

# Four Trends in Executive Education



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Innovation in information and communication technology (ICT), deregulation, and progress in skill development bring immense dynamics to the field of executive education, as they do to education in general. Web-based training apps and massive open online courses (MOOCs) create virtual learning spaces that are accessible any time and from anywhere. Most of them are free of charge. Accreditation of earlier achievements to further studies, as elaborated for instance in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), make lifelong learning more flexible and efficient. Experiential learning is a mandatory element of training designs, and competence models serve as standard instrument of human resource management.

On a broader level, those phenomena indicate that some long-established compromises of traditional executive development are to be overcome. They have been in place because of resource constraints and market dysfunctions. It is particularly due to the forces mentioned before that end-users and intermediaries e.g. from HR are less and less forced to accept them.

## From content to context

Contextual elements in management training take account of the contingent nature of managerial action. Functional differentiation and globalization increase the contextual complexity and the need for context awareness. However, while content delivery dominates, the integration of contextual elements in management trainings is rather guided by scope and efficiency considerations, e.g. using standardized case studies. The ultimate context in executive education, though, is the participant's area of responsibility within the institution. It is the starting point to reach out into other contexts in order to get inspired by them. The trend towards customized programs which are fully adjusted to the specific institutional situation is a consequence to reach the first but not necessarily the second aspect. In open enrollment settings, the work on participants' cases in smaller groups is an option to combine both, in particular to the benefit of the student who is providing the case. Even more tailored to the individual situation is to add transfer projects to executive programs and to offer professional coaching to the students, supporting a context sensitive out-of-the-box thinking and the re-integration of the insights. The most consequent approach is to take the context as starting point and to develop the content entirely from there.

## From input to impact

The fact that knowledge is available for free may indicate that training content is a sufficient condition to achieve impact, while practice is the necessary one. If individual participants join executive programs on their own expense, they will at least expect improved career options as an outcome. Thus, integrating career services into executive programs is a means for business schools to engage in this kind of practice. If institutions send executives to formal training and pay for it, they usually expect improvements in the participants' area of responsibility, if not in the larger organization. In many open enrollment settings, the application of the learning is addressed by well-meant encouragement by the faculty, or facilitated by measures like learning and transfer diaries. The transfer projects mentioned before are a typical application device of in-house trainings, but they are as useful to make the impact part of an open enrollment program design. This all heads towards on-the-job trainings comprising a fully demand-oriented input, or even the provision of content 'nuggets' on learning platforms for self-organized access. Then, peer coaching serves as highly complementary measure to guide this process and to implement a certain kind of social control.



## From teaching to coaching

ICT innovation, deregulation and impact orientation have strong consequences for the role of the faculty. Didactically optimized web-based trainings, eventually provided by the respective owner of the intellectual property, make the existing content distribution channels obsolete. Students pick their lectures off the global shelf and organize their learning according to their needs. Systematic e-tutoring, peer coaching and smart assessments ensure that students don't get stuck during the process, and that the quality requirements are met. Still, blended learning designs which include times of synchronous personal presence and face-to-face interaction are worthwhile. As e-preparation leads to more homogeneous classes regarding the factual knowledge, presence sessions can be used to address more complex aspects of management. What matters in particular is the psychological and the social dimension of decision-making. The selection of appropriate concepts and tools, the appraisal of facts, the conclusion on measures and their implementation can be trained and reflected with regards to the role of power, trust, diversity and the like. Experiential settings like business simulations and outdoor activities are appropriate design elements. It becomes clear that the faculty for this part of the value creation is much more in a facilitation and coaching role with strong emphasis on the training architecture and on personal and group feedback.

## From mass production to 'lot-size of one'

Traditional executive education demands huge compromises in terms of the individual resource endowments with which a student enters a skill development endeavor. While the supply side benefits from the scaling advantages of large cohorts and standardized delivery, the demand side so far had rather few options to get to a tailor-made solution. Some of the inefficiencies have even led to de-regulatory interventions. ECTS standards and meaningful diploma supplements, for instance, make learning achievements more transparent, which then allows students to claim for their accreditation in subsequent development steps. Based on this, contextual aspects like personal preferences, career, family, and financials can be integrated much better into life-long learning plans. On the supply side, this leads to more flexible learning architectures that provide a variety of entry points and scheduling options on the way to the targeted degree. Similar individualization takes place with regards to the learning process. Upfront knowledge appraisal and modularized content enable an individual calibration of content, and coaching settings are much more personal than ex-cathedra teaching. These are four key trends which have a strong impact on the business model transformation in executive education. They affect the way how and by whom value is created, which resources are involved, if and where profits are made, and how they are distributed amongst the parties involved. They break up the traditional value chain and re-allocate power relations between supply and demand. Schumpeter's gale of creative destruction finally has arrived here, too.