

IPMA Education and Training Series¹

3 Reasons Online Learning Institutions Fail

Key challenges online educators face in their quest for mainstream industry and marketplace acceptance

By Dr. Steve Perry

It's common knowledge that professional success can be greatly enabled and enhanced with a college education at any stage of life and no matter where a person is in their career path. But, for those who are already in the workforce or dealing with the demands of an entrepreneurial venture, pursuing a college degree is not an easy journey amid work, family, social and community commitments. For this category of lifelong learners, the need for more accessible and economically feasible choices is greater now than ever before.

For decades, higher education has followed a tried and true, largely unchanged format since the Industrial Revolution. While modern-day technology has transformed other critical aspects of society, from the way products are manufactured to how goods and services are delivered to the way people manage their day-to-day lives, the approach to higher education had resisted opportunities for game-changing advancements.

Fortunately, in the last several years, new entrants and approaches within the education arena have spurred the industry's rapid adoption of new technologies, and substantially enhanced the options available to continuing education student. One tech-driven facet has ushered in an entirely new era: online degree programs. While learning outside of a physical classroom setting is something that was almost unheard of just a decade ago, in 2013 nearly half (45%) of the 21 million students in the United States took *at least* one online course.

Fast forward to 2015—a time when working adult students, in particular, are turning to the Internet in pursuit of more cost-effective classes, certification programs and entire degrees in droves. However, while there are numerous proven benefits to an online education, such as flexible learning schedules, budget-friendliness and access to industry-leading curriculums, the industry is not without its challenges. Indeed, online educators face 3 key challenges in their journey toward mainstream industry and marketplace acceptance.

¹ This series of articles is by members of the IPMA Education and Training (E&T) Board or other IPMA leaders on the subject of project management education, training, careers and related topics. More information about the IPMA E&T can be found at <http://ipma.ch/education>.

Challenge 1: Establishing a Relevant Curriculum

Without a doubt, the learning dynamic we've grown accustomed to with traditional, face-to-face courses varies greatly from a technology-based online learning environment. Thus, in order to succeed, the development of an online curriculum must address these differences and prepare students for the unique challenges they will face in an Internet-based environment.

A study conducted by Columbia University in 2013 confirms that a well-planned curriculum is paramount to ensuring the successful learning outcome of online students. The study showed that factors such as clearly communicated goals and learning objectives, successful use of technology, and opportunity for personal interaction with instructors and other students were the main distinguishing factors in predicting the success of online students.

In the past, some institutions have rushed to develop distance-learning education programs, and it has resulted in substandard programs that failed to keep up with current business trends and standards. Many times, academics who create these courses have not worked in that industry for many years and are not up to date with the expectations that students will face while entering the competitive job market.

Solution

Online curriculums should be kept constantly up-to-date with the current trends happening in each respective sector, and preferably be designed around the people who have found great success in the business world. A primary example is "*The Daymond John Certificate of Entrepreneurship*" targeted at aspiring entrepreneurs, junior and mid-level managers. The program was created by FUBU founder and ABC-TV Shark Tank star, Daymond John. This program is ideal for students seeking practical business skills such as identifying market trends, bringing a new product or service to the market, and learning strategies to start and grow a business. The program is designed for real world applications, and is backed by one of the most iconic and successful entrepreneurs in the country - an education that will far surpass traditional classrooms and will be available to anyone regardless of their location.

Another example of an industry-leading online curriculum designed by an industry insider is the MBA program at Strayer University, created by Jack Welch, chairman and CEO of General Electric. The program is redefining the traditional Master of Business Administration degree by making each course available entirely online, and taking advantage of technology-based tools, such as video conferencing, to better connect with students. Welch's program also allows professionals to pursue an education and advance their career without quitting their current job.

Challenge 2: Ensuring Students Develop Crucial Skills

Whatever a student's area of study, there are certain concrete skills that every employer prioritizes and values in today's workplace. Surprisingly, it's been reported

that 4 in 10 U.S. college graduates do not possess the complex reasoning skills to manage white-collar work, according to a test of nearly 32,000 students. This lack of preparation reinforces the need for continuing and professional education programs to equip adult students who are returning to the classroom to succeed and excel in their professional lives. In the past, some students have dealt with a bias against online learning from prospective employers. For instance, in 2009, a literature review by Cleveland State University found that human resource managers, executives and other gatekeepers had negative perceptions of online degrees. While some believe that these skills are acquired more efficiently by traditional campus learning environments, recent advancements in technology have substantially leveled the playing field for online universities.

According to a survey conducted by NACE, an association of professional engineers from around the world, the top three skills most desired by employers were as follows: an ability to make decisions and solve problems, strong verbal communication with people inside and outside the organization, and lastly, the ability to obtain and process relevant information. General skills are essential to any job, but it also dramatically helps to direct students toward degrees, or certificates in fields that are currently hiring. According to the same study by NACE, the current top three desired degrees are business, engineering, and accounting, but this list is constantly changing and adapting.

Solution

One of the best ways to advance in your career and boost your salary is to become more knowledgeable about your target industry, and develop the intangible skills that thought-leaders within that vertical obtain. Online schools seeking to equip their graduates with the most relevant and in-demand skillsets for today's job market must have an agile framework, and provide their students with the courses and learning opportunities to gain those skills. One way to do this is through certificate programs; which are shorter, and more specifically targeted than their degree counterparts.

Certificate programs are shorter, often more relevant, and cheaper than receiving a full degree. Males with professional certificates make 39% more than the median male worker with an associate degree, and 24% more than a male with a bachelor's degree. For women, the numbers are 34 and 23% respectively.

To help prepare students more efficiently, institutions like T.D. Jakes School of Leadership provide a wide breadth of both degrees and professional certificates in a variety of disciplines. Their Women's Leadership Institute, for example, is a transformational, intensive leadership program that helps women refine effective leadership behaviors and competencies that will help them excel in the workplace.

Professional certificates can be an excellent way to gain targeted skills that will directly benefit students in their job hunt, and as their careers continue growing for years to come.

Challenge 3: Keeping Students Motivated

Finding the motivation to stay dedicated to academic pursuits can be tough when there are so many distractions and commitments vying for an adult student's time. When students are learning online, these distractions can prove even more troublesome because of the relaxed schedule and informal learning environment. There is nothing stopping students from being pulled away by demands from the workplace or relating to family obligations.

Solution

Online courses often have syllabuses just like their traditional counterparts, which outline the class schedule and allow students to plan in advance for upcoming lectures, assignments, and tests. By setting up a structured environment with clear deadlines and milestones, online schools can drastically reduce a student's likelihood to procrastinate and increase their ability to work and learn efficiently.

Today, fully 75% of small to midsize businesses embrace online credentials. For those seeking to take their career to the next level, earning a certificate or degree from an online university can be an efficient, cost-effective and highly-valued way to gain a competitive edge in the marketplace, advance in their careers and better ensure entrepreneurial success.. Online learning is the future of education and has been linked to a higher quality of life. As the old adage goes, "the more you know, the more you grow."

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