

Corporate universities: Distinct skills can be brought together

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They may be old rivals, but today business schools and corporate universities have put aside their mutual antipathy. Collaboration is now the name of the game.

There are benefits for both sides: corporate universities gain access to research and fresh thinking; business schools get the opportunity to view a company at work.

"Developing strong partnerships with corporate universities is an opportunity for the company and the business school to share and create new knowledge," says Bertrand Moingeon, professor of strategic management and deputy dean of HEC Paris.

The relationship between HEC and Pernod Ricard, the drinks company, has evolved over the past 15 years. The school has not only designed programmes for Pernod Ricard, but has used what it has learned to develop case studies about the company.

"[The relationship] is a learning journey for us," says Prof Moingeon. "There is experimentation and risk, it is a great opportunity to test new things to try new methodologies, it is also learning [opportunities] for us."

"HEC is key for us," says Bruno de Monplanet, vice-president group human resources management and training at Pernod Ricard. He describes the relationship as symbiotic: "[The school] is able to match the theory with the reality ... and where you find this reality is inside a company like ours," he says.

"These are things that teachers need to give some flesh to their thinking: a school can give direction, vision and a long-term view and we can tell them how the market works and we have consumer insights," he adds.

But the benefits work both ways. Mr de Monplanet considers one of the key aspects of the corporate university's relationship with HEC is perspective. The school offers Pernod Ricard an "external vision and more objectivity", he explains.

He cites the example of emerging markets where Pernod Ricard needs to understand how to market its brand clearly. The school can advise the company appropriately, he says, because its global vision provides an appreciation of emerging markets.

Esade in Spain also works closely with several corporate universities, including Universitas Telefónica, Unión Fenosa and PwC. The school recently held a forum in Madrid to discuss the future of corporate universities and the challenges they face.

"Our forums serve the purpose of helping corporate universities to gain a better understanding of their strategic and non-strategic role," says Alfons Sauquet, Esade dean. But they also help the school to acquire an understanding of their needs, he adds.

He says business schools can add value to corporate universities in specific areas, such as innovation, research and managing diversity.

"Time has proven that it is a fruitful relationship between both parties," says Prof Sauquet.

For Juan Rovira, head of Universitas Telefónica, it is the design of programmes and their execution and delivery that is of particular value.

Mr Rovira describes the relationship between Universitas Telefónica and Esade as an "extraordinarily powerful link".

"You need to work with experts because they are expert in converting [needs] into business requirements," he says. "It is the role of the business school – they receive our needs and help us convert them into a programme."

Telefónica has 250,000 employees worldwide and a business school's ability to translate a company's needs across all markets is vital.

Looking ahead, Prof Moingeon for one, anticipates further collaboration. "We see corporate universities developing and creating new knowledge," he says. "Traditionally, corporate universities have been using available knowledge."

He also anticipates e-learning partnership initiatives and joint applied research projects with corporate universities working alongside business schools.

For Prof Sauquet, the more corporate universities work with business schools, the more the relationship is likely to develop into a strategic partnership.

Familiarity appears to breed confidence and loyalty when it comes to future collaboration.

For corporate universities, the research and innovative perspectives that a school can offer will ensure such partnerships continue.

Without doubt, however, corporate universities – once seen as a company fad – are thriving.

And the lessons that companies and their corporate universities are now learning in the teeth of the recession, will in time provide business schools with priceless knowledge and insights.

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