

Corporate University:

Establishing Effective Education Solutions

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7 Best Practices in Setting up a Corporate University

Building out a corporate university may be one of the most daunting tasks a “Learning and Development” department faces. Creating the university is more than creating a training department - it involves the entire organization, its future, and even its perceptions of training and development. There are several best practices that you can follow in order to set up your corporate university effectively. This doesn't mean that you have to follow each best practice, but use and modify them based on your organization and its needs. The first best practice is consistent and constant assessment and analysis.

One of the first assessments you'll want to make is the need for a corporate university. Some Learning and Development departments are simply instructed to build a university, and if that's the case you won't need to assess this step. But if not, the idea to keep in mind is that you don't want to create a corporate university for its own sake. Determine if the organization has various departments that need curriculum paths and courses just for those areas. In addition, you'll want to discover if cross-training and succession planning are part of the organization's future. Even more importantly, is the organization looking for new ways to retain employees, especially by enticing them to become "mobile" within the organization's structure? If your organization fits this description, you may be a prime target for a corporate university.

Once you've made the decision, begin to analyze training needs in each area. This "first blush" needs assessment doesn't have to dig too deep, but it needs to at least give you a

picture of what training in the corporate university will look like. For example, go to the department stakeholders and determine what their vision is - are they looking for curriculum paths, leadership, operations, management, or a combination of all of these? Go to the "shared" departments like HR to find out what they see as training needs that stretch across the organization. Finally, go to the executive team to get their impressions.

Once you have the go ahead for the build-out, as well as an idea of the corporate university vision from your stakeholders, begin a full-on needs assessment in the areas you'll be serving. There are many ways to assess needs, from finding out what's going on that shouldn't be going on and vice versa to doing job analysis. Plus, you may need to consult with HR to determine if a competency based build out is necessary for succession planning and performance evaluation.

At the same time, you may want to start assessing the organization's readiness and perceptions when it comes to a corporate university. Create surveys that "feel out" your audiences based on the changes that will come with the corporate university. Surveys can prepare the population for the change that's coming, the change that means, "this isn't your father's training department". As you survey, you'll have an idea of how to obtain buy-in from stakeholders and market the university.

As part of the university's operations plan, you should constantly assess training, as well. You can start small, taking level one and two evaluations for courses and instructors. But plan to move on to higher levels of assessment in order to deliver more efficiently and to report ROI going forward. For example, as courses are better developed, begin surveying learners and

their managers at 45 or 60 days after the training in order to determine if they are truly hitting the application stage.

However you decide to do it, the key to the assessment and analysis best practice is to start before you build your corporate university and to keep it consistent even after the build out is

Corporate University: Buy In and Marketing

If you're ready to build your corporate university, one of the next best practices revolves around creating sponsors, obtaining buy-in, and building a marketing plan. This is an important best practice, as a corporate university with no traction is basically going to be a training department in an ivory tower. The idea here is to get people involved, get them talking, and get them excited about what the corporate university will have to offer. And you can do all of this with a well-planned marketing campaign.

The first step is to create sponsors, or the people who will drive the corporate university's public face. It's understood that your Learning and Development department will be a major sponsor, but we are talking about people outside of L&D. This group of sponsors can be your stakeholders, learners, and executives, and preferably a mix of all of these groups. But how do you "create" sponsorship? Show each group how the corporate university will benefit their departments, the organization, and their careers. Tailor this message based on the group you are courting. For example, career benefits are perfect talking points for learners, because the discussion starts on a personal level. When you line up sponsors who will "talk up" the university, you'll see how the news catches on.

complete. Sometimes the inclination is to back off on analysis and assessment when things are going well, so resist that temptation at all points during the build out and beyond.

In my next post, we will discuss obtaining buy-in through effective marketing to all levels of the organization.

In regard to sponsorship, let's take a deeper look at executive sponsorship. Getting an executive sponsor means obtaining buy-in and support from an executive or C-level person. You may have one built in if your organization has a Chief Learning Officer or Human Resources Executive who oversees Learning and Development. But this sponsor could also be an operations or financial officer. Or, you could gather a couple of executive sponsors. Remember that most executives are interested in how the project will impact the organization at bottom line levels, such as financially, operationally, and in terms of meeting the organization's overall goals and mission. Let's move on to marketing.

Marketing means that you are going to attempt to obtain buy in from the rest of your organization. The first thing to do is get involved with your marketing department in order to plan the branding, "look and feel, and the overall message for the corporate university. This type of marketing can be modeled after just about any successful commercial marketing campaign. In other words, the organization should be able to hear a few words and think about the corporate university and its benefits. Your marketing department can even help you create color palettes and material designs, such as Power Point slides, online learning templates, and even print materials. This type of uniform delivery will add an extra dimension

to the organization's perception of the corporate university.

Now that you're on board with your marketing department, begin to plan the campaign. Keep in mind that you are selling a product, because no matter what happens you want people to access the university, use its services, and talk about it in a positive way. If you have no customers, you won't be successful. So plan marketing that follows the phases of your build out. For example, marketing may need to be heavy during the roll out and then lighter as the university gets off the ground. When new initiatives roll out, such as new courses, you'll want to plan more marketing.

Also, remember to keep your marketing fresh and vary the methods you are using. For example, if your organization uses social networks, try to get the university involved. Consider appropriate marketing activities such as in-person "road shows", the organization's internal network, and even signs or print materials. And also consider placing marketing where larger groups will see it, such as meeting rooms or even company cafeterias. In other words, in conjunction with your marketing department, fashion several different marketing methods and channels.

Finally, keep all of your sponsors informed about the corporate university. You don't want sponsors "swinging" with no information. For the build out, make sure that each sponsor, no matter what his or her level in the organization, knows about the roll out dates, courses, and events. And keep them informed going forward.

Next, we will discuss the creation of an efficient staffing model for the corporate university.

Corporate University: Effective Staffing

The worst thing you can do when setting up a corporate university is to get it rolled out and then find that you have too much or too little staff. In today's economic climate, you're probably leaning toward having too little staff, but regardless of whether you can hire one person or ten you'll need to plan carefully. Let's examine best practices related to staffing your corporate university.

First, examine your current staffing model in relation to the current training offerings and organizational needs. Is it working? For example, how much time are instructors spending in the classroom versus the "ideal"? Do you have online courses sitting on a shelf waiting to be developed? Who is developing classroom training, if at all? Is the current staff overworked or pulled in numerous directions to the point that they are not accomplishing much of anything? If you could staff to your ideal in the current department and climate, what would that staff look like? Although it's fun to create wish list for staffing, you'll need to maintain your realism, as well.

Now take a look at the corporate university vision you uncovered in your initial assessment and analysis. What kind of staffing would be needed to fulfill that vision? Again, it's a good idea to remain realistic about your budget and the organization's current economic condition. Consider what you need and what you think you can get in relation to staff. But take the time to compare the current staffing model to the one that is going to get the job done. You've basically created two "ideal" staffing models: the one you developed and the one that will fit with the stakeholders' vision. Is the workable staffing model something that can be

completed and filled quickly, or do you need to prioritize? For example, if certain instructors are good course designers, consider moving them into development instead of asking for more staff in that area. Are you a "working" manager? Can you add to your workload?

Next, discuss your staff needs with your executive sponsor. First of all, he or she will have insight into the reality of the organization's financial situation. This sponsor will be able to tell you if your staffing model is currently a "pipe dream" or if it can be achieved. Or, he or she may be able to tell you if you're going to need to prove ROI from the very beginning before new staff is added. You can use this executive sponsor for advice and reality at a time when asking for staffing money may be extremely difficult.

When you have a better idea of the kind of staffing you may be able to get, consider its structure. Are you going to be able to manage a new corporate university and take on additional direct reports? Or is it time to consider departmentalizing? Another way to consider the staffing structure is to compare it with the needs assessment you've uncovered. For example, if it's been determined that customer service training is badly needed across many different departments, you may need to consider creating a customer service training department or "college" within the university. As you learn more about your assessment, you may find that you'll need individual people or departments for sales, leadership, management, and operations. If so, are these areas going to be large enough to need their own management and leadership?

Another way to consider staffing is to determine if you're truly going to go lean. Do you need to hire staff members that will be able

to develop training, deploy, facilitate, evaluate, and move on to the next project? If so, you might want to consider hiring "Learning and Development Specialists" who are multi-taskers, as opposed to individuals who specialize in one area or another.

Finally, start small regardless of the budget you're given. If by some chance the economy changes again, you don't want to have to contract. See how well you do with a smaller staff as the corporate university rolls out and go from there.

Our next best practice, creating a university structure, is related to staffing but serves a larger purpose.

Creating a Corporate University Structure

You've put quite a bit of time and effort into the planning of the corporate university and you may have already spent some of your budget money. The next best practice to consider is the structure of the corporate university, which includes policies, procedures, and standards. Let's examine some common elements of a university structure.

First of all, a key point to keep in mind is that a corporate university is not like a regular university. Regardless of the name, your corporate university is still based on creating value and not just delivering academics. If your planning process gets too complicated, step back and look at the university entity with this key point in mind. But in the meantime, you should definitely create a structure that includes policies, procedures, and standards.

What policies will the corporate university and its learners have to adhere to? For example, will you set a class size minimum for delivery? If not, you may find that instructors are engaged

to teach classes for two people versus 12, which may not be cost effective. What about an honor system code for training? Especially online training that may be reportable, such as compliance. It may seem silly to think this way, but some learners will "cut corners" if given the opportunity, so putting them on guard to begin with is a good way to start. On the other hand, does the corporate university plan to become a cost center and charge for training or no shows? If so, what are the rates for this going to be and how will you determine the rate for each course offering? Consider how far in advance a learner needs to cancel his or her course registration. If you've set class minimums, you may need to consider a timeline policy to avoid engaging instructors when there are too few learners. In relation to grades, is the university going to determine a passing score for courses, such as 80%, or will courses be offered on a pass-fail or attend-did not attend basis? And also keep in mind that any new hire offerings may need to fall not only under the university but also human resources if participants have to pass to keep their jobs.

Next, determine course standards. What is the desired length for online and classroom courses? For example, online courses can be limited to 45 minutes or less and classroom courses can be limited to 3 hours. If this doesn't work, will you want to have course material broken up into those types of "digestible" chunks? Or will course lengths depend solely on the content, the audience, and the specific delivery method?

Another consideration related to the corporate university structure is the standards that surround materials. You may have already worked with your marketing department to come up with color and design standards, but

your instructional design team will need more specific standards. For example, you may want to choose different standards for different types of courses, such as technology versus customer service. Or you may want to set standards for Power Point presentations, such as graphics, fonts, and lengths. Consider online training as well: what types of graphics can be used in an online course? For example, will you use a 3-point callout box or a 2-point callout box? What grammar standards will be used throughout any training piece? This part of a corporate university structure may seem picky, but you want every piece of training to reflect a certain look and feel as well as the same standards. At this point, it may be a good idea to note that this task can be offloaded to the people who will be doing most of the course development.

Finally, what is the process for requesting training? Will you employ a standard front-end analysis and development timeline, or will you make decisions on a case-by-case basis? What process will you use to prioritize training needs? For example, each training manager may be responsible for accepting and prioritizing new training requests or you may choose one person to handle the request and distribute it to the appropriate area for development and delivery.

Once you've decided on a structure, which, by the way, can be changed as the university changes, you'll need to move on to a Learning Management System

Corporate University: The Learning Management System

A corporate university must have some sort of unified delivery system for scheduling, online courses, classroom course schedules and descriptions, tracking, and instructor and facilities scheduling. It would be difficult to plan

so heavily for the roll out of the corporate university only to find out that there is no way to deliver. So the next best practice is to purchase or build a Learning Management System (LMS).

Choosing an LMS is an important step for any Learning and Development organization. In fact, some organizations may already have a functioning LMS when they make the transition from training department to corporate university. But if you do not have an LMS, the setup phase of your corporate university is the time to buy, build, or "freeware" a system. You definitely don't want to have to backtrack in order to catch up on scheduling, curriculum paths, and course tracking after the university is up and running.

The first step is to determine how you'll use the LMS. Do your courses reside mainly online, in the classroom, or a mix of both? Do you want learners to have direct access to registration, curriculum plans, and career paths? Are you managing multiple locations, facilities, and instructors? Do you plan to include technology, such as blogs or social media, in the roll out of the corporate university? Will you want to include a content management system? All of these decisions will have an impact on what kind of LMS you choose.

Next, locate LMS vendors who share your vision and can provide the features you need. Take the time to price them out, contact their clients, and look over their company information before making a decision to bring them in. Once you're ready, be sure to bring any potential LMS vendor in to your location to provide a live demo of their system and its features. Create a review committee to take part in the demos, review technical specifications, documentation, and contracts before you make any decisions. In

fact, your review committee can be part of your corporate university stakeholders and sponsors group.

One of the issues you may face is the question of funds. But just because there is no money to purchase an LMS does not mean that there is no solution. There are LMSs that are offered as "freeware", such as Moodle. Take the time to research and review free LMS systems, because they do work and can be used to meet basic needs with no customizations. On the other hand, if you have an IT department that is involved in the roll out of the corporate university, ask them to spec out an in-house LMS. This may be a very effective way to get what you need in an LMS without having to pay for a vendor.

Once you've decided on an LMS, test it thoroughly well in advance of the corporate university rollout. Be certain that any data that has been entered or imported is correct before putting the LMS online for your learners. One of the biggest mistakes you can make is rolling out the corporate university with a badly functioning LMS.

Another consideration for the LMS is to use every feature you've ordered or had developed. For example, if you bought a content management system that allows for design of online courses, have your design team start developing online courses, quick reference guides, or even short online interventions that are designed to fit inside a classroom course. Avoid wasting money by wasting features.

Finally, as you develop your corporate university structure, you'll want to make decisions about how the LMS will be administered. Some organizations choose to have an administrator, while others may hand

the administration of the LMS to various people in various departments. The point with this step is to make these decisions early, knowing that you may need to have some flexibility as you move forward. Remember that some type of Learning Management System is a foundation of your corporate university, so spend some time on the various aspects of this important best practice.

Next, we will look at the inclusion of technology in the corporate university.

Corporate University: Include Technology

In today's environment, technology is king. We know this because first of all because technology is cost effective and efficient, but also because, let's face it, technology is popular. Smart phones, MP3 players, and social media almost make it a necessity to include a technology plan in the roll-out of the corporate university. Obviously this use of technology will help the university to stay fresh and cutting edge, but what's better is that effective use of technology will save money and help you show more ROI.

The first step is to examine the organization's existing technology infrastructure. To put it plainly, some organizations may not have the technology to offer the most advanced technology. You may know what your organization is capable of, but even if this is the case you should get your IT department involved in the planning stages. Use some of the examples we are about to discuss in order to begin a dialogue - and find out what you can and cannot do. Keep in mind that the "cannots" may turn into "cans" in the future - and the speed at which technology moves usually means that the future is closer than we think.

While you're looking at the organization's current technology, also take the time to take a realistic look at the population. The question you want to answer is not whether the population is ready for technological advances in learning, but rather what kind of technological advances are they ready for. Depending on the industry and age of the organization, you may find that your audience is already highly technically advanced and may expect that L&D will provide them with stimulating technological interventions. On the other hand, the population may be resistant to blogging or watching a training course via a synchronous web conference. Either way, your job is to determine just how far you can go.

In any corporate university in today's environment, online training is a must. Whether it's off-the-shelf or internally developed, online programs cut training time and costs, and provide a great way to track and report grades and completions. In addition, with the right LMS you can administer online programs very well. For example, if your organization is ready for the latest and greatest, your LMS can be a Social Learning Management System, or SLMS, that provides for online interaction and social networking. Or, if you plan to work on rapid development, you may need a content management system (LCMS). Regardless of your choice, make sure it's the right choice for the technology you want to deploy. But keep in mind that technology goes much further than online training.

Consider including technology in classroom courses, as well. For example, blogs, discussion threads, and social networks can be used as both before and after class exercises. Instructors may be able to gain insight in the participants' knowledge levels both before and

after the intervention, as well as learn how well the training affects behavioral change out on the job. Also, as you are planning your corporate university rollout, have the design team begin looking for opportunities to create online applications for courses, such as quick reference guides, games, short knowledge based modules, and even testing. Another great way to incorporate technology is through podcasts that can be downloaded and viewed after or before class. Some rapid development programs, like Articulate, can export directly to podcast format.

Start looking for other ways to include technology in learning, as well. Some of the methods we have already discussed, such as blogs or social networking, are great ways to get learners involved and keep them involved. The question is determining how to begin using these applications. As you look for ways to integrate technology into the corporate university, you will also be able to create a culture that is open to technology. From there, you can use applications for marketing and to keep your audience informed about the corporate university and its progress.

Before you roll out your corporate university, conduct an assessment that helps you determine how you can use technology, both in online and classroom formats, as well as in marketing and information. Once you've rolled the university out, continue looking for ways to update technology and keep the programs fresh.

Our final best practice is avoiding the "ivory tower".

Corporate University: Avoiding the "Ivory Tower"

Learning and Development departments, as well as corporate universities, can sometimes fall victim to the "ivory tower" syndrome, that is, losing touch with the "real world". Typically the ivory tower is no one's fault; it simply happens because all of your resources are so focused on the task at hand. The tower can even develop when you are still in the process of rolling out your corporate university, so some of the ideas here can be used during the initial build as well as in the future. How can you avoid getting caught up in the ivory tower?

The first way to avoid the ivory tower is to keep analysis and assessment consistent. Even if there is no major development going on at a given time, you should be evaluating courses, instructors, technology, delivery methods, and even the Learning Management System at all times. Continuous assessment of how you're performing will help you determine where to put your resources, even if the corporate university is still in the setup phase. Plus, assessment will help you discover the university's efficiency, costs, and benefits. And this will come in handy when it's time to prove ROI.

Another way to keep in touch with the "real world" is to maintain contact with your sponsors and stakeholders, throughout the entire rollout process and beyond. This group is made up of people who are doing the work, supervising the work, and even planning the goals behind the work. If you alienate this group or simply lose contact with them, you run the risk of losing contact with the world outside of the corporate university office.

Along those lines, it may be a good idea to transform your sponsors, stakeholders, and LMS review committee into a corporate university advisory team or committee. This group can report back regularly and formally on what's going on, what initiatives are planned, and on how the corporate university can help. An advisory group like this can help you make decisions both during the rollout and going forward. The advisory group, in other words, may be invaluable in keeping you in touch with the rest of the organization.

Another consideration is the positioning of the corporate university staff. Think about sending them out to the field in order to assess and observe. For example, instructors should spend regular time in the field they teach. As they go out to observe the people who are doing the work, they may find that things are not being carried out as instructed, and sometimes this may be for a legitimate reason. Or, a field observation may turn up evidence that managers and supervisors are not helping learners transition from the classroom to the work environment. But no one who has direct contact with learning materials should be exempt from field observation. Even instructional designers or developers should spend some time in the environments they are attempting to recreate in the learning arena.

As a corporate university leader, you should take the time to make contact with people inside the L&D industry through networks like Linked In, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), or the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI). Benchmark your connections' organizations with your own. Find out what they are doing, what technologies they are employing, and what issues they are uncovering. Then decide if you can incorporate any of their strategies into your corporate university structure and operation.

Finally, consider holding regular contact with your audience via the corporate university. Conduct surveys about the university itself, its offerings, and even its ease of navigation and understanding. Think about having focus groups or "town hall" meetings to find out how the university is perceived. This part of keeping touch with the audience takes you away from the work environment and helps you focus on the learning environment and the learners' views.

Avoiding the ivory tower may be one of the "best" best practices because the ideas discussed here are useful from the very beginning. And if you continue employing these strategies, you'll find that the corporate university has become a trusted business partner.

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