



TODAY'S LEARNER

## Connecting Continuing Education to Industry

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*Continuing Education has been serving adult learners for decades, and it is the gateway to getting learners into the workforce. Both industry and main campus have the opportunity to leverage Continuing Education to be more accurate in meeting the needs of learners and employers. In this interview, Mark Koulianos discusses developing programming for non-traditional learners, how CE can stand out to industry partners and the importance of developing strong relationships between the institution and employers.*

The EvoLLLLution (Evo): What are some of the key obstacles you've observed when it comes to developing programs and support services designed for non-traditional and non-credit learners?

Mark Koulianos (MK): The biggest thing is that the university, the college or the community college—whomever you're working for—has to embrace it. They have to support what you're doing. If you have that support, it makes things a lot easier. But a lot of times, that's not the case because

Continuing Education or Workforce Development, as we think of it, is not part of their core mission.

I've been on a crusade. I tell people, "You need to start thinking about the future and make this type of programming part of your core mission." And just getting over that hurdle is big. But once you do that, it opens up a lot more doors, and things that used to be obstacles or barriers stop being obstacles or barriers.

Evo: What does it take for a CE division to stand out as an ideal partner for employers or for industry?

MK: The real differentiation is in the quality of your programming. That seems so fundamental, but you'd be surprised to know what I hear from other CE units across the country. What we do, on my team, is focus on results. Let's take the name of my unit as an example. It's a continuing ed unit, but it's called Corporate Training and Professional Education. I think the difference when we partner with companies is that people truly see an ROI from their investment with us.

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When we're working with different companies through the programs we offer, they actually see their employees come out of the training with new skills, and they are ready to hit the ground running and contribute to the company right away. That is important to the companies we work with.

To further clarify, let's talk about ROI. As an example, we do a lot of project management, but our most popular program with corporate clients is our Lean Six Sigma continuous improvement training. What makes our program stand out is that participants actually have to bring real projects that they're going to use in the training. That means they are working on real, live ideas for process improvement projects while learning these skills. If a company sends 30 people to this training, that's 30 projects they're working on. If only one of those projects returns something, it's worth the cost of their entire training. But usually, their training investment is returned tenfold. Also, the company is set up for future success because now their employees have this skill set. This isn't a check-the-box exercise or heavy on the theory. The idea is more to give them the tools they need to actually make a difference for the company. We structure all of our training around that, and it's why

we use real-world practitioners for all of our training. They know what they're talking about and have already lived in the shoes of our participants.

Evo: What are the characteristics of a great partnership between higher ed institutions and employers that really make an employer want to work with their CE partners?

MK: First of all, the voice of the customer is important. You have to make sure you're meeting those companies' needs. A lot of times, you have one or two scenarios—one where someone will come in and promise the world to a company that they can't deliver. Or you have the other extreme, where it's "Well, this is what we have; take it or leave it." Listening to the customer, thinking about what they're trying to train or solve for and actually making that happen throughout your training is really important. Secondly, you have to make it easy. We spoke about how navigating this space with the university or college is not always easy because they often can't move as quickly as business. That is true, but you have to work to change that.

You have to set up your programming and process to match the speed of business when you can. You need a simple contracting process. You need instructors that are not

just subject matter experts but also really good and engaging teachers. It's a combination of all those things that drives success. You also want good employers to work with, ones who truly believe that investing in their employees will be good for their bottom line. These employers also need to be able to articulate what they want or what issue they are trying to solve through training. That sometimes takes a little bit of consulting and coaching from our team, but it is important to us. And it's important for them to have a good understanding of what they want to spend before they get into an engagement. They need a budget for this. They also need to realize that training isn't always magic bullet for larger, more systemic problems. Sometimes training, or specific training, will only solve a part of a larger issue.

Evo: To what extent is the education provider a learning and development consultant in helping employers understand their long-term needs rather than immediately responding to short-term demand?

MK: Well, I can only say the way that we've tried to set it up came through trial and error. It came from many things that I observed in my 20-plus years in the corporate world before moving over to higher ed. I worked in finance and global operations

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in some large companies before doing some consulting for small- and medium-sized businesses. A lot of times I'll go out on the call with the PhD on my staff. Her degree is in instructional design, and she really understands adult education theory and learning. So usually, it's a combination of both of us talking with clients and trying to convince them it's a win-win on both sides. As a supplier, I want a long-term relationship with them. Every time they bring in someone new, a new group of managers or they have a training need to meet, I want them to come to me. We combine the educational resources of a major research university, real-world practitioners, the experience that I have from the business world and the adult education expertise that my staff brings to the table to provide training that will get results.

I'm already thinking for the long term when I have that initial conversation. For their sake, I try to guide their thinking, so they can ask themselves how effective it will be. Many times—I hate to say—if there's a company that doesn't have internal training, or if they have an internal training unit but looking for expertise outside of what they do, it becomes a check-the-box kind of exercise. And I don't want to do it. I don't want to be a "one and done." I'm not here to sell them something. I'm here to build

relationships.

Most of the time, we have a lot of repeat clients. It's not always the case. Some people get the one thing they want and they're gone, but it's important to try and build a mutually beneficial relationship. It's just part of that intake process, if you will, of going out to meet people. It's about convincing them of the true benefit of what we provide, that they will want a sustained approach to training with a partner they can trust and work with to meet their needs.

Evo: What are the aspects of the service experience that are going to help a university turn a one-time training engagement into a long-term, ongoing contract?

MK: You need the right people that understand the mindset behind building relationships. This isn't a sales process; it's a relationship-building process. It starts with listening to the client and understanding exactly what they're trying to do, then guiding them thoughtfully to make the most impact on their organization as possible. As an example, someone may come to me and say they're looking for leadership training. I would then ask what they are trying to solve by initiating leadership training, to clarify what type of training they're looking for. I would then show the available programs and what we'd teach them. Then,

we have 30-, 60-, and 90-day accountability sessions to make sure employees are trained and putting into practice what they have learned—and that employers are seeing results.

That's all basic customer service stuff, whether you're selling education, a product or anything else. It's again about the way you build that relationship, having the long-term mindset, not that of a one-time sale. I want to have impact. I want what we do to be beneficial for this company, for this client. It's as simple as that.

Evo: How can the emerging models for credentialing help continuing ed divisions provide opportunities for employee lifelong learning?

MK: That's the future. It doesn't matter whether you're at a university, college, community college or what have you, all of us in this space fight the same battle to some extent—some of us more than others. What I try to tell my administration is the rate of change in technology continues to increase much faster than they and higher education can change. As an example, I read an article where it said the rate of knowledge for healthcare used to double every 20 years. Now, it doubles every 73 days. For corporate clients or those in other disciplines, it's not as accelerated but still pretty rapid.



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These microcredentials and stackable credentials—ones that build onto each other—can help shrink the skills gap as you manage new products coming out, emerging trends, and problems that need to be solved in the marketplace. You can offer small bits of information that people can stack and build throughout their careers to stay relevant. We should quit thinking in only the two-, four- and six-year educational models. In the formal sense, people are getting their foundational learning. Most people that graduate with any AA, AS, bachelor's, and master's degrees are well prepared to go into the workforce, but what is learned isn't going to sustain you for an entire career. I'm not going to say these degrees are obsolete, but more skills will be needed as your career progresses or as workforce needs change. By shortening the learning cycle for new skills, these stackable credentials give us the ability to offer small amounts of very useful timely skills that will keep the workforce relevant and prevent a skills gap.

When discussing Workforce Development, from an economic standpoint, we don't want to hear that there's a skills gap—and these credentials are the way to combat that. You always seek the people who want the traditional education experience, and their degrees will always

be a foundation. But people are going to work 30-plus years after they leave an institution, so why not be able to offer these things throughout a person's career?

Evo: Why is the translation of microcredentials difficult to get across, especially when talking to main campus audiences?

MK: There's a hubris around the traditional higher ed model. You will hear that the focus is on research, foundational teaching, things like that. There's denial about not meeting the community's workforce needs. They believe they are adapting and moving to address these needs in their programs—maybe so, but they aren't moving quickly enough. I don't think we should replace the traditional higher ed model, but we need to augment it by adding emphasizing Continuing Education or training throughout a working person's career by adding to the mission of the university or college.

So, either you can react to the marketplace, or you can always be playing catch-up. At my own university and the institutions that I talk to, I'm always pleading, "Don't you want to get ahead of this?" I don't understand the hesitance. Maybe it's the change and the hubris. I tell them it's not a bachelor's or master's degree we're talking about. This is

the way that people want to consume learning and further attain knowledge. This is what people are saying once they enter the workforce.

They say they would rather consume learning in smaller chunks and put it into practice. And by the way, they need the training now. They didn't need negotiation skills at the beginning of their career; now they do. Or, they didn't have to really understand cyber threats ten years ago now; now they do. They needed to understand marketing, let's say, but didn't have to understand digital marketing, social media and crowdsourcing. Just think of all the things that have changed. Think about the things that have changed just since the pandemic. I was in a unit that worked face to face 95% of the time. Now we're 100% virtual, and we're never going back. Microcredentials, specifically, in Continuing Education and Workforce Development are key to making sure our workforce is competitive and our economy is strong in the future. Traditional higher ed institutions can be part of it or not.

The world is changing. Either you can embrace it, or you can keep fighting it. There is a certain way things have always been done, and people will still want to do it this way. And I think people are missing the boat.

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Evo: What are some of the most exciting opportunities you see on the horizon for Continuing Ed?

MK: Just by definition, when I talk about the majority of my students, they are early in their career or are mid-career. They don't necessarily want to get a master's degree, or they have a master's, but now they need other skills. Typically, one of two things would have to happen. One, they would have to find a private training company or some other way of learning what they need, or two, their companies would have internal training to teach them these things. Well, we know what happens the first time there's a dip in the economy or in a company's fortune: The first things that get cut are training and travel.

That's the reality. Training will get cut. What excites me is that now you can play in this space. You can be this nexus where traditional education, training, corporate and company needs, and even small business come together. And they already trust you. At the end of the day, companies care about their people being trained. One of the companies that I worked for was bought out by private equity, and they brought in a lot of GE people who taught the GE mindset, continuous improvement and other similar concepts.

The role that the continuing ed shops can play in this space is the academic company. You can provide the training and skills that people need to succeed and thrive in their careers, the training they need after their formal education. You have an opportunity to step into this void and really make a difference. My passion is Workforce Development. There are two pathways. You can help people up-skill and re-skill and really focus on that. And you can also provide an alternative road for people who maybe can't afford a full university education, those who don't necessarily want to continue to work in a low-paying job and skills to get them on track to a higher-paying job. That's the opportunity for me—up-skill and re-skill and then an alternative path that can lead to a better life.

Evo: Is there anything you'd like to add about the most significant opportunities you see on the horizon for the professional development and corporate training space?

MK: There are going to be higher education institutions that either embrace this or don't. And the ones that embrace it, that can get out ahead of it, are going to do really well in the future. The rest are going to find themselves struggling, I believe, to not only just stay relevant but to stay afloat financially unless it's a

private school and there are large endowments and things like that. This is the future, and you can either embrace it or eventually become irrelevant.

*This interview was edited for length and clarity.*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- People want results. Presenting the ROI to both employers and learners will help retain them and keep them connected to the institution.
- Partnerships vary among employers, so it's critical to listen to their needs to negotiate and problem-solve to create the best outcomes for everyone.
- Institutions and their faculty need to break away from higher ed's traditional model and be more open-minded to collaborating and adapting to deliver innovative programming that will meet learners' needs.

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