

# University Executive Education Gets Real

**Business simulations apply a 'learn-by-doing' approach.**

By Chris Musselwhite

FROM OPEN-ENROLLMENT nondegree programs to small-group fast track MBAs or customized management education programs, university executive education programs are changing to meet the needs of executives. Having already experienced the demands and speed of the real world, managers grow weary with lectures and theory. As the pace of business accelerates, corporations are seeking a faster, more tangible return on their investment in education.

In response, university executive education programs are changing both the materials and the teaching methods by incorporating business simulations and interdisciplinary teaching teams into the classroom. By injecting real-life situations into the classroom, adult learners are more engaged in the curriculum.

## **Classroom simulation**

Recognizing the flexibility and relevancy of all aspects of business education, many universities are adding business simulations to their academic tool chest. As a way to reduce costs, many are partnering with corporate education companies and consultants. The partnerships enable universities to provide managers with powerful educational tools that are normally reserved for corporate education settings.

"The move toward implementing more experiential learning into the classroom through simulations is in response to a need for more integration of functional business areas," says Dayle Smith, professor of management and

organizational behavior at the University of San Francisco's School of Business and Management. "This provides the working manager with the problem-solving experience and skills he will need to effectively maneuver in today's complex business world."

## **Experiential learning**

Business simulations utilize discovery learning. Psychologists Carl Rogers and B.F. Skinner both agree that adults learn best through self-discovery. Rogers, the humanist, said, "Learning is facilitated when the learner participates responsibly in the learning process...significant learning is acquired by doing." Skinner, the behaviorist, said, "To acquire behavior, the student must engage in behavior."

The increased use of simulation has led to interdisciplinary teaching teams. A long-time complaint from the business world has been the academic tag-team teaching approach that sometimes includes the organizational theorist, the financial expert, and the marketing professor. This teaching method often fails to build bridges among different areas of expertise.

"A team approach not only brings the discussion of a business case study to life, but it gives students access to all the areas of expertise that they'll need to call on in the real world," says Doug Bowie, manager of custom executive programs at the University of Calgary's Haskayne School of Business.

Smith agrees, adding that "real integrative learning takes place when students have the opportunity to discuss and analyze business issues as they relate to different functional areas. Imagine a fi-

nance professor, a marketing professor, and an organizational behavior professor bringing up issues that require reconciling different priorities. Asking these types of questions requires the students to see how the areas fit together."

## **Teamwork**

Another benefit of inter-disciplinary teams is a more accurate representation of how problems should be approached in the workplace.

"Solving an issue effectively often calls for input from several different departments within the organization," says Smith. "Using faculty from different disciplines to role model the kind of discussion and interaction that may occur in a corporate boardroom challenges students to think like senior managers. While a particular area may not be your expertise, your senior role sets the expectation of an understanding of the language and tools of other areas."

Additionally, when teachers work together to create the best possible outcome, students see firsthand the key relationship between having common goals and achieving objectives.

"The constant improvement that results from working in an interdisciplinary team also accurately models the successful collaboration of cross-functional teams that are characteristic of more agile and competitive organizations," says Bowie. "Working toward a common goal ensures that any problem is solved faster while continuously improving the entire process."

That is a huge departure from a single professor lecturing to the students about his area of expertise without stopping for discussion.

"This change alone is dramatically improving the quality of the teaching and

the learning taking place in the university management classroom,” says Bowie.

### Business simulation

All of the universities using simulations agree that they are powerful tools for learning. First and foremost, simulations allow people to learn by doing. Research proves that concepts learned through discovery are quickly transferred from theory to action. In the words of Chris Agyris, discovery learning promotes “double-loop learning,” which promotes behavioral changes.

“It’s the ‘A-ha’ moments that are produced during the debriefing sessions that make simulations so effective,” says Ahmad Ezzeddine, assistant dean at the Wayne State University School of Business. “These are the moments that translate into real change in future behaviors.”

Another benefit of simulations is that they address all the various learning styles. “People can read, touch, and feel the results, so individuals have an opportunity to learn in the way that is best for them,” says Ezzeddine.

Simulations are widely used as course introductions because they are a great way to demonstrate why the integration of disciplines is needed. They are just as often used as capstone events because they demonstrate clearly how integration helps solve complex problems more effectively. This flexibility shows the relevancy of simulations to many different aspects of business, which is paramount to producing a tangible return-on-investment.

“Business customers demand that the training show their employees how to apply their learning in actual scenarios that apply to their business, and simulations are a great tool for that,” adds Ezzeddine.

### Interpersonal skills

Perhaps the biggest reason simulations are so valuable in the corporate classroom is their contribution to emotional intelligence. Relationship skills are a critical managerial competency. According to research conducted by Discovery Learning at the Center for Creative Leadership, 64 percent of managers selected developmental goals related to building better relationships as important competency skills, while just 37 percent se-

lected goals related to being a better manager or administrator.

“A corporate education professor I know explained it to his class this way: ‘You will learn as much from others in this experience as you will learn from me,’” says Bowie.

### Normative data

One final advantage of simulations is the norms that come along with them. Comparative norms and benchmarks are powerful learning tools. With access to this data, learners can see how their productivity, collaboration, and risk-taking behaviors compare with the corporate world at large, with their own industry, and among their colleagues and co-workers.

This brings yet another practical lesson into the classroom: keeping your eyes on the competition while remaining honest about your organization’s own strengths and vulnerabilities.

### Real learning

“Doing simulations just to do a simulation doesn’t achieve anything [because] it’s not the role playing that’s so beneficial,” says Terry Margolis, associate director of professional development at the Wayne State University School of Business. “The real learning happens in the debriefing session when participants can be introspective about their behavior and the resulting impact on the process and end product. It’s here where they translate the experience into real learning that will stick with them.”

Margolis and Ezzeddine both note that simulations are worthwhile additions to university-based programs and not replacements for traditional business academics.

“Academic grounding is essential,” says Ezzeddine. “Simulations are the playing field where students can apply their theoretical and real-world business knowledge, refine it, and incorporate it into their behavior and decision making. A blended approach is definitely the best approach.”

Margolis agrees: “Students need a combination of the business foundation from theory and the interpersonal and leadership skills from hands-on experiences.”

### Company culture

By thinking “outside the classroom,” savvy university-based providers don’t discount the importance of an organization’s culture when it comes to customizing executive education. This is especially true for training programs that are designed for specific organizations. This understanding can drive not only the content, but the presentation, which can be critical to attaining the educational objective and ROI desired by the company.

Bowie reports: “When we questioned the senior members of a large engineering firm about what they wanted to achieve with their training program, they told us that when they asked the company’s vice president-level executives where they saw themselves in five years, they all answered along the lines of ‘working in a higher position for another company.’”

Simulations and the norms they provide can reveal important findings about a company’s culture. For example, in an analysis of a simulation used by Calgary, Bowie found that 72 percent of the teams selected the more risk-averse product for development, while only 52 percent selected this same product in the general business population. This revealed the organization’s attitude toward risk.

Both situations show how culture affects the effectiveness and outcomes of any executive education program.

### Real ROI

With the increasing complexity and speed of the workplace, managers have never had more to learn and less time to learn it. In response, management education providers are focusing on real-world needs by incorporating interdisciplinary teaching teams and simulations.

Together, these teaching methods are ensuring that concepts learned in the classroom are transferred to the workplace more quickly and decisively. **TD**

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