Communities of Practice Approach in Marketing Education and Executive Development

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Abstract

Executive Education programs are becoming more dynamic, learner centred and relevant to strategic organizational objectives. Executive education provides a fertile ground for evaluating techniques to bridge the academic-practitioner divide. This paper presents an integrated application of communities of practice (CoP) for successful delivery of executive education, specifically in marketing education. A conceptual model suggests integration of CoP and Executive Education leading to firm specific competitive advantage. As the main elements, knowledge and knowledge transfer activities, communication, strategy and organisation objectives and self-objectives are proposed as leading to effective executive education and competitive advantage. CoP moderates the link between executive education and thence to competitive advantage and has an important role in sustaining competitive advantage through ongoing executive learning.

1. Introduction

The role of executive education is shifting. In the past, its focus was to provide managers with management knowledge and prepare them for forthcoming promotion [1]. It was also used by organisations as part of a reward and recognition program and a staff retention tool. Today, companies are recognizing executive education as an essential tool for developing their managers in their decision making and execution of strategies within the business. By offering education to their internal staff - specifically at executive levels - the company expect to improve managerial decision making, by creating and transmitting knowledge, which in turn has a positive impact on company performance. Since knowledge and capability developed in-house might not avoid the natural evolutionary rigidities of organizations [2], external pressures for strategic orientation and change may make it necessary to incorporate external knowledge [3]. Use of external sources such as business schools, universities, consultants, coaches, trainers and mentors has visible impact on improvement of organisational performance. This paper proceeds by reviewing executive education that examines the context of marketing education and develops a model of executive education leading to competitive advantage based on a community of practice approach.

2. Evaluation of Executive Education

Twenty years ago, education for executives consisted primarily of university based programs or seminars offered by specialized training organisations [4]. Executive education developed in the 1980s and 1990s as the increasing pace and scope of global business demanded higher
levels of education among mid to senior level employees beyond just the MBA degree. This concept spread rapidly and globally, and companies soon recognized the advantages of educating their management workforce. Participants studied new theories and applications, analysing case studies and listening to classroom lectures by well-renowned academics. The curriculum was designed by university faculty or the business school who offered the course such as finance, marketing or business administration. Most of the programs were linked to MBAs. Executives attending these programs were set up for personal development and the opportunity for a promotion to another higher level. In transition, executive education has moved from university based to in-company. Customised offerings in-company aligns the program more closely to company objectives and contexts. Customized programs, different intakes, and open enrolment programs are newly implemented strategies designed to cater to relevant target groups. Customised programs, which are tailored for and offered to executives of a single company, represent the fastest growing segment of the market [5]. This helps organizations to increase management capability by combining the science of business and performance management into specialized programs that enable executives to develop new knowledge, skills and attitudes. Knowledge translates into the capability an organization applies to the products and services it brings to the marketplace. Research shows that a firm with a clearly articulated and understood business and capability strategy will have a higher market-to-book value than a firm that does not [6]. Customized programs in executive education are capturing high demand as markets shift and organizations develop and implement responsive business strategies. As the business education sector is growing fast in executive education, universities and business schools have started to offer the courses at different times of year and are available to participants from different companies and organizations. These courses offer a short term based and fast track programs to best match with time constraints. The content focus has also shifted from functional knowledge to subjects such as leadership and organizational change; programs have changed from teacher centered to learner centered [7].

3. Marketing and Executive Education

Marketing is the process used to determine what products or services may be of interest to customers, and the strategy to use in sales, communications and business development. This concept involve in all the strategic application of the business from cradle to grave. Marketing is an integrated process through which companies build strong relationships with customers and create value for their customers and continuous development for the business [8]. Customer is in the centre of marketing and duty of business is to make customer delighted and improve their repeat purchase with loyalty levels which helps improve successful business in long run. With the customer as the focus of its activities, marketing management is one of the key components of business management. The term marketing concept holds that achieving organizational goals depends on knowing the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the desired satisfactions. It proposes that in order to satisfy its organizational objectives, an organization should anticipate the needs and wants of consumers and satisfy these more effectively than competitors.

Marketing practice inclined to be seen as a creative industry in the past, which included in advertising, selling and distribution and logistics. However, the academic study of marketing makes extensive use of social sciences, psychology, sociology, mathematics, economics and neuroscience, the profession is now extensively accepted as a science, allowing numerous universities to offer higher education courses like Master-of-Science (MSc) programmes.
Increased number of marketing involvement in the business created more areas to offer in education in marketing to improve knowledge.

Recent literature proposes that barriers persist between the producers of academic marketing knowledge and one of its targets, marketing practitioners [9]. Marketing academics often develop knowledge that is more closely aligned to the needs of another one of its other target markets: academic journals and conferences. Furthermore, academic marketing knowledge is generally presented in written format, replete with jargon and complexity [10], minimising its general appeal. Shugan (2004) stated state-of-the-art marketing decision making, backed by well-tested marketing theory, may not be necessary for routine decisions, but is really only needed for infrequent, critical direction-setting decisions[11]. As a result of this, some academic-practitioner divide is inherent, and hopefully, over time, the most useful and applicable theoretical advances diffuse into the practitioner world [12]. The diffusion process is however executing slowly and theory development has a risk of failing in academic education. Practitioners and educators have a joint responsibility to continue the learning community to keep it up to date.

Critical theorists contend that academic marketing generates very little true theory [13]. In response to this marketing academics attempted to refine what “marketing knowledge” meant. According to Rossiter (2002) there are five basic forms of marketing knowledge: basic concepts and definitions, frameworks (i.e. the 4 P’s), empirical generalizations, most-likely-to-succeed strategies, and research principles and techniques for a given situation[14]. From the practitioner’s point of view, while marketing knowledge may be based in the five forms listed above, it really consists in knowing how to apply the codified information in a creative, idiosyncratic and customized ways [15]. As a result, marketing knowledge entails the knowledge components, the skill to adapt and knowledge to apply these. Marketing orientation and organisation learning context and capability development are main areas of marketing learning. In the literature it has been noted that marketers have knowledge about the market and marketing capabilities [15].

In today’s business world marketers must be able to respond to intense competitive pressure, adapt to rapidly changing market conditions, satisfy customer demands at increasingly granular levels, and maintain a high rate of innovation. A number of long-term economic and demographic forces are driving these new competitive pressures, including globalization, the continued expansion of the knowledge economy, increased demand for good corporate citizenship, the “graying” of the workforce and traditional industrial powers, as well as the increasing diversity of the population [16]. The challenge for executive education in marketing revolves around the development of market orientation, market knowledge and marketing capabilities and the ability to apply codified information creatively and adaptively.

4. Executive Education Models

The gap, or the shortage of leadership talent, represents a significant business risk. It increases the stakes for selecting and preparing people for increased levels of responsibility. Companies also recognize the importance of collective leadership development to create strength based on unity and alignment within their management teams. With the strategic importance of leadership, companies look for organizational solutions encompassing a full range of development tools that are useful, measurable, and systematically integrated—including structured experiences, coaching and mentoring, and formal coursework. This new
Different executive education models are in use today. Two of them are traditional, with many years’ of application; others are more recent models that have developed in parallel with the emergence of the new information and communication technologies.

The ‘Residential Model’ is management education offered in residential programs such as full-time or weekend MBAs or shorter management seminars, in which students and faculty convene on campus to work with each other in face-to-face situations. This shorter seminar approach was accepted as the best way to deliver management training with a convenient location downtown [17]. This model is mostly used for students and lecturers to come together in the same place and at the same time to best effect. It gains all the benefits of face to face communication and provides an opportunity to get to know each other on a personal level both in and out of class. Knowing each other on a personal level, students also tend to trust each other more. Trust helps to create a supportive, collaborative learning atmosphere in which students feel able to take risks and air and discuss their views in front of others [18]. Another advantage of this model is that it can build a learning community in which students know each other personally, which typically boosts motivation [19]. There are some disadvantages of this model as well. To get the fruitful output it is required to participate to the session in particular time and particular place. This is an issue with the participating group, as most of executives or manages have their time constraints to be in a given place at given time with their work schedules. And another issue with residential method is it is not readily scalable as management education is heavily constrained by the students-to-faculty ratio [20].

‘Distance learning’ is when a student studies and does course work away from a physical campus setting and a lecturer. Distance education is now seen as something quite separate from classroom learning; there is a growing realization that traditional teaching techniques will not work in distance education [21]. The success of distance education depends on enhancing interaction between instructors, students and the learning environment, as well as on active learning in the class [22]. Distance learning has pros and cons in the model. The main advantage is the flexibility of its nature. As students get their materials and resources via mail they get opportunity to work through the assigned materials in their own time and own pace. Widely distribution of distance learning covers vast area of geographical base as no person participation required. For an example Open University Australia offers range of educational programs with high participate possibility to all around the world. Drawback of this model is distance between student and the lecturer of the geographical distance as well as physical distance. Due to the distance, exchange of information between students and lecturer is low and understanding level of student is difficult. Slow interaction makes students to get away from continuous education and as no involvement with other students it is difficult to stimulate collaborative learning and create learning communities [17].

In the new era, new executive education models are developing with the change of technology and customisation. ICT-based Models of Management Education and Hybrid Management Education Model are two base models in the discussion currently. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have transformed the business world and continue to do so. The impact of the Internet and ICTs on business education has received little attention, and in recent years there have been calls for more research on the most appropriate
ways to use ICTs in management education [17, 23, 24, 25]. As executives manage their work within given time constraints, ICT enabled programs offer a high degree of spatial and temporal flexibility. ICT helps to create communities of learners using asynchronous bulletin boards, e-mail or chats [18]. This method is high flexible which is most important for managers with their time constraints who would otherwise not enrolled in a program. Students in full time employment are the largest segment in the executive market, and the ones who need the most flexibility [20]. Using high technological communication methods in learning process allow students to get involved with other students as well and create learning communities via networking and discussion blogs. Successful continuation can be expected with this interactions and it motivate students to continue their education to the finish line. However, ICT model has some disadvantages too based psychological concerns such as navigation difficulties, security, tired eyes, frustrations and etc… And compared to class room education, ICT interaction is less.

The hybrid Management Education Model is based on combining the best of residential education with the best of the ICT-based model. It is able to reach a wide group of participants, thus overcoming one of the main disadvantages of the residential model’s lack of spatial-temporal flexibility. It also increases the depth of discussion, as it allows for more reflection [26, 27]. It enables the construction of a strong learning community, a rich learning environment and highly collaborative learning. Face-to-face contact during residential periods helps to build personal ties that can continue in on-line periods, when students are in their work locations. Lastly, this model fosters active learning.

5. Executive Education and Learning Communities: Application of Communities of Practice (CoP)

Neither of these two models, the traditional residential adaptation and ICT adaptation clearly address as a central focus the learning community, and its development, as a strategy for delivering competitive advantage. The CoP lens on executive education offers the potential to deliver enhanced competitive advantage by strategically harnessing the learning community. Learning theory and the CoP approach can be applied to executive education to create potential laboratories for designing of curriculum in professional development. Fundamental to a learning initiative in the new era is the process of continuous improvement and creation of a learning community. The knowledge domain and the mechanism to generate or transfer knowledge are two primary dimensions in learning communities [28]. According to management learning literature [29, 30, 31,32] there are four knowledge domains identified as inherent to this approach: theoretical concepts and practices, previous experience, self, and others. Contribution of these four domains creates the learning community.

Everybody belongs to a community of practice with or without knowing it. As a relatively recent concept Community of Practice (CoP) has turned out to provide a useful perspective on knowing and learning. The concept was initially developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) in a study of situated learning. Since then, a range of definitions has been developed and the theory of community of practice has now expanded up to electronic CoP or virtual CoP. Within the expansion of CoP concept, it acquired considerable attention from both academics and practitioners and being addressed by vast range of academic literature. CoP defined as a group that stick together through ‘mutual engagement’ on an ‘indigenous’ enterprise, and creating a common repertoire [33]. As a part of organisation scope, education has to conduct CoP to manage knowledge with in the education and training sector. CoP has the potential to accelerate, intensify, enrich and enhance the implementation of education program. A
A community of practice approach to teaching and learning in education provides a space for staff to collaboratively reflect, review and regenerate their current teaching and learning practices.

The learning community concept underpins CoP [34]. A learning community focus on continuous development, active engagement and reflection in a specific bounded organisation. To improve communication and continuing professional development, any company needs to consider developing professional networks to engage in knowledge transfer activities. With use of executive development programs, companies can adopt knowledge transfer activities using communities of practice. CoP can aid in the improvement of a learning mindset amongst participants and the extent to which growth is sustained. To evolve, growth of adult learning in executive education in the marketing stream puts focus on experientially-based practical knowledge and the literature to introduce its new curriculums and designs. An examination of the messages, reflections, and inquiries in the continuing exchange of emails among the executive program alumni after program completion is illuminating. It indicates the extent to which program content is linked to language reflective of an enhanced awareness of learning, values, and personal leadership, program content and new opportunities for leveraging learning opportunities over time [28]. Social networking processes also have a huge potential to create learning communities apart from technology. These social networking processes are termed Forums, Communities of Practice, Peer Networks, Knowledge Communities, or any of a variety of similar names.

In Figure 1, we present a conceptual model integrating community processes and a CoP approach in an executive education context. The process of continual inquiry, learning from action, and developing practical knowledge comprised of content, process, values, and tacit knowledge is the basis for executive effectiveness [35]. The goal of an executive education program is creating learning experience that improve this capability and continuous learning to enhance this capacity and this is the enduring challenge of providing significantly improved executive education.

Central to this approach is the CoP. The CoP approach enhances the effectiveness of executive education relationship to competitive advantage.

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<th>Community Processes</th>
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Three elements are crucial in distinguishing a community of practice from other groups and communities [36]:

The specific domain: A community of practice is something more than a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest like marketing. The community focus: In pursuing their interest in a specific domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, share information and this enhance marketing effectiveness. The shared practice: Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice.

Embedding CoPs in executive development programs means that there is a need to begin building these communities well before programs start by staging their “coming into being” prior the programs themselves[37]. Participants thus identify a shared focus and join a group of peers who share similar development goals, during and after the program, as part of a facilitated CoP. This will lead them to challenge and support each other in the improvement and execution of strategic action plans, leadership practices, and business goals. Participants as well as the their organisation acquire continuous benefits as they all involved with real business issues discussions, and this promotes the knowledge, ideas and capability to share and motivate the entire business to new adaptations. Brassard and Koriath (2005) stated that when CoPs are launched as part of executive programs, people make more meaningful commitments because they feel mutually accountable. The structure and discipline of the CoP will support them in real time in their continuous learning and development. We propose the CoP based model as the central facilitator in executive education with residential, ICT and other approaches serving as possible alternate modes to achieve and enhance the CoP.

6. Conclusion

Executive education offers a productive background for evaluating techniques to challenge the academic-practitioner to develop new marketing ideas as well as to use new marketing knowledge which delivers competitive advantage. In future executive development programs, CoPs will create new networks of conversations within the organization through their participants. These will form new opportunities for sharing perspectives, creating new knowledge, and generating innovative solutions. Further this execution will disturb the system when required, challenge assumptions, and test traditional knowledge. CoP is part of a vital landscape to evoke powerful innovative distinctions for people, so they can act differently to develop their own effectiveness, their team, and their organization.

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