Executive education even more essential
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These are difficult times. Despite signs of a tepid economic recovery, we remain mired in the worst labor market in 70 years. Consumer confidence has plunged, home sales are flat-lining and fears of a double-dip recession persist.

So of course it's just good business sense for corporations to tighten their belts by slashing the budgets used to fund executive education. Right?

Wrong, says Stephen Burnett, professor of strategic management and associate dean of executive education at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Evanston. "When you have very difficult times, you always look for ideas that can make a difference in an organization," he says. "And executive education is an ideal way to generate those ideas."

Steve LaCivita, associate dean of executive education at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, puts it another way. "People are looking to solve problems and engage in opportunities that are being defined not only by the downturn, but by the accelerated pace of change," he says. "The blueprints people once used are inadequate today. And individuals have to be architects to create the new strategies they're going to use, and assess the value of those strategies, rather than simply following blueprints."

In fact, there may never have been a better time for executive education, say business school officials at some of Chicago's best-known universities, including the aforementioned University of Chicago and Northwestern University, as well as Loyola University Chicago. All offer both open enrollment programs to business people and custom programs tailored to specific companies.

Effective strategy

One reason executive education programs are so effective is the genesis for course development typically comes at least in part from the business community. At Kellogg, for instance, courses are inspired by faculty research and teaching interests, but also by "the customers," Burnett says. By working with and deeply understanding businesses and business executives, program administrators become aware of common issues organizations face.

"The phone rings constantly, and on the other end are individuals and companies saying things like, 'Here's my problem: I've just been promoted; I'm the new GM and how can you help me?'" Burnett relates.

At Booth, LaCivita reports his staff has interviewed more than 260 chief learning officers at corporations worldwide, to determine what keeps those officers up at night. "We also talk to participants in our program to find out what they need, and that's more than 2,000 people a year," he adds.

Loyola University Chicago associate director of executive education Mario Polizzi reports executive education programs at his school are based on listening to customers. "When an organization is saying
we're facing a competitive threat, we tell them we can help them address that, whether developing a new product, launching a new service or introducing a new business line," he says.

There's a difference

Executive education programs vary widely and require differing levels of commitment. For instance, Kellogg offers about 40 open enrollment programs in eight subject areas: marketing, leadership, strategy, technology, governance, general management, sales and not-for-profit, Burnett says. Most will be offered twice this year, meaning there will be about 80 open enrollment courses in 2010.

Most range from two days to four weeks, and in the latter, students literally reside on campus, studying and socializing together at the James L. Allen Center, Kellogg's executive education facility. In the live-in environment, "there's a total immersion," Burnett says. "And that's also important to peer learning. You learn a lot more if you live with your classmates 24 hours a day."

At Booth, one of the better-attended open enrollment programs is Chicago Management Institute, offered every other Friday, all day, from January through June, LaCivita says. "It's a general management program, a way for people in corporations to broaden their perspective," he adds. "There are general management pieces, leadership, marketing and strategy, and a variety of other lessons, including micro and macroeconomics. It's aimed at upper middle to senior-level executives."

The Chicago Executive Institute, by contrast, is an advanced management program focusing on leadership strategies and corporate governance, with electives available to make it more individual to the goals of senior-level execs enrolled. The next program will begin in April 2011 and end in August 2012, and be comprised of six one-week sessions spread over that period, LaCivita says.

At Loyola University Chicago, a popular open enrollment program is the "mini-MBA," 10 Monday nights in a row from 6 to 9 p.m. at Water Tower campus, Polizzi says. Another is the Health Care Management Class, a kind of mini MBA for those who want to learn about managing health care organizations. This is a one-week course, from 9 am. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Like Kellogg and Booth, Loyola designs custom courses to the needs of corporations.

The university is now providing the staff of a large French firm that is launching a new business line with a three-week, full-time course. "We're putting all their U.S.-based employees in this line through the same training," Polizzi says. "As a result, they're all credible because they're better informed, and can build the capacity to execute, because they all have the same training."