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Breaking the educational glass ceiling: an interview with Harry Lenderman

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Abstract

Purpose – To examine the role that corporations can (and are) playing in removing restrictions to a college or university education for their employees – the educational glass ceiling.

Design/methodology/approach – An interview format is used with an experienced academic, and learning and development practitioner, drawing upon experiences and lessons learned from the creation of a corporate university within Sodexho corporation.

Findings – Directly connects the introduction of “performance-based degrees” with the opening up of educational opportunities for the previously disadvantaged to corporate performance and achievement of commercial objectives.

Research limitations/implications – The paper primarily draws upon insights from the creation of the Sodexho Corporate University, but sets this within the context of best practice elsewhere. It identifies the educational glass ceiling that exists for employees of major corporations, opening the door for further study.

Practical implications – There are reputed to be around 2,000 corporate universities in the USA alone. This paper has implications for the scope and objectives for those developing or leading corporate universities and corporate business schools, or contemplating such an intervention.

Originality/value – This paper sets out an original train of thought, has useful pragmatic insights, and provides scope for significant further research.

Keywords Education, Universities, United States of America

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

In the US corporate universities have increased fivefold in the last decade to around 2,000 at a time when 500 higher educational institutions have closed (Meister, 2003). This paper is the result of an interview conducted by Eric Sandelands with Harry Lenderman[1], Academic Dean of Sodexho University[2], the corporate university of Sodexho – a food services and facility management company with 315,000 employees in 74 countries. Dr Lenderman highlights the false choice that organizations make between organizational prosperity and the educational development of employees arguing that the two are completely inter-related. He also points to a more enlightened role for corporate learning within a context of structural educational transition – providing educational opportunities for those for whom college was not an option, while simultaneously building organizational capability.



Sodexho University has been created within Sodexho USA which has annual revenues of US\$ 5.5 billion and 110,000 employees. Within the corporate university sector, it is increasingly viewed as a model of best practice.

Sandelands

Can you give us your views on companies that are “at the top of their game” in the area of learning?

Lenderman

First, today, many companies feel that they have to make a choice between corporate growth and prosperity and helping their employees grow and prosper in the area of personal and professional development. After all, today’s business environment is a tough one. When faced with difficult market conditions, many companies feel that they must make a choice between bottom line and employee development.

Yet, there are many companies today that are investing in their employees, while showing significant gains in growth and company profitability, sometimes in the face of very difficult market conditions. In fact, many of the top companies in this country have determined that they must simultaneously press for company objectives, while supporting employee development. Starbucks is an example of such a company that is a leader in their marketplace. You cannot argue with how well they are doing on the bottom line by partnering with their employees in the area of mutual growth and prosperity.

Third, in my experience, some companies step up to the plate even further by providing educational opportunities, on the job, to their employees. These companies realize that they not only can coexist with opportunities to learn, but that they must help the company while helping their employees. Companies who see themselves, as aligning with the best practices available will recognize the wisdom of gaining improved company results coupled with employee development. Creating a learning environment is part of the success of these companies. The tools and skills gained through the learning process teach employees to most effectively solve problems and adapt to changing market conditions simultaneously. Companies are hungry for these skill sets. This is a classic win-win situation.

I have chosen to work with companies who aspire to be in the third category. I am so excited to share what I know about learning with companies and individuals in these companies. This process has an added advantage of breaking the educational glass ceiling that is so prevalent in the business environment these days.

Sandelands

What do you mean by the term “educational glass ceiling”?

Lenderman

I believe that business that subscribes to the win-win proposition of company and employee partnerships must address the “educational glass ceiling” issue that faces many employees. There is a great opportunity for companies to increase their bottom line while addressing this glass ceiling. Let me tell you a bit about the educational glass ceiling.

I coined the term “educational glass ceiling” from my observations and experiences related to the difficulty experienced by many people to earn access to a college degree here in the US. I suspect that this educational glass ceiling exists across the world. The term refers to the limited (invisible yet restrictive ceiling) educational opportunity afforded to learners who are eager and willing to master college level studies, but have missed the opportunity to attend college. This missed opportunity could be due to socio-economic conditions or simply that their life is tied up working or raising a family to such an extent that attending traditional educational institutions is nearly impossible.

I do not believe that there is a plot to create an educational glass ceiling, though I do feel that one exists and that this ceiling holds back hundreds of thousands of willing and capable learners. I understand that colleges and universities can only accommodate a certain number of students and that the cost of an education is escalating to the point that even more students will be unable to earn a college degree, if this trend persists.

I understand that the best colleges turn away many learners than they cannot accommodate. I understand that the best colleges also pick and choose their learners based on what they perceive as a “prediction of success” at their institution. Throughout my life I have heard countless stories of students who showed promise, but were not able to obtain the dream of a college education due to circumstances that had nothing to do with their ability to learn.

My entire career has focused on human resources, training and development. I have taught an endless list of classes designed to motivate employees to manage and lead. During this period, I interacted with hundreds of dedicated, competent individuals who quietly (often sharing their embarrassment) told me that they do not have a college education and that because of this missing educational experience in their lives they were not even “qualified” to interview for many positions that would fulfill their employment dreams. It breaks my heart to hear these stories. Finally, I can now do something about this heartache!

I feel that a glass ceiling does exist with regard to opportunities to learn. The person who hits their head on this glass ceiling surely is stunned and dismayed when the impact of hitting this invisible ceiling is felt. Until recently, I simply accepted the concept that a college education is necessary as a given condition of employment for some jobs. Quite frankly, there are certain jobs where if you do not have a college degree, you need not even apply. If a person lacks the degree qualifications, they are passed over quickly and without any afterthought as to their abilities. For those above the educational glass ceiling, the ceiling is just as invisible as to those from below. After all, if one does not have a college degree, all one has to do is go to school and get one, right? Problem solved. Well, anyone in that position can tell you that it is not that simple!

What makes me excited is that we now have a process that will enable employees to earn a college degree at work, while at the same time enabling the business to address and solve its most difficult business problems. This new and exciting learning process will help the company and help the employee position themselves for increased performance on the job, as well as place them in a better position for advancement.

Sandelands

Why would a corporation want to assist employees to gain educational advancement?

Lenderman

Frankly, it makes good business sense for companies to help break the educational glass ceiling for their employees. Companies benefit from the increased responsibility of their employees and foster the ability to learn as a matter of everyday business operations. They can address issues such as retention and employee and customer satisfaction, while maintaining a cutting edge advantage in today's highly competitive market. So, to give the short answer, companies can now have the opportunity with their employees to partner in the learning process. Companies that take advantage of this opportunity are way ahead of their competition.

Really, colleges only prepare future employees in a very generic sense, with the exception of a handful of technical disciplines. Any company has to show their employees the "ropes" of how that company operates. Having a degree generally is part of the entrance ticket to a job. From there on any company has to see that their employees have learning opportunities. As I said before, there are a few companies that are facing up to the opportunity of helping themselves and their employees simultaneously. This is especially true today since most of what we learn today will be obsolete in five years! Not only must employees increasingly have the need for a college degree but also they need to become able to learn more about their job each day throughout their career. Our modern business culture demands that we become lifelong learners. Employers have to be prepared to meet the learning needs of their employees. We have found that employers who embrace learning with open arms will be more successful in the future. College level learning, so to speak, continues throughout life and should be linked to learning on the job and employee performance.

Now, it naturally follows that modern corporations are seeking ways for their employees to gain a college degree to grow as individuals and as learners. Currently, tuition reimbursement programs appear to fill the void. Companies proudly talk about the tuition reimbursement programs as a potential ladder to a college education. The truth is that very few employees, compared to the population of employees who aspire to an education, take advantage of these generous programs.

Sandelands

What can corporations do to help solve the problem?

Lenderman

To start, companies can now investigate ways to foster an environment of learning tied to educational opportunities. They can continue to provide educational opportunities for their employees as they traditionally have and add an additional productive business tool. They can continue to fund college educational opportunities for their employees. However, the job does not end there. They cannot leave this vital job of educating their employees to someone else! Now, there are ways that the best companies are discovering, to participate in their employees' educational opportunities more effectively than ever before. They can now embrace outstanding results at a reasonable cost. Sodexho is such a company. Sodexho has sponsored a corporate university that takes learning seriously and has tackled the educational glass ceiling head-on!

Sandelands

How has Sodexho tackled it?

Lenderman

First, Sodexho (Corporate University) has taken the lead in insuring that employees have a chance to learn. Funding is available for college tuition reimbursement. There are also many training classes and experiences that Sodexho University offers. Sodexho is second to none at offering educational opportunities.

Do you recall how I mentioned how companies can go further to meet the needs of today's employees as well as tackle the educational glass ceiling? Sodexho has teamed up with Revans University: The University of Action Learning, to provide college degree learning opportunities, facilitating college degrees that are earned on the job. Sodexho employees can now earn associate, bachelors, or master's degrees in management while working and solving the most difficult problems that Sodexho faces. Dr Fred Lastar, Richard Lenderman and I wrote a book about the journey that 32 Sodexho employees took to earn their degree at work. The book is entitled "Performance-based Degrees Earned at Work" Lenderman *et al.* (2004). This book tells the Sodexho University story in much more detail than I can explain here. Our students wrote half of the book. The students describe their personal learning journey. This process is unique in the world. These students earned their degree solving company problems while they developed personal and professional skills that will benefit the company for years to come.

I envision many companies following Sodexho's lead.

Sandelands

Within the corporate university in Sodexho what has given you the greatest satisfaction?

Lenderman

You can see from my responses that I have a passion for giving people a chance to earn a reality-based, problem solving-based, accredited degree at their workplace. At graduation, when I saw our employees cross the stage and receive their degrees, I was overwhelmed with delight and pride for each of them. I cannot imagine any better award than helping others live their dreams! Those employees were proud graduates as well as grateful employees of Sodexho for the opportunity that they had to earn a degree at work. To top it all off, Sodexho, as a bonus of adopting the earn your degree at work program realized a return on investment (ROI) of over 600 per cent.

Sandelands

What has surprised you the most?

Lenderman

To tell the truth, I am amazed at two things. First, I am amazed at how easily and quickly the potential students figure out that they want to participate in a degree program earned at work. Within minutes, they ask me, "When can I start?" This tells me that there is a great hunger for educational opportunities within companies.

Second, in contrast, I marvel at how difficult the process is to explain to some HR professionals. We have been lucky at Sodexho with so many HR folks grasping and supporting the concept. Because the degrees are earned at work and not in the traditional classroom style, many are not able to grasp the process easily. I suspect that

this is a normal reaction in many companies. Some folks take new ideas and run with them and others take a wait and see attitude. It took me some time to understand and embrace the concept of learning at work myself. Naturally, now that I am a believer in the process and have seen marvelous work being done by our students I had to leave my earlier thought process behind. I was so pleased to see our students flourish. The work that they have produced for the company is amazingly well done. I suspect the wait and see folks will not need much more proof! I also suspect that the HR professionals that are aligned with the operations of a company will catch on more quickly than those who are isolated from the folks that have to produce the actual services or products that the company offers. Did I say that politely enough?

Sandelands

What challenges have proved the largest obstacles to progress?

Lenderman

The cost of individual degrees is so economical that it is hard to figure how that could be an obstacle. The cost per degree, per person, goes down with more students enrolled. Until critical amounts of people are enrolled, things can take some time to get rolling. When student enrollment reaches 30 or more students, the cost per degree, on average, is under \$2,500.00/student. After 30 students, the cost per degree dramatically drops below \$2,500.00.

At first, some folks are concerned about the time it will take to complete their degree versus time available to work on the degree while on the job. It takes a while to learn to integrate the process of learning at work as part of their normal work duties. I suspect that the root of this is planted in traditional education, where one has to go somewhere else to learn and spend their time in class on certain days and times. For the modern worker, this is difficult. When they realize that they are learning all the time at work and that they will improve personal and company results, this potential problem vanishes.

Sandelands

How do you and your colleagues measure the success of the Sodexo corporate university?

Lenderman

This is one question that I love to answer. Since all work produced for the degree programs are “outputs,” each project is well documented. Part of the grading for the projects is the evaluation of the ROI component of their work. It is part of the process. Any work submitted without a demonstration of progress (ROI, customer service improvement, etc.) is incomplete.

Two people grade the student. One is the “Business Coach” who insures that the work furthered the goals of the company and the other is the “Learning Coach” or “Set Advisor” who insures that the project is well stated and presented according to academic standards. This process involves hard work and personal growth of the individual.

Proving that the learning turns into a profitable outcome for a company has been sought after by training professionals since the first training class was ever conducted.

While we can conduct well-received training, we struggle with a predictable outcome of that training. Now, using this ROI approach to learning produces results that are immediately obvious and measurable. At last, we have found a problem centred, employee-rewarding model of learning that shows measurable results from that learning.

A Sodexho vice-president stated that he could not find a more cost effective approach to operating his part of the business. He has several learning teams operating now and anticipates more than a dozen more learning teams forming this year. His first team saved Sodexho several hundred thousand dollars. What business could turn down that sort of return?

Sandelands

What challenges await you next?

Lenderman

I now spend three out of four weeks talking to companies and organizations outside of Sodexho to help them to start a similar program to Sodexho's Degree Program. I sift through many different mindsets in order to explain what we are doing. This process is challenging and rewarding at the same time. I have kept my focus on the win-win proposition of company and employee benefits to our degree program.

I would dearly love to see thousands of students at hundreds of companies earn their degree at work and break the educational glass ceiling that they have had to battle throughout their career. I know that companies that choose to maximize their human and capital resources can quickly embrace our educational model.

Sandelands

In conclusion, what tips would you give others wishing to create a Sodexho-style corporate university?

Lenderman

First, I would recommend that companies first realize this new opportunity to help educate their employees. Most companies realize this.

Second, I would recommend that these companies identify employees who would love to earn a degree at work while solving the company's problems.

Third, I would eliminate the educational glass ceiling as quickly as possible by providing cost effective college degrees to their employees!

Notes

1. Those wishing to further explore the ideas and experiences related in this interview can contact Dr Lenderman as follows: Harry Lenderman, Ed.D., Academic Dean, Sodexho University, Tel: +1 410 392-9012; Fax: +1 410 392-2954; E-mail: harry@elkforge.com
2. Sodexho University is the corporate university of Sodexho in the USA. Its degree programs in the workplace are conducted with IMCA Socrates™ and gain credit for degrees at Revans University – The University of Action Learning. For contact more information: IMCA Socrates at: www.imcasocrates.com and Revans University at: www.revans-university.edu.

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