Innovations in Executive Education

You are the chief learning officer at a large global corporation and your company’s leaders need to tackle a strategic challenge. Your job? To develop an impactful suite of leadership development offerings that align with business goals. While mapping out a strategic learning plan, you turn to the world’s leading academic institutions in search of a first-rate executive education provider. You wonder: “How might a business school help prepare my organization to win?”

Sound familiar? At ICEDR, HRD practitioners often ask us such questions as: “My company is looking to become more innovative, or expand in high-growth markets, or drive culture change. What are business schools doing in these areas?” As a result, in the summer of 2011 ICEDR will launch a research project on Innovations in Executive Education. This study will be a deep-dive into the state-of-the-art ways that academic institutions are addressing large global companies’ strategic challenges.

As a precursor to the upcoming research project, ICEDR and The Boston Consulting Group surveyed HR, leadership development and talent management professionals at over 50 companies. These professionals were asked about executive education trends and their hopes for how executive education offerings could be improved. This briefing reports their responses, and the answers will inform ICEDR’s upcoming research project.

We organized the survey responses into four sections:

1. **Open Enrollment Innovations**: Companies send individuals or teams to programs on a wide range of topics.

2. **Custom Innovations**: Academic institutions and corporations work one-on-one to create learning experiences that are tailored to company needs.

3. **Outside-In Learning Vehicles**: Participants learn from the world around them through opportunities such as expeditions, consortia and action learning.

4. **Blended Learning Excellence**: Professionals study through a mix of different learning environments that includes face-to-face interaction and online instruction.
Open Enrollment Innovations

Question: “What is one type of open enrollment program that you would like an executive education provider to offer?”

Answers:

✓ “International consortia in emerging markets”
✓ “More programs focused on specific skill areas”
✓ “How to transform into a digital company”
✓ “Strategic insights on new trends”
✓ “Talent management skills”

Question: “What are your key considerations when deciding whether to use open vs. custom programs?”

Answers: Generally speaking, for open programs, survey respondents stated that the unit of learning is the “individual” while for custom programs the unit of learning is the “company.” Respondents indicated that they look to open programs for personal development, to fill the skill and capability gaps of the individual. Rather, custom programs are geared at a larger participant group and target business challenges related to company strategy.

Custom Innovations

Question: “What are the most important factors when selecting a provider for custom executive education?”

Answers:

1. Practicality
2. Customization
3. Latest thinking

For the companies surveyed, these factors are more important than considerations such as brand or reputation, price and the ability to offer global delivery.

Question: “What makes excellent customization?”

Answers: When it comes to custom programs, one theme that resonated from nearly all respondents was that customizing executive education offerings to companies’ specific business challenges matters now, more than ever. One respondent noted, “I believe business schools could do a better job of responding to the brief from clients rather than hoping that their research content will meet audience needs.” According to survey respondents, here are the most important factors for excellent customization:

1. Understanding of our problem
2. Faculty engagement
3. Understanding of our culture
Outside-In Learning Vehicles

*Question: “What is one innovation in executive education that you are currently aware of?”*

Answers: Survey respondents are enthusiastic about “outside-in” learning vehicles, such as learning expeditions, consortia and action learning that help participants learn from the world around them and apply new ideas to business challenges.

*Learning Expeditions*
Respondents look to learning expedition visits with other companies for a variety of reasons, including best practice innovation sharing and cross-cultural, global learning experiences. In addition, these expeditions inspire executives to take new approaches to leadership and social entrepreneurship. Many say these memorable experiences make the learning “stick.”

*Consortia*
Several noted a high interest in consortia and wanted more consortium style programs with other companies. In addition, as business schools across the globe continue to form strong partnerships with each other, respondents are looking for even greater collaboration between business schools. One respondent suggested that business schools have the “capability to deliver ‘glocal’ programs in Europe, the Americas and Asia-Pacific without flying faculty, but rather through partnerships or networks around the world.” In the future, who will be teaching executive education programs in China? An increasing trend towards Chinese nationals?

*Action Learning*
Overall, survey respondents expressed a desire for teaching methods that are highly pragmatic and business focused. They suggested that schools “add experienced, respected global executives to the faculty mix” and stated that “the best innovation is simplicity: real listening, working on real business issues.” In particular, one business focused and practical method that respondents wanted more of is action learning. However, some expressed concern that executive education providers can be too rigid in their approach to action learning; that projects can be misaligned with the organization’s culture and that projects tend to lose momentum once employees return to work.

Blended Learning Excellence

*Question: “Why do companies use blended learning?”*

Answers: One survey respondent said, “if you are not doing a blended approach, I probably would not use you.” Why is this? For companies, one common answer to “why blended learning?” centers around a desire to foster connections among participants pre- and post-program as well as between modules. The ability to continue dialogue and build networks between delegates and faculty beyond the classroom is one clear way that an innovative approach to blended learning could add tremendous value.
Question: “How could executive education providers use technology more innovatively?”

Answers: Many agree that the e-modules of blended learning need improvement. Common complaints are “it’s boring” or “there are too many talking heads.” Here are suggestions survey respondents had for using technology more innovatively:

- “Offer live, streaming, interactive video solutions.”
- “Perhaps consider pre-work introductions via conference calls, preparing the individuals for what’s to come.”
- “Put content into modules and figure out what can be delivered for information and background and what needs interaction, dialogue or debate.”
- “The new work being done around mobile has been exciting. Anything that drives the development of mobility in executive education is of interest.”

As one respondent noted, “executives are now demanding tools that are as transient as they are.” What are some engaging approaches to blended learning that leading business schools and corporations are taking? Stay tuned as we gather examples over the coming year.

The Path Forward

This briefing is simply a beginning. Upcoming ICEDR initiatives dedicated to exploring and gathering examples of innovative approaches to executive education include:

Talent-Connect
In July 2011, ICEDR will launch a new online initiative, Talent-Connect, that will showcase the latest innovations, executive education programs and applied research happening at ICEDR partner academic institutions. At ICEDR, we have already received many Talent-Connect submissions and are looking forward to sharing them with our partners this summer.

ICEDR Research Project: Innovations in Executive Education
Starting in summer 2011, ICEDR will launch a research study on Innovations in Executive Education. We will share the findings with ICEDR partners via regular updates on Talent-Connect, as well as through live events, webinars and articles.

ICEDR’s 20th Anniversary Forum – How Organizations Win: The Power of Innovation, Integration and Inspiration, hosted by Accenture and MIT Sloan School of Management, June 6-8, 2011 in Boston, USA
At the ICEDR Forum in June, we will hold discussion groups on the changing nature of business schools in a changing world, and a very practical session on how Talent-Connect and the ICEDR Innovations in Executive Education research study can be optimized to benefit both our partner companies and business schools. Click here to view the schedule, presenter biographies and to register for the Forum.

We at ICEDR look forward to working with our partners to co-create these exciting initiatives on innovations in executive education.
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About the Survey

The survey results are based on data from sixty-nine human resources, talent management and leadership development professionals who work in large global corporations.

Contact Us

For more information about this study and to suggest topics for exploration, please contact Lauren DeSimone, Director of Talent Management and Leadership Development Initiatives at ICEDR at ldesimone@icedr.org