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EDUCATION

Why Higher Ed and Business Need to Work Together

by Michael D. King

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Over the past decade, business has changed dramatically. As a result, workforce skills and requirements have also changed. There are jobs today that didn't exist 10 years ago — data scientist, social media manager, app developer — and in five more, there will be new roles with new requirements that don't exist now. But while this has happened, one sector has lagged behind: higher education.

The speed of technological innovation and industry demands is moving faster than higher education's ability to adapt. The system continues to focus on lectures and exams, leaving students underprepared to enter today's workforce. They're suffering as a result – along with businesses and higher education institutions themselves. How can we expect students to be effective and successful employees when we're using outdated models to prepare them?

When we at the IBM Institute for Business Value surveyed a group of academic and industry leaders about the current state of higher education, they agreed. We found that 51% of respondents believe that the current higher education system fails to meet the needs of students, and nearly 60% believe it fails to meet the needs of industry.

Industry and academic leaders revealed that the very skills needed for workforce success are the same skills graduating students lack — such as analysis and problem solving, collaboration and teamwork, business-context communication, and flexibility, agility, and adaptability. Underscoring this point, 71% of corporate recruiters indicated that finding applicants with sufficient practical experience is their greatest challenge when recruiting from higher education institutions.

Boosting the value of today's higher education system and, most importantly, helping prepare students for life after class, means adopting a more practical and applied approach to education. Those surveyed overwhelmingly agree that providing experience-based and practical learning is critical to address the current performance gaps. Integral to this is building and expanding partnerships between academia and the private sector to create a more valuable education ecosystem.

San Jose State University (SJSU) is an example of an institution that has recognized the need to incorporate experience-based learning and a focus on skills related to social business. In partnership with IBM, SJSU created a program that provides students with the opportunity to deepen their social networking skills while learning to adapt to real-word business challenges. As part of their coursework, students are mentored by IBMers. They learn about internal and external uses for social networking technology, and how it can be applied to business operations — from HR to marketing to product development — for more efficient collaboration and faster innovation.

For example, during one project, students assessed the marketing environment of an IBM business partner. Performing "social business assessments," the students looked at how the organization collaborated internally and built connections with suppliers. Then, working together, they created a plan to improve marketing operations, suggesting that the company make better use of blogs, videos, and content sharing to improve the flow of information and collaboration across the entire organization. The practical experience from assignments like this better prepares students for tasks they'll have to do in the real world.

Students also expect their institutions to deliver technologically enhanced experiences, yet higher education doesn't always deliver. Universities have to start embracing and exploiting new technologies in analytics, cloud computing, mobility, and social media to provide greater access to educational content, integrate physical and digital worlds for more engaging experiences, and improve decision making.

Consider what's happening at EMLYON Business School. They developed a "Smart Business School" higher education environment that delivers personalized, on-demand business education globally via cloud computing. Business courses are available across devices, in multiple languages, at the school's campuses in France,

China, and Morocco as well as on "pop-up" campuses in emerging markets, such as West Africa. The combination of cloud, big data, and analytics, and EMLYON's in-depth teaching expertise, creates a "learning by flow" education model that provides unique and personalized development and training that is more directly relevant to today's workforce and skills requirements. In a similar way that consumers today choose their entertainment, EMLYON students can choose the courses and content relevant to their career path when, where, and how they want it.

Both of these examples also show that in order to transform curricula and embrace technology, institutions should consider collaborating with industry partners. In fact, 57% of industry and academic leaders agree that collaboration is necessary to effectively deliver higher education to students, while 56% believe collaboration is necessary during curriculum development.

The emergence of new collaborative education models are already starting to reinvent education. In 2011, IBM helped develop and introduce Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECH), a completely new education model that blends career and technical skills, emphasizes STEM subjects, and combines free public high schooling with community college. It provides students with a solid foundation across the core academic curriculum that's linked directly to common core standards. This new school of grades 9-14 pairs students, who are admitted with no special tests or requirements, with mentors from the business community. Affiliated companies also provide practical workplace experience with internships. After six years of study, students earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree, and many will receive job offers from sponsoring industry partners like IBM. In the fall of 2015, there will be at least 40 P-TECH schools, serving tens of thousands of students and 100 partner companies.

For multiple generations, higher education has successfully supported growth, economic development, and social change. While the industry has never faced the magnitude of change and disruption it does today, the challenges also come with tremendous opportunity for institutions and their leaders to find new ways to deliver more value to students and the workforce. By capitalizing on new technologies and collaborating with industry forces to build a new model of education and create a supportive ecosystem, we can shape a new way of working and learning. It's time to reinvigorate our higher education system so students are adequately prepared to succeed in an evolving world.

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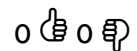
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The "outdated" university system has survived some 800 or so years - while many "innovative" and "agile" companies and other organisations have fallen by the wayside. The university does not exist to serve industry, it exists to serve knowledge - through its creation and transfer via research and teaching.
Universities survived the invention of the printing press, the invention of the railroad, the telegraph, the radio, the telephone, and the internet. It doesn't need to adapt itself to every fad and fashion - it merely needs to focus on rigour and excellence.

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