



Is Your Corporate University at Risk?

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"Hold Your Corporate Meeting, Wedding or Bar Mitzvah Here." -Ad in a local paper in a town where a Fortune 100 Company's training center is located.

Corporate universities have been all the rage. Now, most are reassessing their role and many are in trouble. Whether you have a lavish building complete with hotel services, a more subdued facility or even a "virtual" CU, you know things aren't the way they used to be.

Cutbacks in employee tuition and travel have moved lots of training from headquarters to the local office. E-learning has changed the way people think about how they access training. Traditional courses are giving way to more personalized "just-in-time" and "just enough" learning – even to disposable learning with such a short shelf life that it changes the entire CU investment equation.

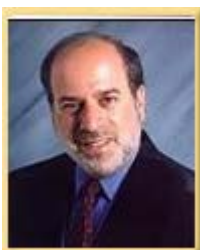
Is your CU at risk? There's more to this issue than just economics or technology. To understand if your CU will make it, answer these seven questions:

1. **Do you serve customers, employees, or both; and how are you marketing to each?** When done well, corporate universities can support external sales by elevating the importance of learning as a customer benefit. However, employees and customers are different and your marketing strategies should reflect this. If you're doing too much "selling" to internal staff, and you become associated with pushing seats (focusing on attendance/usage) rather than communicating value (focusing on performance), your viability may be weakened, especially when budgets are cut.
2. **Speaking of value, are you more focused on providing something for everyone, or are you focused on addressing very specific business issues?** Most CUs that have tried to be all things to all people have found themselves being of little value to their real customers – the executives who approve the budget and pay the bills. Having 200 courses in a catalog may seem like progress, but having just a few really great programs that help drive or transform the business may be significantly more valuable.
3. **Do you have a chief learning officer?** Answering yes to this question is not enough. Is this person merely the training director with a new title? If so, you are in trouble, because if you just changed the title without changing the role, it's likely not much else has changed either. To truly lead organizational learning is to go way beyond just running the training department.
4. **How strong is executive sponsorship?** Without executive sponsorship, there's not enough clout to drive important learning initiatives where it matters most – at the top. A lack of real support at the highest levels of the business carries the risk of CU insignificance. And because senior leaders, and their priorities change, getting sponsorship is only half the battle – you have to keep it over the long haul.

5. **If you have a centralized facility, where is it?** Facilities that are far away from the executive suite, or even from the majority of employees, may have difficulty generating participation. While it's a good thing to "get away" from the business from time to time, a "spirit of retreat" cannot compensate if the CU is perceived as disconnected – physically or functionally – from the business.
6. **Do you have the right metrics in place?** If you still use internal tuition revenue, student days, enrollment levels or number of courses in the catalog, watch out. Look to your executive sponsors; do they really care about these measures? Positive results around measures that matter to them, like business performance, will help sustain learning in your business.
7. **What's your CU's mission?** This is directly related to your value proposition, and the most important question of all. If you just deliver high quality training that meets employee needs, an important goal, you're doing ok – for a training department. But CUs must have a higher calling. Improving individual and business performance, responsiveness and innovativeness is much better. The best CUs are, in fact, focused on business transformation, not just training.

If you're troubled by these questions, or not happy with your answers, don't just wait for things to get better (they probably will get worse). It's time to rethink your CU and move beyond traditional practices. One way is to see learning in a different light, not so much as a training event, or a place where people go to learn, but as a unique business process that lays on top of other processes. If this is where you want to go, you need to embrace new ideas about learning that transcends training and focus more on the workplace than on the classroom. There will always be an important role for good classroom training, but the corporate university of the future cannot survive if that's all it does.

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