

What Can an Online Program Do for You?

by Paris de l'Etraz

A business school must train its students to function well in a fast-paced, technologically demanding workplace where teams of people from multiple countries collaborate on projects with urgent deadlines. I'm convinced the best educational environment for achieving that goal is a blended learning program. Such programs, which deliver part of the education through face-to-face instruction and part through online interaction, are often promoted as offering more convenience to students and more efficiency to the school. But they also might do a better job than traditional classrooms when it comes to preparing students for conditions they will face in the real working world.

Blended learning programs help schools internationalize, diversify, expand—and actually improve management education.

Advances in virtual-world technology promise that students' online experiences will continue to become richer and more intense. Even so, a school shouldn't use technology just to capitalize on an existing model by shuffling hundreds of students through a specific platform; the school shouldn't simply push knowledge through Webinars, streaming lectures, or self-paced learning modules. The best programs employ technology to promote interactive, group-based learning—not only in the classroom, but also online, enabling seamless collaboration and challenging students academically every step of the way.

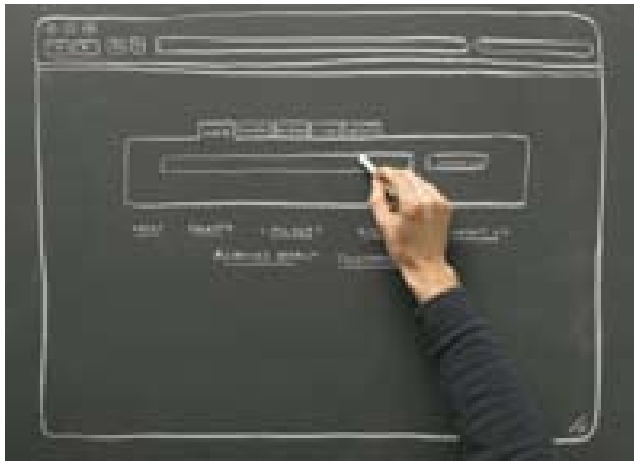


“Blended learning programs aren’t about dazzling new products, they’re about *design*.”

Therefore, blended learning programs aren’t about dazzling new products, they’re about *design*. They succeed when there is an effective alignment of a school’s methodology, technology, and faculty. As a program director at IE Business School in Madrid, Spain, recently said, “At IE, we only ask one thing from our technology—that it works.” That should be the starting position for any school offering a program or a course that relies in part on technology.

Seven Reasons to Blend

While dozens of business schools already offer some online learning options, for those that don’t, I’ve found seven reasons to consider incorporating them into the curriculum. I draw on the experiences and observations of Rob Ayasse, a recent graduate of IE’s International Executive MBA program, as well as the input of other proponents of online education.



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1. A blended learning program suits the schedule of today’s busy professional. Particularly in EMBA programs, students often are so rushed and overcommitted that they don’t have the time to take a year out to further their educations. A program that is partly online allows them to keep working at their jobs while investing minimally in travel. Ayasse needed a program that would allow him to take classes from Brussels, where he’s based, or Afghanistan, where he frequently travels. Because the IE program required only three face-to-face sessions, two in Madrid and one in Shanghai, he could easily make his schedule conform to the demands of the class.

Administrators at schools that haven’t yet launched blended programs might worry that the student doing the online work isn’t the same one attending the face-to-face

session. But at IE, since our entire model is based on collaborative learning, we don’t have a fear of substitution. In addition, we assess three areas in our final evaluations: teamwork, which counts for 30 percent of the grade; individual participation through forums and videoconferences, which counts for 35 percent; and the final case study exam, which also counts for 35 percent. Thus, students are assessed on every component of the program.

2. A blended learning program can offer as much academic rigor as a traditional program. Ayasse appreciated the range of readings, multimedia learning tools, and simulations employed in his class, as well as the “wide-ranging, highly interactive four-day online discussion of the topics.” But the critical value of the class, he says, was “the need to read the material, then synthesize it into well-written submissions for the online discussion. This process forces students to internalize information at a much higher rate, which fosters a deeper understanding of the material and leads to a far deeper exploration than a classical classroom setting could provide.”

3. A blended learning program allows everyone in class an equal chance to participate. This is not always the case in classroom sessions, where time is limited or particularly outspoken individuals might dominate discussions.

In fact, Santiago Iñiguez, dean of IE, believes that students of sophisticated blended programs are forced to interact with their classmates *more* than students in face-to-face programs. He stresses that when students work online, they need to make a real effort to become known by their classmates, because otherwise they “don’t exist.” Students who attend a conventional classroom and merely sit in the back of the room don’t need to invest nearly the same amount of energy.

Says Ayasse, “In every traditional class, you have those who are eager for discussion, and those who try desperately to hide, while the majority of people fall somewhere in between. In an online discussion, everyone is *forced* to participate actively, because there is *nowhere* to hide! It becomes immediately obvious—not just to the professor, but to all the classmates—if somebody has not read or understood that week’s case. Believe me, this in itself is a powerful motivator.”

4. A blended learning program helps a business school globalize. In a July 2010 article in the *Harvard Business Review*, Richard Barker noted that Americans make

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up 70 percent of the class at most highly ranked U.S. schools, while 20 percent are students with close ties to the U.S.; only 10 percent are genuine outsiders. Top-tier European business schools have much higher diversity rates, with some admitting fewer than 10 percent from their home countries, but even they often express a desire to globalize at a faster rate.

In an effort to draw more international students to their programs, many universities have opened satellite campuses in other countries. But these remote locations often don't do much to globalize a school, because 80 percent of the students still will be drawn from the local population, while only about 20 percent will be truly foreign. A blended program, which allows individuals to participate from anywhere in the world, is more certain to help a school attract a truly international student base.

5. A blended learning program can help schools diversify the classroom.

Most business schools don't want to simply ratchet up the percentage of students who come from other countries. They want to create a learning environment that reflects our business reality—which includes diverse workforces that face the everyday challenges of business integration. A blended learning program has the

unprecedented ability to bring together multicultural student groups who are expected to interact seamlessly, as they will be required to do in the workplace.

Ayasse's EMBA team comprised individuals in six cultures working in time zones that ranged from Hong Kong to Montevideo; they had to work collaboratively to develop two to three products a week. "It was a massive logistical challenge, but one that's increasingly common in the modern age of global business," he says.

Student teams aren't the only ones who are dealing with those logistical challenges; professors have the task of overseeing the efforts of so many far-flung students. IE's online campus, where professors coordinate forums and videoconferences with students, is open 24 hours a day. Professors arrange videoconferences for the times when most students

can join at a reasonable hour and record the conferences so that students who miss them can view them later.

6. A blended learning program offers many possibilities for collaboration.

Whether the collaborations are between universities and businesses, or among multiple universities, these partnerships leverage the strengths of different organizations all over the world without requiring expensive investments in travel.

In 2009, IE partnered with Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, to launch an EMBA that places humanities at the center of the curriculum. The 15-month program includes five intense face-to-face periods in Providence and Madrid, coupled with periods of online learning. Courses integrate business concepts with concepts

from the social sciences, life sciences, and engineering, with the goal of developing leaders who have fresh perspectives on global business.

7. A blended learning program can help the business school grow.

As I've already noted, it's difficult for young professionals to take a year or more away from work to pursue a graduate business degree, and I think it's going to be even more difficult in the years

ahead. At the same time, MBA programs are becoming more expensive, just as fewer employers are willing to pay for their managers to take these programs.

These factors make it unlikely that traditional MBA programs will continue to expand in the future. But blended learning programs—which allow participants to keep their jobs and schools to pull from a larger pool of candidates—will deliver growth to the business school.

The IE Approach

At IE, we are committed to blended learning. Our programs feature students from more than 30 countries for a mix that is 94 percent international. Most of our students are mature, with an average age of 36. We keep our classrooms small, capping them at 32 students, and we con-



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sider it important that our MBA faculty teach most of our blended programs.

Our methodology is based primarily on the case method, and we focus strongly on interaction and group-facilitated learning. We believe our asynchronous online discussions—which usually last several days—go into issues more deeply than a one-hour classroom discussion might, because students and professors can think about the contributions everyone else has made before crafting thoughtful responses. In programs like the IE/Brown Executive MBA, several discussions will be held in parallel, which creates further linkages across topics.


Our faculty are skilled at driving online discussions and collaborations to help students achieve key learning objectives. These interactions are supported by digital learning tools from Blackboard and Adobe Connect that allow students to participate in videoconferences, send instant messages, access online documents, and communicate via VoIP technologies. We chose these platforms because they are user-friendly, widely used, and frequently updated. Professors can also mix in other technologies, such as simulators or wikis.

We believe these digital tools build strong communities across borders and time zones—even stronger than the communities that can be created in a face-to-face classroom. However, it's not the technology itself we focus on, but the way this technology aligns with our curriculum and our faculty.

The Way Forward

Each business school needs to create its own “footprint” in terms of the business education it delivers. For most of us, that means adopting important new learning technologies, updating our curricula to keep them relevant, continuing to add practical value to our local business communities, and always maintaining our academic rigor.

One of our greatest challenges today is helping our faculty accept the idea of a learning environment that happens partially online and embraces constant student interaction. IE has a whole area dedicated to learning innovation, and we work closely with professors to make sure their traditional classes are replicated as well as possible online. The process is ongoing, and professors may attend seminars and receive other kinds of support throughout the year.

As the business world becomes increasingly complex and demanding, business education must become more responsive. I believe the time will come when an MBA will cease being a possible stop for a manager on a career route and instead become an integral part of the day-to-day journey. Business schools will have to make that journey with those young executives—and blended learning programs provide the best vehicles for traveling in style. 

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