

The Globalization of Learning and the Learning of Globalization

Jeanne C. Meister

For previous generations, “global” business meant big business. Not today, though, when even the smallest one-person shop listing its wares on eBay has a customer base just as global as the “big guys.” In this era when networking technologies have joined the world together with instant global information and communications, how will learning and learning delivery change? Learning departments have an opportunity to influence how successful companies will be in tapping into global markets and serving global constituencies.

If you’re going to act globally, you need to think globally. That’s one of the lessons coming out of a recent London Business School study, “The Upwardly Global MBA.” Too much corporate education has been national in nature. Changing this situation involves changing the way executives think. The study found that corporate leaders believe they now need managers who are more sensitive to global issues, who can think globally and who can adapt to working across cultural and national boundaries. “Flexibility, cultural sensitivity and integrity are key attributes of tomorrow’s global business leaders,” said London Business School Dean Laura Dyson, co-author of the study.

The qualities sought by executives surveyed go well beyond the functional or technical knowledge and skills traditionally taught. Leaders today need global experience, multidisciplinary capabilities and skills in teamwork and managing diverse cultures. These are objectives that will require large-scale change. CLOs need to be prepared with a response and a plan when they are asked how they can help a company work across boundaries and build a common culture.

There are also other, more practical matters that CLOs can help their companies overcome. Language is the most obvious. Offering consistent learning opportunities and messages in multiple languages is a huge challenge. At United Technologies (UTC), for example, company learning executives developed an explicit strategy of investment in the language translation necessary to reach the majority of the company’s people via its learning portal. Beginning with English, UTC expects by the end of 2004 to translate its Web-based courses into French, German, Spanish and Chinese, allowing it to reach about 80 percent of its employee population.

Another obstacle is technological. Some countries have not achieved the bandwidth necessary for electronic learning. Global companies like UTC often must deal with the issue of a decentralized organization, where local networks are owned and managed by the local companies without explicit coordination among them. To overcome that and globalize the learning portal, UTC intends to go outside the firewall and use the Web. That will enable the company to reach employees more easily, and will enable employees to access what they need to learn and perform optimally.

Some other issues in “thinking and learning globally”:

- Global business leaders work in multifunctional teams made up of executives from around the world. Does your learning content reflect this global, multidisciplinary approach?
- Does your faculty makeup adequately reflect your organization’s revenue split by geography? Do you have a multilingual faculty?
- Are your vendors able to service your growing global needs in terms of language translations, local faculty and knowledge of local customs?
- Alliances between learning groups and business schools or universities are vital strategies today, especially to jump-start companies toward developing their global capabilities.

A final thought: As the London Business School study pointed out, corporate education must be more experiential and action-oriented. Exchange programs help, according to the global executives surveyed, as do programs that allow younger professionals to shadow a global executive. But in the end, these kinds of programs often run aground because there just aren’t enough skilled executives to go around. Thus, the growing sophistication of performance simulation, role-playing, theater-based simulation, etc. will help capture the wisdom of the few and make it available to all. Advanced learning strategies and techniques will be vital to help companies succeed with their global agendas.

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