

## How does IMCA Socrates™ accredit managers at work?

### Workplace education: Our view of the future

During the next few years, we believe that the rise of corporate business schools (CBS) and universities will drive the creation of a parallel, equivalent (but wholly different) paradigm in business and management education. This will happen partly in response to growing corporate dissatisfaction with the MBA culture, centred as it is on notions of academic excellence, but more so, as CBS leaders gain in confidence and begin to see the CBS as an educational entity in its own right. We think that professional excellence will sit at the heart of the new paradigm. Further, that corporate business schools will build their own external credibility via internalized accreditation structures. We also think that corporate business schools will be awarding their own professional qualifications, based on real world learning at work. These new style awards will be highly prized awards that recognize professional attainment at work and celebrate the fact that managers, supervisors and associates actually learn best at work. They will also reflect personal, portable, professional achievements and they will be every bit as intellectually challenging as an academic degree. This will be derived from customized, deep level learning in a corporate world that is fast and getting faster.

### What role will evaluation play in the corporate business school of the future?

We believe that a much more learner-centred approach will come to the fore. The emergence of professional, performance-based degrees will transform levels of engagement and motivation in learning at work. These will have customized pathways with bespoke designs linked to the needs of clusters or categories of managers (based on variables like seniority, experience, job roles and responsibilities). In this scenario, the outputs or applications will attract credit (rather like currency). Furthermore, this will enable managers to align their own self development with the needs of the business and formalize their own development in a way that is relevant and meaningful. As managers create and implement outputs from their own work, they become internal experts or put another way, nodes in the corporation's own knowledge network. We also believe that the evaluation work conducted by CBS leaders will in future, focus on helping managers to optimize a twin track return on investment - for the manager and for the business. This learner-centred approach will need a real time variance monitoring and tracking system so that CBS structures can adjust their learning designs, capture the evidence of learning, award credit and disseminate the benefits of output-driven learning at work via their knowledge network.

### So what about the role of technology in the corporate business school of the future?

Apart from the time and intellectual capital commitments made in creating and sustaining a corporate business school, technology is arguably the most expensive and under used investment. The central question for us here is: 'Will managers freely buy-in and engage with an electronic learning environment?' We have worked with online environments since 1985 and it is without doubt, the most cost-effective way of distributing content - from curriculum to the body of knowledge provided by online libraries. Our own experiences tells us that busy managers soon disengage unless they can see how to make the technology and learning experience meaningful to them. We have found that action learning provides a near perfect fit with e-resourcing. Here, the manager begins - not with the content or the courses, but with the questions and challenges they are facing at work. Then in effect, they draw in the content that might best shed light on, or illuminate their questions. What arises from a learner-first, learner-driven approach to using technology is both liberating (for the manager) and valuable for the business. In particular, the manager is able to customize how they use content or input work to create a dynamic curriculum that will enable them to find and apply the answers and solutions to their questions. In all of this, technology has a key enabling role and it is our view that other learner-centred approaches will emerge, allied to action learning. The body of knowledge is now so vast that unless managers can define their own questions, they will never know where to look! This mirrors and helps adults to re-discover the power of self-directed enquiry that most of us used as children - asking innocent questions that are so often over-looked.

**In summary:**

*Professional excellence - the new educational paradigm*

(1) We foresee ever-closer integration of learning and work. In essence: this means providing faster, more flexible, customized learning pathways - and much greater use of action learning to facilitate this. We believe that the rise of corporate universities will drive the creation of a parallel, equivalent (but different) paradigm in business and management education.

*Corporate universities as educational entities in their own right*

(2) We predict that in a few years time, corporate universities will want to award their own qualifications, based on real world learning at work. These new style awards will recognize professional excellence at work and celebrate the fact that managers, supervisors and associates actually learn best at work.

*The emergence of a performance-based degree*

(3) The concept of a professional or performance-based degree will build on all the infrastructure developments that have taken place since the advent of e-learning and significantly, it will provide the catalyst for turning input activity (such as training, e-learning, curricula resources) into outputs - all aligned with the needs of the business. The transition from input to output will help to ensure that managers are motivated, fully engaged, recognized and rewarded for their professional attainments at work. This paradigm shift has already begun. It will not compete head on with the traditional academic world, rather it will provide an alternative, relevant pathway that blends learning and work and defines quality in a fluid, dynamic way as fitness for purpose - always as a mirror image of the organizational and personal priorities for learning.

*The corporate university as a strategic driver of return on investment*

(4) We foresee the gap narrowing between the evaluation of personal and corporate learning outcomes and the outcomes of work itself. In essence, whatever measures and approaches are meaningful to the corporation as business evaluation tools, will be deployed. So, whenever and wherever learning occurs, it will have to yield a return on the investment in learning (by the corporate university) and on the expectations of the manager.

*The re-emergence of learner-centered evaluation*

(5) We believe that a much more learner-centered approach will come to the fore. The emergence of performance-based awards will transform levels of engagement and motivation in learning at work. These will have customized pathways with bespoke designs linked to the needs of clusters or categories of managers (based on variables like seniority, experience, job roles and responsibilities).

*The role of technology in the corporate university of the future*

(6) We have found that action learning provides a near perfect fit with e-resourcing. Here, the manager begins - not with the content or the courses, but with the questions and challenges they are facing at work. Then in effect, they draw in the content that might best shed light on, or illuminate their questions. What arises from a learner-first, learner-driven approach to using technology is both liberating (for the manager) and valuable for the business.

**Where does IMCA Socrates™ fit in?**

IMCA Socrates™ is a system based on three components: (i) the concept of a truly customized corporate university, (ii) an action learning approach (here action learning projects become the curriculum) and (iii) accreditation whereby associates gain credits that lead to awards. It is a formula with something for everyone. The organization 'wins' by getting practical solutions to operational problems and a highly motivated workforce committed to successful implementation. Individual associates 'win' by getting a worthwhile qualification and the organization itself helps to model a new style corporate university where associates apply their knowledge to raise performance and the business coaches are successful managers within the company. According to Peter Honey, a European learning specialist, the effect is nothing short of a quantum leap towards becoming a learning organization. The approach invites organizations to behave as if learning through work is king.

"The enterprise where we work is far and away the most significant business school that managers ever attend." Gordon Wills, IMCA, founder.

Our mission is to support corporate business schools and universities as they strive to become recognized, educational entities in their own right. Our campus lies in the global workplace and uniquely, we provide the services and support of an accredited university to assist organization's to build their own brand for learning. Why? First, in the books that we wrote during the late 1990s about our experiences of working with corporations in the emerging corporate university field<sup>(1)</sup>, we saw that a radically different approach to management education was emerging. What did we learn from our work?

That:

- A dynamic professional curriculum and quality assurance model is essential. A pre-configured academic curriculum imposes an external view of what is important - it completely undermines the organization's own agenda.
- Economies of scale can be found using a wholesale model. This enables many more people to gain their degree at work - an excellent, cost-effective alternative to the traditional, rather elitist retail model of business school education in the classroom.
- The organization's own brand is far more relevant and important as a sponsor for learning than a traditional university brand name.
- Participant engagement is vital - one cannot assume that busy managers will buy in to the opportunity to gain a degree at work unless they can learn what they want, in a way that is meaningful to them. The level of customization required here poses the ultimate challenge to educationalists.
- The corporate world is fast and getting faster and most managers are literally swamped every day with emails and information of every kind both in hard copy and electronic formats.
- Organizations have very significant agendas of their own and that it is perfectly possible to craft a programme of study for managers at all levels, without the need to rely on conventional frameworks for management education.
- Academic wisdom is not actually helpful in creating frameworks for learning at work. In fact, the organization's own model for professional excellence is more meaningful - and more challenging.
- The holy grail of learning at work is tangible evidence of return on investment in learning - practical, trackable outcomes help managers to learn from experience and organizations to achieve better results.

Second, we firmly believe that the enterprise itself is the best business school environment for busy managers.

Our shared conviction is that learning at work is a better way for practitioners to become more effective managers. We created IMCA Socrates™ specifically for this professional purpose. Our goal is to help organizations to use it with confidence and to build innovative 21<sup>st</sup> century structures for accredited learning at work.

IMCA Socrates™ is an integrated system for accredited workplace learning. The word 'integrated' means that the system sits at the centre of the organization's own learning and development agenda, where it blends with the culture, language, politics and imperatives that characterize each user's own brand for learning. Our single biggest challenge was to design a system that organizations can use as their own. We found that if doesn't fit like a glove it doesn't work! Prototyping with our foundations users - all large organizations - meant that every aspect of the system was fine-tuned with this objective in mind. How does it work then?

**Step 1:** Where possible, we like to start by posing questions to senior line operators - they have to deliver outcomes and these always involve people. The aim of the discussion is to capture their realities - we use notes, diagrams and any other helpful device to frame a learning design in their own words. We then play this back to check that the specification is right. We have for example, used this approach to assist with large projects via an organizational cascade. We also find that operators have their own ideas. Above all, the purpose is to specify what work needs to be done and how the outputs will be captured and implemented. IMCA Socrates™ is entirely outcomes-driven - here credit is the currency we use to enable everyone involved to obtain a qualification appropriate to their level of contribution.

**Step 2:** Involves working with a small team from the human resources function. We run a train the trainer course to explain how the system works and thereafter they manage it with support from an external accreditation adviser - a member of the IMCA Socrates™ team.

**Step 3:** Brings participating managers face-to-face with their learning coach (ideally their boss) each will have separately reviewed the work completed and, after each output, they agree what went well and what could have been better. A third person verifies the grade. This gives the coach a constructive role in supporting managers who are working towards a work-based degree.

**Step 4:** The management team with support from the accreditation adviser, prepare quarterly progress reviews (QPRs). These include inputs from all the stakeholders groups - the participating managers, their coaches, internal advisers and external quality assurance team members who provide an independent perspective. The quarterly QPRs help the team to track all the changes and outcomes and in audit terms, they provide a storyline (rather like a book in four chapters). An annual operational review completes the cycle and subject to satisfactory progress, the IMCA Socrates™ team renew the organization's accreditation licence.

In summary:

- IMCA Socrates™ users like the system - it delivers results at low unit cost and our long term renewals record shows that it works.
- Stable, secure partnerships arise from working with organizations on the inside. The integrated approach enables the accreditation adviser to work with the management team - in the long term.
- Quarterly progress reviewing brings with it the necessary discipline to reflect on what is 'going well' and 'not so well' - where necessary, we put things 'right' - together.
- We always build from customer realities and priorities and create unique learning designs based on practical ground rules.
- We always leverage the company's own resources, activities and professional curricula. There is masses of content already.
- We are wholly outcomes focused - plenty of excellent training and development goes on, but the evidence of learning and application is nearly always absent.
- We want to help our customers to build and continually improve their own brand for learning. The only one that really matters!

Notes:

(1) Wills, Gordon (1998) 'The Knowledge Game', Cassell, London; Teare, Richard, Davies, David, Sandelands, Eric (1998) 'The Virtual University', Cassell, London; Prestoungrange, Gordon, Sandelands, Eric, Teare, Richard (2000) 'The Virtual Learning Organization' Cassell, London.

Source: Accrediting Managers at Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Richard Teare & Gordon Prestoungrange, Prestoungrange University Press, 2004.