

The role of a U.S. Navy admiral is equivalent to a CEO. Senior executive education at the Navy's FLAG University mirrors corporate leadership development, deploying technology for maximum impact.

Executive education stands alone as a critical and widely varied training challenge. As leaders, executives demand a high level of collaboration, coaching, and resources to be effective. Yet, their basic skills are also critical to success.

The U.S. Navy is one of the world's largest global organizations with responsibility for nearly 1 million people and many billions of dollars of resources. The top 600 leaders at the Navy are admirals (and the civilian equivalent). How does the Navy train and support these senior individuals so that they can effectively learn to lead? What role does technology play? What can we all learn from such a global and complex organization?

Through our ongoing research efforts, we recently talked with Jeff Munks, the deputy executive

Admiral Leadership

learning officer responsible for FLAG (the letters aren't an acronym for other words) University. Munks shared with us how the U.S. Navy deploys executive education and how it uses technology to implement FLAG University, a multi-year program to support executive development of top senior leaders.

FLAG University is a specialized program designed to offer top Navy officers throughout the world the opportunity to acquire skills, competencies, and personal feedback designed to help them constantly improve as leaders of an incredibly complex organization. With roughly 600 senior leaders for an institution with just under 1 million people and a budget of well over US\$100 billion annually, the stakes are high. These positions are very much CEO level in responsibility. A single admiral has a sphere of responsibility that may encompass tens of thousands of people and hundreds of millions to billions of dollars—equivalent to a

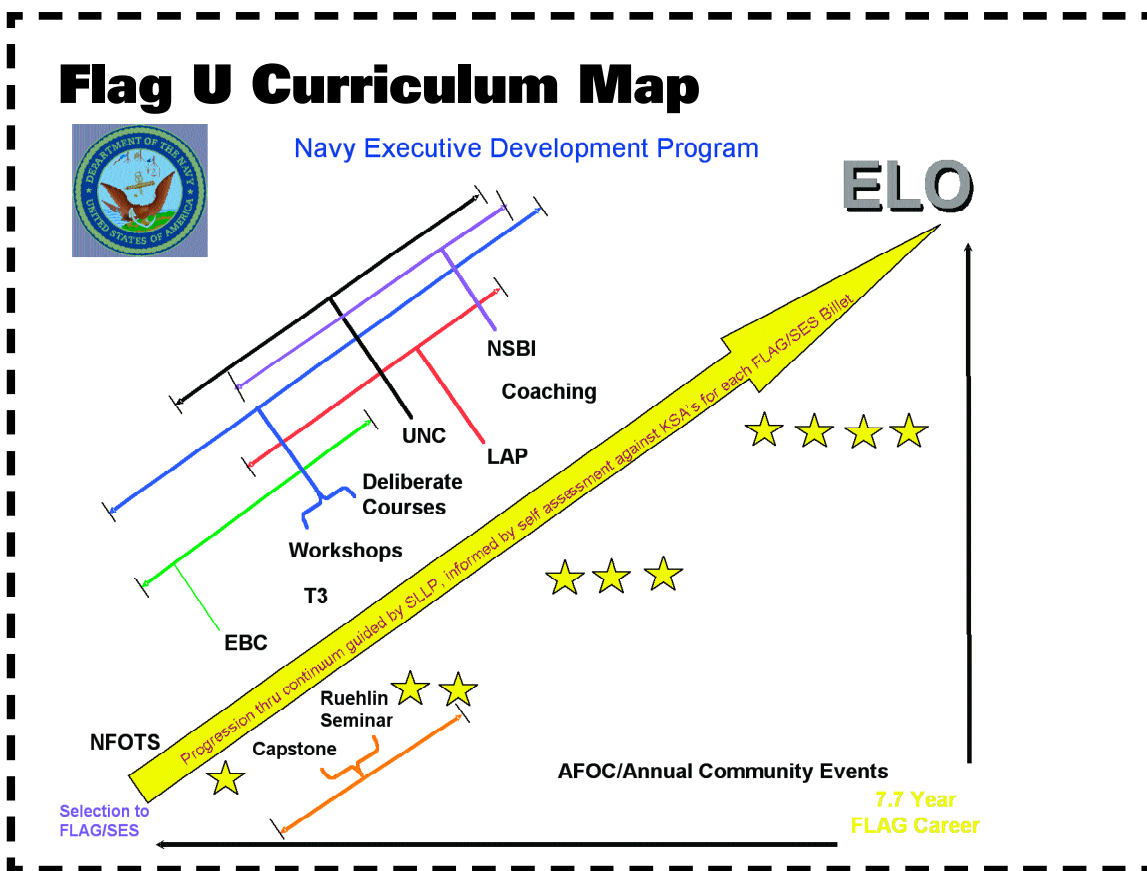
Fortune 500 company.

In its more than 200 year history, the Navy has established a long tradition of producing excellent leaders when the United States has sounded a call to arms. Anyone who has ever stood aboard the deck of an aircraft carrier under way at sea cannot help but appreciate the incredible complexity involved in choreographing the intricate movements of more than 5000 people in a way that translates 95,000 tons of steel into a floating city capable of projecting and protecting American interests anywhere in the world. The Navy consistently produces people capable of effectively leading complicated systems. It knows how to develop leaders.

In the Navy, like in most organizations, people rise to responsible positions because of their proven performance in operational roles. Many aren't necessarily "trained" to run a multifaceted integrated organization. When a ship captain is promoted to admiral, for

example, he may find himself suddenly in a command position that involves complex negotiations with suppliers and the management of a several thousand member, union-represented workforce. No longer is he the "voice of command"; he must negotiate, collaborate, administer, and lead. How does the Navy prepare individuals for this jump?

That consideration led to the creation, in July 2002, of FLAG University. "Our mission is to support the executive development of the Navy's senior leaders, both military and civilian," says Phil Quast, Vice Admiral, USN, (Ret), the Navy's first executive learning officer. "Each year, the Navy promotes 50 to 70 men and women to FLAG rank, either as admirals or as civilian equivalents in the Senior Executive Service (SES). Our job isn't only to help them make the transition, but also to surround them with learning opportunities that are relevant, current, and consistent throughout their FLAG career."



Aboard a ship, with an all-military crew, the captain's word is law. Subordinates take orders and carry them out as matter of unquestioned routine and as sworn duty. As a FLAG officer responsible for budgets, strategy, goal setting, and resource allocation, the knowledge and skills required to successfully lead a workforce that includes civilians and contractors can be very different from that of captain. These are CEO-level responsibilities that must be acquired and constantly honed in order for the Navy to run effectively.

Career-long learning

FLAG University is an ongoing initiative that isn't bricks-and-mortar bound. Rather, it is a carefully structured continuum of events and experiences presented to each FLAG Officer and civilian in the SES, in a manner that makes sense for the individual's projected career path.

Each acronym shown on the figure on page 46 represents a specific executive development experience. For example, NFOTS stands for the two-week long New FLAG Officer Training Symposium, conducted in Washington, D.C. every year. EBC, the executive

business course, is a 10-day residential program conducted on both U.S. coasts at the Naval post-graduate School in Monterey, California, and at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, up to nine times per year. The EBC exposes Navy senior leaders to a broad range of executive development themes and includes the examination of private-sector best practices through visits with senior executives at firms such as IBM, Cisco, Apple, HP, SAS, and many more. Past visits have included business leaders such as HP CEO Carly Fiorina, IBM senior VP Jaime Hewitt, and Cisco CEO John Chambers.

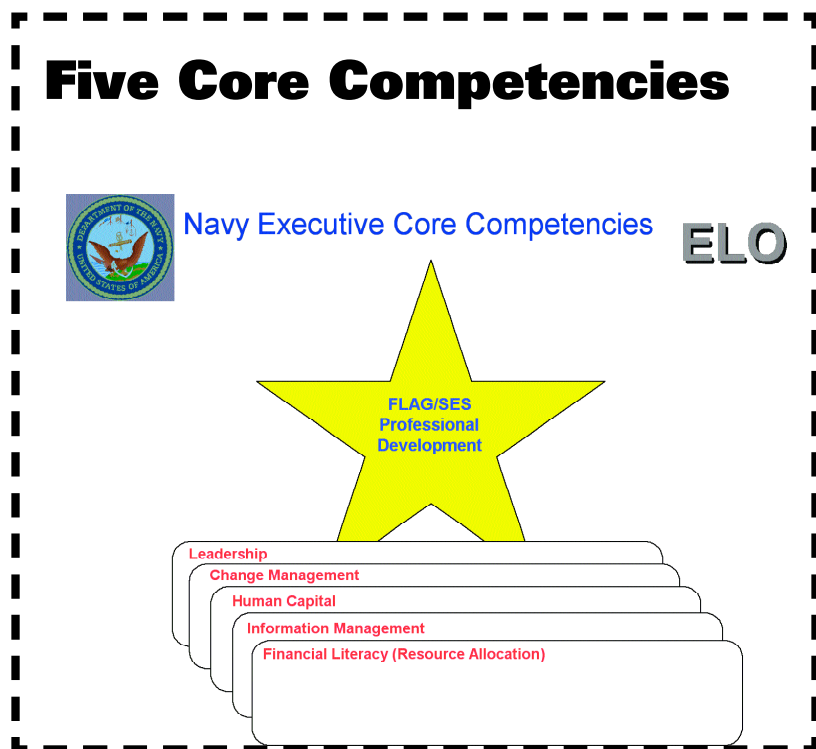
The focal point of FLAG University programs are the five critical competencies identified by Chief of Naval Operations, ADM Vern Clark, as essential for every senior leader:

1. Financial Literacy. The goal here is not to turn admirals into CPAs or CFOs, but to give every senior leader in the Navy the requisite skills to successfully manage complex budget, procurement, and contracting processes so that taxpayers' money is used for its intended purpose.

2. Information Management. IT systems change with head-spinning frequency. The Navy is presently working to implement and optimize the Navy-Marine Corps Intranet, one of the most ambitious network rollouts ever conducted. Senior leaders need to stay current on major aspects of this project, as well as on other IT systems and projects that enable unprecedented levels of flexibility and responsiveness to new and emerging threats to national security.

3. Human Capital. Ensuring that the right people are in the right place at the right time and doing the right work is a challenge in the best of times for the best of organizations. With nearly 1 million personnel spread far and wide across the globe, the challenge is complex for Navy senior leaders.

4. Change Management. In large organizations, it's often said that the only constant is change. Now, with the officially named Global War on Terror beginning to come into



sharper focus, it becomes increasingly clear that the old adage regarding change will be relevant for years to come. Navy leaders need to be expert at implementing and communicating significant change at every level—from grand to granular—to ensure that every service member not only has the orders for the day, but also understands how those orders contribute to both mission and readiness.

5. Leadership. Effective leadership begins with an individual who has an accurate understanding of self. Toward that end, FLAG University sponsors Navy senior leaders in a week-long intensive program at the Center for Creative Leadership, which is preceded by completion of five personal survey instruments, including two that require 360 degree feedback from subordinates, peers, and superiors. From there, the many dimensions of leadership are woven throughout the career learning continuum provided for Navy senior leaders.

From those competencies, the Navy identifies deep and complex required skills, which can vary from organization to organization. For example, if you're the executive responsible for Pentagon contractor pro-

gram management for the Cruise Missile program, financial literacy may mean understanding cost accounting, budgeting, and lifecycle costing, as well as negotiation and general business principles. If you're the executive responsible for global security, your financial literacy skills will be different.

Keystone to learning

A critical issue for the Navy is understanding which skills create highly competent leaders. Currently, FLAG University is conducting an extensive research project to determine the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for successful performance of every FLAG level assignment.

To accomplish that, researchers are examining each individual assignment and the KSAs needed for that post. The Navy recognizes that no two executive positions are exactly the same. Therefore, the executive development offered for one FLAG officer isn't necessarily the right offer for another. That is a principle not always applied in corporate training.

From this emerging matrix of KSAs, FLAG University is developing a series of confidential self-assessments that will help Navy leaders

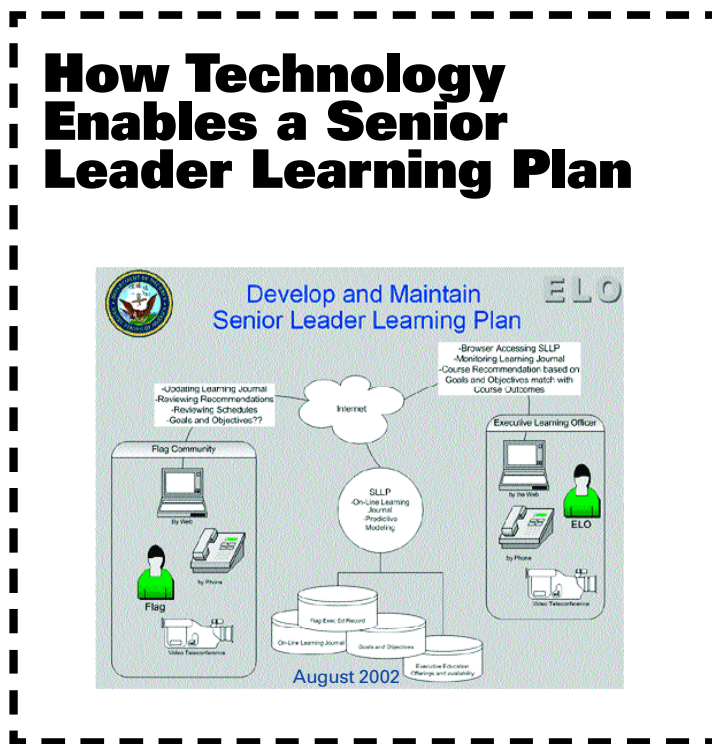
become more aware of their strengths and improvement opportunities

in the jobs they currently occupy or the jobs they seek. These self-assessments, and every other aspect of FLAG University operations, are managed virtually via the FLAG Website.

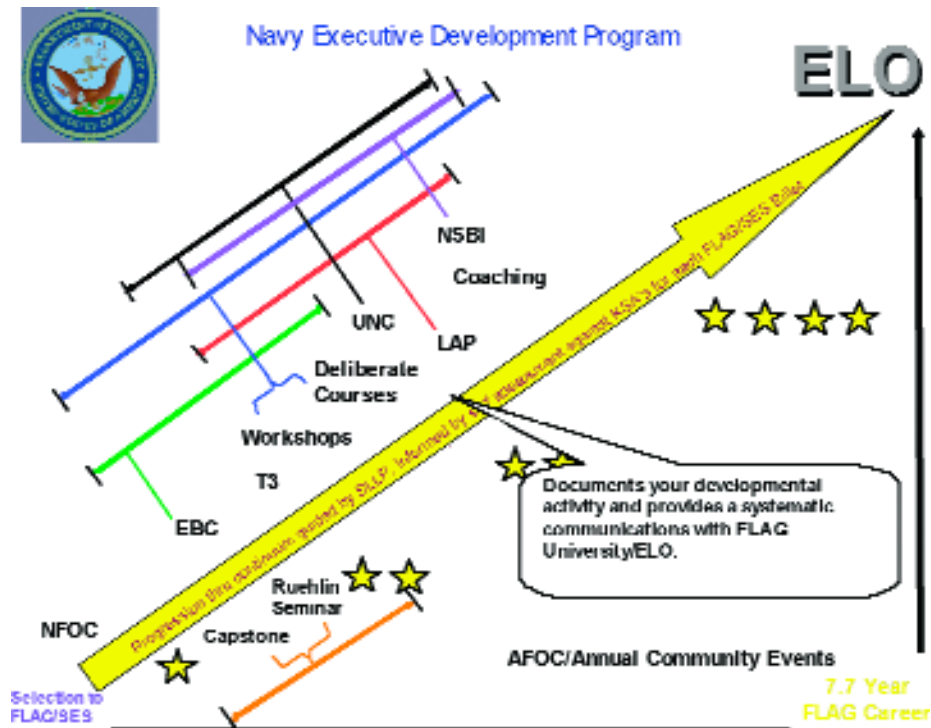
"The easiest approach," says Vice Admiral Quast, "would have been to simply build another bureaucracy to manage the Navy senior leader executive development program. We could've hired dozens of people and created a people-based infrastructure that would probably do a great job of moving paper."

Instead, Quast chose to invest in technology, hiring a very small team and directing them to create the network-based analog to a world-class executive development program.

"FLAG University isn't using



How Self-Assessment Drives the Learning Plan



technology as the end-all solution,” says learning officer Munks. “Rather, we are using technology to merge human and electronic networks in ways that enable us to support our constituents no matter where they are or what they need.”

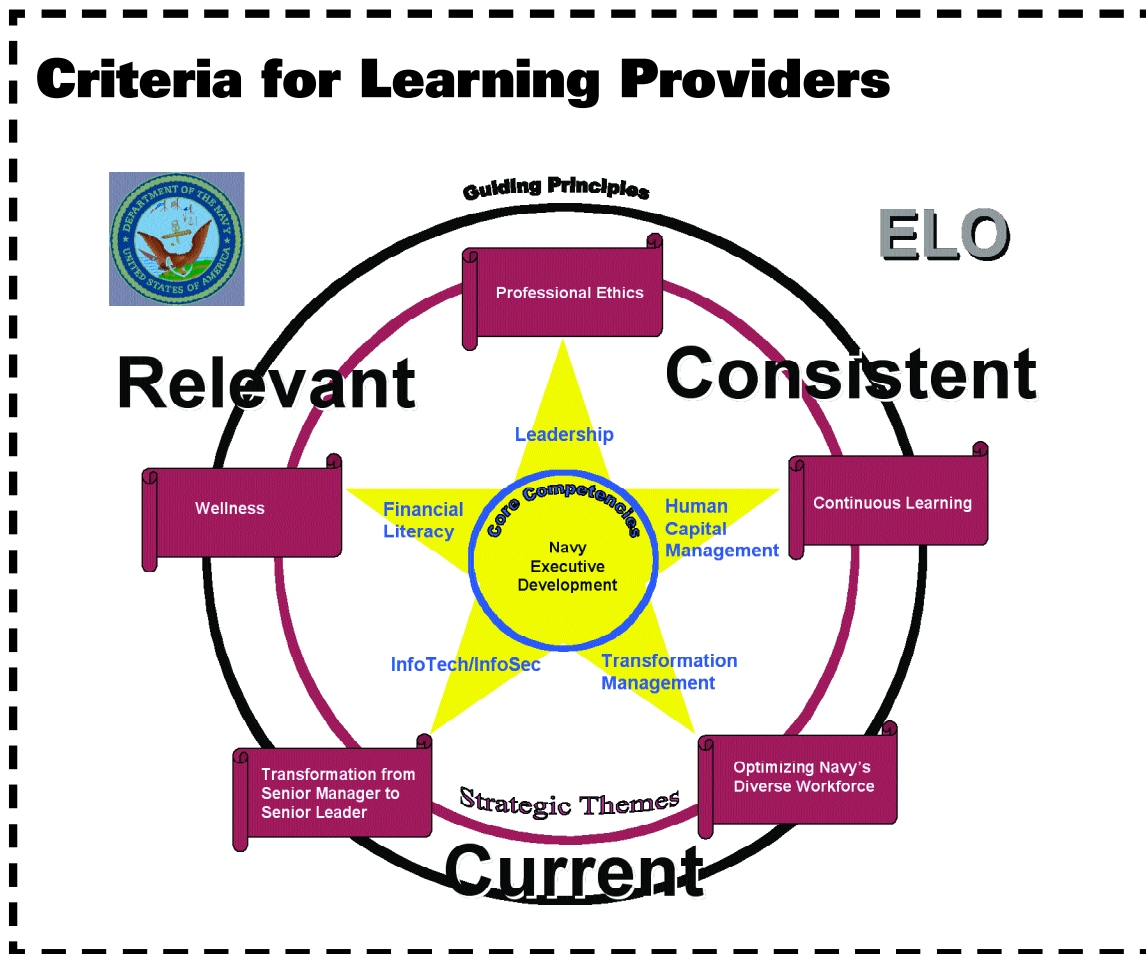
The knowledge-skills-abilities databases and confidential self-assessments will be maintained in a secure environment at FLAG’s Website. Each FLAG officer and civilian equivalent has his or her own secure page at the site. From that page, users are able to review and update their personalized Senior Leader Learning Plan, an electronic executive development portfolio. When the system is complete, they’ll be able to self-assess, in complete privacy, against the KSAs associated with their current or future assignment.

How it works

Say you are Rear Admiral Jones and you’ve just been assigned command of an organization responsible for managing a major new procurement. You go to your personal secure Webpage at ELO Web and take the confidential self-assessment for your new billet (assignment). The results of the self-assessment indicate that you would benefit from increased knowledge in the area of pricing—how vendors determine the pricing structures and pricing points for their products and services.

As Munks notes, the rest of the process is facilitated by software.

“We provide the FLAG or SES with the ability to search for a learning experience—whether a residential program at a university, an introduction to a recognized subject matter expert, or an online course offered by a vendor. FLAG University’s commitment



is to help senior leaders find the right learning experience at the right time and in a manner or mode of delivery that's most feasible given the tremendous constraints on these busy executives' time.

FLAG University doesn't develop content, but it does develop the learning plan and identify best-of-breed programs for their executives. To ensure the quality of executive development programs sponsored by FLAG University, the programs must be relevant, consistent, and current. They must fit into the guiding principles and meet the needs of the core competencies.

The broader strategy

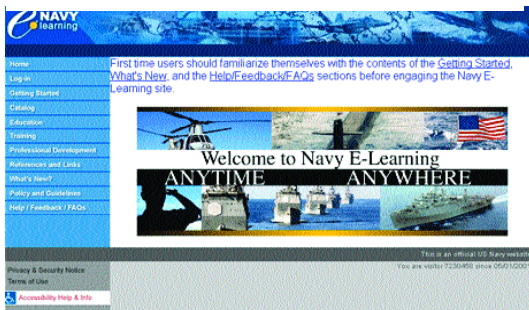
By any measure, FLAG University is small in terms of numbers but big in terms of impact. Its students lead the world's most powerful Navy. FLAG officers also have access to the broader

Navy e-learning systems. Navy Knowledge Online (a secure U.S. Navy Website) offers a tremendous array of course and learning experiences, some developed internally and some made available by commercial and institutional providers. It is available to any member of the Navy who can access the network.

Executive education, Navy style, is evolving into a high-tech, high-touch process that is monitored and measured closely by FLAG University. Here, as in corporate executive education, technology isn't used to replace or reduce the cost of training but to manage and facilitate the business processes that have been in place for many years.

The FLAG University Website manages the Senior Leader Learning Plan, handles the self-assessment process, serves as a facility for feedback, and lets executives select courses. It provides a single integrated solution to manage a customized executive development

US Navy E-Learning Portal



plan that supports the professional growth of every senior leader in the Navy.

Using technology, FLAG provides mass customization within a niche market. Each of the Navy's 600 senior leaders is treated as an individual with a unique learning plan to match his or her unique job requirements.

Tony Lucas, CIO for the Executive Learning Officer organization, offers a unique perspective on how FLAG University is making creative use of technology:

“We don't need to go to the ‘bleeding edge’ of technology,” he says. “We have had many years of success in mapping business processes to the network. We're simply applying the same principles to the process of executive development. Whether it's an online learning experience or the network-assisted administration of elements of a traditional, residential program, we're committed to using technology as a force multiplier.”

Says Munks, “The creative use of network-based technologies means that FLAG University can be wherever a relevant, current, and consistent executive development experience happens to be.” For Navy admirals and their civilian counterparts, that translates into a learning support environment that will ensure Navy leaders have the skills necessary to successfully navigate the increasingly dangerous waters of an evermore complex world. And that's good news for all of us. **TD**

Josh Bersin is the principal of Bersin & Associates, a leading provider of corporate and vendor consulting services in e-learning technology and implementation; <http://www.bersin.com> or 510.654.8500. Bersin is the author of *The Blended Learning Book*, to be published by Wiley/Pfeiffer in early 2004. Bersin thanks the team at FLAG University for information for this article: Phil Quast, Vice Admiral, USN,

Lessons Learned: How Executive Education Is Unique

Many of our research subscribers are from corporate training, functional training departments (sales training), and educational institutions. This FLAG University case study shows how executive education differs widely from other forms of training, and how technology can play a critical role.

The key lessons learned:

Executive education is long-lasting. It is a continuous process, not an event. In traditional training applications, the training program has a specific objective. In executive education, the program is designed to build peo-

ple, and that takes time.

Executive education is collaborative. Although such programs are designed to give learners a lot of time for introspection and self-improvement, most take place in group settings, where problems can be shared and leadership skills and styles can be experienced firsthand.

Executive education gives responsibility to the learner. Part of the process is requiring executives to decide what skills they need and to think about their own gaps and weaknesses. The self-learning process is part of the educational experience.

Executive education requires executive coaching. In the FLAG University model, Vice Admiral Quast and Deputy Executive Learning Officer Munks are executives themselves serving as experienced coaches, not necessarily subject matter experts. Their role is to facilitate, coach, and guide the learning process, not impart skills and competencies directly.

Executive education uses technology as an enabler, not a tool to save money. It connects people to each other and gives people access to resources, rather than necessarily serving as a training media.