) – adapting some earlier work by [Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick \(1994\)](#) and [Phillips \(2003\)](#) – indicate that program impact should be measured through *individual learning, individual behavioral change, organizational change and organizational results*. In order to assess such outcomes, individuals were questioned on a) their motivation for attending an executive education program, b) their preparation prior to attending, c) their application of learnings/concepts/methodologies since attending the course, d) the depth of their knowledge post-program, and e) the behavioral change/knowledge transfer that had occurred. Tushman et al., also found that organizational results (e.g., increased revenue; improved retention of high potential employees) were considerably stronger when custom programs were collaboratively designed by company executives and business school faculty, utilized action-based projects and recruited program participants as in-tact teams.

The primary authors believe that these findings, supported by their own experience as professors directing a range of open and custom programs, demonstrate the need for a distinct approach to (at least some) custom programs. This requires an understanding of how business schools can best assess and respond to client needs in a fast-moving environment that includes such change agents as globalization, digitalization and technology disruption. Specifically, this paper addresses these challenges from a conceptual perspective before developing an appropriate methodological tool for providing a real-world executive education application. We then explore the usage and validity of this approach through an illustrative case study.

2. Delivering executive education capabilities and value

The broad questions addressed in this paper are:

1. How should we assess customer requirements in the custom executive education market?
2. What are the enhanced capabilities required to successfully deliver custom executive programs from both an individual and institutional point of view?
3. How should we best evaluate complex executive education programs?

2.1. Towards a solutions-based executive education framework

We can represent the executive education market on two axes – the level of customer specificity (target audiences) and the nature

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