

Corporate Universities: Aligning Learning to the Business



By Michelle Eggleston

When learning and development (L&D) gets a seat at the table, it has the opportunity to be at the forefront of change. Developing a Corporate University that aligns learning to the business can create a strategic advantage, providing a sense of identity to L&D. By coming in at the front-end of strategic projects, L&D is able to see projects from start to finish, not just from the finish line. This prospective approach allows the organization to view learning as a business initiative, not just a by-product.

“A Corporate University is a strategic unit in the organization,” said Joy Joseph, head of learning and development at AXA Equitable. “It allows the organization to move and take their business to the next level. It’s not the name of the structure that’s important; it’s how it’s positioned and how it supports the business that is the main objective.”

The Corporate University Model

Training departments are often decentralized or limited in the scope of their responsibility in the traditional Training Department Model, where the department manages a catalog of programs that are widely applicable to the organization. The learning function may be engaged by the business for a strategic project, but has limited control over vendor selection. Under this model, L&D is called upon at the back-end of a strategic project.

Using the Corporate University Model, there is a noticeable difference in strategy regarding how the learning function is organized. This model is driven by an organizational commitment to learning and talent management, and is strategically engaged by the business to drive mission-critical programs. The learning function is seen as a business partner in the organization, while providing a structure for the management of content, experiences and resources related to learning. This approach allows L&D to come in at the front-end of strategic projects.

“Being at the front-end, you are solving the business problem,” said Joseph. “Sometimes there may be a training need that may not be immediately visible. When one is called as a partner to help solve a problem, looking at it prospectively is always better as opposed to being on the back-end.”

Is a Corporate University Right for Your Organization?

A Corporate University aligns both talent management strategy and learning strategy to the business. If a learning organization is seeking to create a sense of identity within the organization or seeking to accredit the learning function, a Corporate University may be a benefit.

The key elements for building and maintaining a Corporate University structure include executive sponsorship, governance and credibility. Having the support of senior leadership is especially important. Without it, the learning organization will not be able to drive the strategies of the organization, and the organization's talent management strategies will not be successful.



“The Corporate University represents a structure and a brand for the organization to strategically align learning to the business,” said Sean Stowers, director of learning services at Pearson Learning Solutions.

“Most executives are business people,” said Joseph. “They want to know how much they have to spend and what they will get in return. We need to be able to articulate how learning aligns to strategy and how it supports the business.”

Partnering with universities or organizations with specific experience in the business or industry in which a company operates can be extremely beneficial. To begin partnering, it's important to know what the organization is trying to accomplish and how it supports the business. Then search for universities that align with those values, methodology and have credibility in the marketplace. It's key to ensure that all training, including that provided by partners or vendors, is aligned to the mission of the organization and the brand of the university.

Pinpointing an exact budget for a Corporate University is difficult, as it involves many different aspects of the business. Price can fluctuate depending on the size of the organization, the mandate of the project and the culture of the organization. Whether the culture is conducive toward e-learning or in-person training contributes toward cost, as well as accounting for people resources.

In essence, the brand of the Corporate University is only as good as the results and experiences it delivers. Delivering on the brand does not always mean implementing the latest, trendy solutions: Sometimes you have to go back to the basics. It's important for the name of the university to be easily associated and related to the learning organization. In turn, every action of the university needs to support the mission of the organization.

Moving Forward

Teamwork is critical to ensure the relevancy of solutions, including leadership buy-in. Essentially, you know that you have executive sponsorship support when training is called to the table at the start of the project. When training has a voice at the table and is able to develop solutions for the business, a lot of credibility comes to the training department.

“Learning is an important function to the whole organization,” said Joseph. “It needs to be viewed as an objective unit in the organization that belongs to everybody and nobody, frankly.”

It's important also for L&D to be genuinely interested in the business it supports, not just the business of learning. Staying abreast of emerging trends that will impact the business is imperative to moving forward.

“I'm a big fan of thinking forward,” said Joseph. “Every organization that wants to succeed and wants their employees to be engaged should have a Corporate University.”

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Published originally on TrainingIndustry.com on November 28, 2012.*