

Capturing *the* Potential of Education



Executive education programs today are focusing on the “hot” supply chain topics. Here’s a look at what’s available and how you can take advantage of these offerings.

By Bridget McCrea, Contributing Editor

Whether they want to get back to the basics, increase their firms’ global presence, or more tightly intertwine their companies’ end-to-end supply chain, today’s supply chain professionals are turning to universities, professional associations, and consulting firms for the education required to achieve those goals.

Education providers are answering the call, combining new course offerings with convenient delivery methods to reach all corners of the supply chain profession. In this supplement, we’ll look at what’s new and “hot” in executive education in the supply chain space, look at what several schools are doing to make sure that they’re meeting student needs, and give you insights about what’s coming around the next corner.

Back to Basics, Please

With the national economy slowly improving and companies in recovery mode after a few tough years, more attention is being paid to the supply chain. Organizations are examining how well the supply chain is working, the role it plays in a firm’s overall success, and any related deficiencies or gaps that need attention. “There’s definitely a focus right now on getting ‘back to the basics’ with supply chain-

related education,” says Don Ratliff, executive director for Georgia Tech’s Supply Chain and Logistics Institute in Atlanta.

“Companies want to make sure that their supply chain and logistics people understand basic inventory, transportation, warehousing, and supply chain strategy,” Ratliff continues. “There’s a lot less interest in the ‘gee whiz’ stuff that firms were asking for just a few years ago.”



Credit the economic downturn with stoking that grassroots mentality, which is driving companies to develop leaner supply chains, for example. “We’re still not quite past the economic downturn,” says Ratliff, “so the focus is still on making sure a firm has the basic blocking and tackling down; lean falls under that umbrella.”

Ratliff’s team at Georgia Tech is also fielding a high number of company-specific queries right now.

Most of the questions concern supply chain challenges that the firm is grappling with, with an eye on solving them through “live” continuing education (as opposed to online message boards or other virtual means). “In some cases,” says Ratliff, “you really need to be able to sit down and talk these issues out face-to-face in order to get them solved.”

Companies Speak Up

At the University of Tennessee’s Global Supply Chain Institute in Knoxville, executive education programs are being adapted to meet the needs of the companies like Coca Cola, Procter and Gamble, Honeywell, and Amazon. “These firms meet on campus a couple of times a year,” says J. Paul Dittmann, the institute’s executive director. “Through those interactions, we hear a lot in terms of what they’re looking for in their supply chain education.”

One area that’s getting a lot of attention these days is the global supply chain and how it’s being supported through executive education offerings. “Most supply chains are global in nature,” says Dittmann. “The question is, how many good educational programs are available to executives that need a strong learning component that’s focused



Capturing *the* Potential of Education

[specifically] on supply chain?”

The pickings are slim, according to Dittmann, whose group recently introduced a global supply chain executive MBA program to help fill that gap. And while multiple universities offer executive MBA programs, he says that this new offering was developed around the need to “carve out a niche in the global supply chain arena.”

In developing the new program, the University of Tennessee once again turned to the 30 or so global supply chain executives active in the school’s Global Supply Chain Institute, all of which had the opportunity to give their input into the program’s design. “Using that input, we put together a supply chain curriculum with a strong global focus,” says Dittmann.

The 12-month global program includes residencies in Knoxville as well as in Paris, Budapest, Singapore, and Rio de Janeiro. “Students will spend five, one-week residencies on campuses around the globe, and receive instruction from international faculty,” says Dittmann, who is bullish on the program’s potential for attracting students. “We think there will be big demand for this.”

Penn State University’s Smeal College of Business is also seeing higher demand for global supply chain education, according to Skip Grenoble, executive director for the Center for Supply Chain Research in University Park. “Global opportunities for [companies] are definitely on the upswing and will continue to increase,” says Grenoble.

To accommodate that trend both in terms of individual courses and for custom programs, the center this year will offer courses in Belgium, Prague, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Shanghai. The phenomenon works both ways in that Penn State is also hosting more international

supply chain executives who come to the U.S. to learn the ropes.

“We also have a group of wholesale and retail junior executives from South Africa who are potential managers, and who are set to come through our program in a few months,” adds Grenoble. “We’re seeing more and more of that kind of international representation in our courses.”

Hands-On Action Learning

Whereas in the past companies were satisfied with the coursework provided by the school or organization they were working with, today those same firms are rolling up their sleeves and taking a more hands-on approach to executive education. This type of “action learning,” is catching on, particularly among firms that are looking for custom programming options.

“There’s definitely a desire to build project work into the courses,” says Grenoble, whose school offers a two-week basic learning program that includes a short break followed by a 3-1/2 day program on transformation. Students start on their project work during the first week, continue work-

ing on it during the break, and then come back to report the results of their efforts.

Grenoble says interdisciplinary content is also in high demand. To answer the call, he says the Center for Supply Chain Research is broadening its content offerings to deliberately include speakers and/or instructors who can discuss non-supply chain disciplinary areas.

“More and more we’re using faculty from other disciplines for the supply chain courses,” says Grenoble. “Right now, our programs are being led by finance, accounting, management, organization, international business, and industrial engineering experts.”

Don Klock, professor of supply chain management at Rutgers Business School in Newark, is a big proponent of blending supply chain management programs with marketing science. “We’re serious about linking the instruction to both customers and consumers,” says Klock, whose team comprises over 30 professors, some of whom are supply chain experts, while others are marketing gurus.

“We work very hard at achieving that integration,” states Klock, “and linking the overall supply chain with the end users.” The school also focuses on cultivating professionals who will be able to run an end-to-end supply chain, and not just one or two links in that chain. Klock explains: “We try to bump up their skills by offering certificates in project management, manufacturing, or sustainability, for example, to make sure they walk away with a broad-based supply chain education.”

Continuous Professional Development

A supply chain professional is a unique animal who is hard to replace or rep-



licate. “It’s not as if an executive from some other totally unrelated field can just come into a supply chain position and be successful; that’s highly unlikely,” says Tennessee’s Dittmann. “Supply chains are amazingly complex, and getting more complicated all the time.”

And yet, today’s supply chain professionals—particularly those that bring the right mix of experience, education and business savvy—are handling the challenge quite well. To further enhance that value, Dittmann says the supply chain manager of the future will have to be more adept at “speaking the language of the boardroom executives.” Concepts like return on net assets, economic value-added, and working cash flow, for example, will have to be mastered in order to create the most well-rounded supply chain executives.

“Our students need to learn the language of the executive suite in order to have the right influence in the corporations where they work,” remarks Dittmann, who sees supply chain management as a lifelong

career requiring continuous professional development.

Some of that development may be delivered online, where distance education is picking up steam and being used to complement tradition-



al, classroom instruction. Expect that trend to continue, says Grenoble, who sees the cost effectiveness of online course delivery as one of its biggest selling points. “Over time,” he comments, “distance education will become more important, particularly for those executives who aren’t necessarily on the fast track, but who need the continuing education.”

Calling the United States the “best at supply chain logistics,” Ratliff also sees more distance education ahead for the space, in particular for those students that can’t travel halfway around the world to attend an American university and other programs in person. “We get calls from all over the world, asking us to provide supply chain education,” says Ratliff. “I expect we’ll see a gradual increase in the use of electronic media to fulfill those needs.”

Bridget McCrea is a freelance writer specializing in logistics and supply chain management. She can be reached at bridgetmc@earthlink.net.