Lifelong learning and the virtual university

Abstract

Describes the concept of the "virtual university", which provides distance learning opportunities. It has changed the concept of university capacity, which need no longer be limited by campus size. Discusses drawbacks and advantages, and outlines the main features of the models already being used.

The concept of lifelong learning, or at least periods of learning at stages within working lives, is seen by many as the route to ongoing managerial effectiveness. Those currently involved in enabling others to learn and who can adapt to the possibilities brought about by technological change are ideally placed to see their activities grow on a worldwide basis. But the threat is there too for the complacent as new entrants to the learning market will be developing innovative architectures to deliver world-class services at low cost.

Here, Eric Sandelands, fellow of international business, University of Surrey/International Management Centres, proposes the concept of the "virtual university" as a method of delivering lifelong learning. It is a concept that can be adopted by the traditional learning institutions seeking new markets whose brand names will travel. It can also be utilized by innovative institutions which can structure themselves to deliver academic programs anywhere in the world.

Distance learning has opened up opportunities for ongoing learning for students without the need for a career break. It has also changed the concept of university capacity which is no longer limited by the size of the campuses. Among the drawbacks, however, have been the lack of student/student and student/supervisor interaction and the expense of keeping learning packages up to date. Nonetheless, the emerging virtual university model uses technology to build in to learning programs the type of interaction found in the original university concept. It is not confined to academia, as many corporate organizations are seeking efficient and cost-effective ways to enhance management development.

BAA and Fina represent corporate clients working with the University of Surrey/International Management Centres in a "learning partnership" to develop learning organizations.

Without underestimating the short-term challenges, the future for distance learning and electronic publishing appears to be very bright. Sandelands defines the learning organization of the twenty-first century in the form of a wish list that would allow institutions to:

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- recruit students from all over the world without providing living accommodation, lecture theaters, and so on,
- deliver courseware based on the best available, up-to-date published knowledge which can be delivered to the student instantaneously (without the cost of storing and despatching it),
- give students access to the best possible library of published information,
- run seminars that focus on key issues and give everyone the opportunity to participate,
- run the programs effectively and appoint the most appropriate supervisors to projects no matter where they are in the world.

Pioneering institutions are designing architectures that exist only in the virtual world. Business School Nederland is the leading MBA provider in The Netherlands. All of its programs are delivered using the World Wide Web, and all of the items on the wish list are present in its learning programs. The Business School Nederland and the University of Surrey/International Management Centres make no secret of the virtual university models they have adopted. The majority of their course structures are freely available to all who care to search them out on the World Wide Web. Outlined below are the main features of the models being used:

(1) All faculty and course participants must have access to the Internet. While this is a precondition of joining the programs, its significance is diminishing as a barrier to entry, given the rapid growth in Internet access.

(2) Courseware is delivered using the Internet; no packs are despatched from warehouses. The faculty designing course materials concentrates on the structure and course content. Each module is defined in terms of the keywords of the material being covered. The reading lists are updated every six months using the key words to pinpoint recent material from the Anbar Management Intelligence database. This ensures access to the most significant recent thinking in the field.

(3) All faculty and students have access to an on-line library for current or archival published material. The Anbar Management Intelligence database provides abstracts of articles reviewed by subject specialists from a defined coverage list of journal material. The full-text article can be ordered if required.

(4) Participation in seminars and conferences is encouraged. Newsgroups, an established feature of the Internet enabling group discussion, are used as forums to share feedback and explore concepts and ideas. These provide meeting places for course participants worldwide. Journal sponsored or other facilitated conferences enable students to debate with academic researchers from beyond the confines of the virtual university.

(5) Effective course supervision is a key factor in ensuring a successfully completed program. Business School Nederland and University of Surrey/International Management Centres tutors use e-mail to set deadlines, provide feedback, etc. They are also able, on a worldwide basis, to match a student with the most appropriate faculty member to act as supervisor.

(6) Another feature of these institutions is the establishment of an active alumni organization to encourage ongoing learning beyond graduation. The alumni are encouraged to feed back advice and experience via the Internet seminars, making for a powerful networking club which can reach into many parts of the globe.

This is not to say that people never meet. Residential start-ups, summer schools and shorter workshop sessions are important too. Electronics have not yet brought us the chat over a beer or similar aspects of the human bonding process. The distance-learning model that emerges in the medium term seems certain to include a blend of face-to-face teaching and discussion groups, materials in print and other media, complemented by electronic access. Yet the emphasis placed on each of these elements looks set to shift as the virtual university concept matures. After two to five years, we are likely to see a multiplicity of virtual universities offering sophisticated educational experiences. The need for training and development in all types of organizations points to this low-cost, high-quality approach to learning as being of major significance in the provision of lifelong learning.