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## The Role of Hybrid Learning Nets in Executive Management Education

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**Abstract:** Business schools have been experiencing a number of challenges over the past several years including declining enrollments. One of the few bright spots in this mosaic has been an increase in demand for executive management education. This trend can be attributed, in part, to globalization and to continued technological developments. These dynamics call for new and innovative systems for improving the delivery of executive management education. The traditional pedagogy is being replaced by a combination of time-honored and web-based customized learning systems. These so-called hybrid learning nets (HLN) are designed to optimize the learning experience. Equally important, HLN help enhance the overall business curriculum by improving course integration and consistency. HLN offer extensive opportunities for collaborative learning that often positively impact the educational experience. An essential feature of HLN is feedback. HLN can deliver specific content based on the background and performance of individual students. The purpose of this paper is to outline ways in which HLN can be used to improve the delivery of executive management education programs.

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# The Role of Hybrid Learning Nets in Executive Management Education

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## ABSTRACT

Business schools have been experiencing a number of challenges over the past several years including declining enrollments. One of the few bright spots in this mosaic has been an increase in demand for executive management education. This trend can be attributed, in part, to globalization and to continued technological developments. These dynamics call for new and innovative systems for improving the delivery of executive management education. The traditional pedagogy is being replaced by a combination of time-honored and web-based customized learning systems. These so-called hybrid learning nets (HLN) are designed to optimize the learning experience. Equally important, HLN help enhance the overall business curriculum by improving course integration and consistency. HLN offer extensive opportunities for collaborative learning that often positively impact the educational experience. An essential feature of HLN is feedback. HLN can deliver specific content based on the background and performance of individual students. The purpose of this paper is to outline ways in which HLN can be used to improve the delivery of executive management education programs.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the few bright spots in business school enrollments over the past several years has been the increase in demand for executive management programs. Figure 1 shows the percent of domestic MBA programs by type that report an increase in application volume for the period 2003-2004 (Edgington, 2004). This data indicates that executive programs are the only MBA category where more than 50 percent of the schools reported an increase in applications.

Program cost and convenience are two major factors that significantly contribute to the decision to enter an MBA program. Executive MBA (EMBA) programs are pricey. The average cost is about \$60,000, but they can run as high as \$110,000.

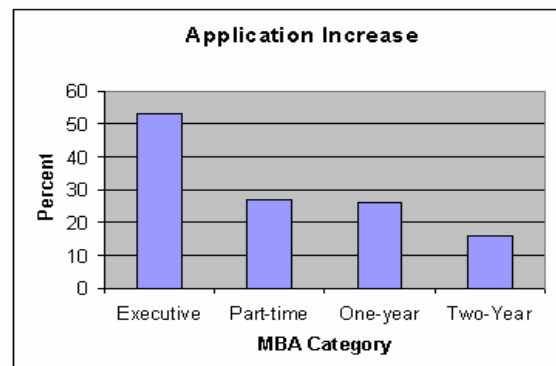


Figure 1 – Applications in MBA Programs

The cost is two to three times that of a standard MBA (Tyler, 2004). However, EMBA programs are more flexible and flexibility is a key to their continued popularity and

growth potential. Some characteristics of most EMBA programs are as follows:

- Reduces emphasis on traditional lecture format
- Focuses on collaboration and hands-on exercises
- Caters to increasing student work demands and travel schedules
- Permits students to use actual work projects in courses
- Generally features more learning from other students (Andragogical)

The working manager is usually interested in a practical and flexible curriculum that focuses on results. To meet these demands, many executive programs are turning increasingly to web supported learning systems (L. Smith, 2001). Many working managers who have been exposed to Internet based learning tend to favor this delivery approach (Lungren, 2003). One learning stratagem that recognizes the need for an integrated yet flexible learning experience is the Instructional Management System (IMS) cooperative initiative (Graves, 1999). This initiative is designed to promote systematic thinking regarding the delivery of higher education, to improve learning outcomes and to increase return on instruction investments. Specific principles of the IMS initiative are: 1) education involves more than a single course; 2) a course is more than content; 3) content is more important than lecture notes; 4) convenience is important and 5) quality assurance requires an integrated learning approach. The IMS initiative calls for the increased use of Internet resources to promote integrated learning and improve outcomes. One Internet based approach that embodies the IMS initiative are hybrid learning nets (HLN). These systems offer the student both a customized and an integrated learning experience. In this regard, HLN are well suited to meet the challenges associated with executive management education since they can provide instructional content at a time convenient to the working student.

**2. HYBRID LEARNING NETS**

Learning nets are Internet-based platforms that provide educational content on a 24/7 worldwide basis. Basically, there are two learning net formats: hybrid, a combination

of in-class and online learning, and all online learning (Harvey, 2003). A recent survey of distance learning based MBA programs indicates that approximately 60 percent of the programs are hybrid and 40 percent are exclusively online (Ubon, 2002). Presented in Table 1 are some examples of current domestic and international online EMBA programs.

Table 1 – Online EMBA Program Examples

School	Accreditation	Mode	Assessment
ASU -US	AACSB	Hybrid	Online
UoW - US	AACSB	Online	Online
Henley - UK	AACSB	Online	Campus
Curtin -AU	EQUIS	Hybrid	Campus

Two of the most difficult challenges in all online programs are validation and quality management (Creaser, 2002). Hybrid learning nets (HLN) tend to ameliorate this validation issue by requiring that some elements of the curriculum be facilitated in a more controlled environment, e.g., conventional classroom settings. Many of the educational programs included in the survey are based on the e-commerce "model" developed during the late 1990s. These learning systems embody some of the key e-commerce themes such as personalization, customization, disintermediation and tracking (Granitz, 2003).

In the hybrid model, students participate in face-to-face exercises (synchronous learning) as well as engage in extensive Web based activities (asynchronous learning). The proportion of in-class to Internet learning would vary considerably depending on course specifics. For example, a course in organizational management might spend more time in face-to-face learning than would a course in financial accounting. In the latter case, a customized presentation on basic principles of accounting could be more efficiently delivered over the Internet. Interestingly, even traditional organizational behavior courses are joining the Internet bandwagon (Brower, 2003).

The overall goal of HLN is to optimize the use of the Internet for content delivery. This includes the facilitation of faculty-to-student and student-to-student interactions. HLN enhance the opportunity for collaborative learning that often yields a positive impact on the educational experience (Graham,

2001). Figure 2 presents an overview of the hybrid design concept.

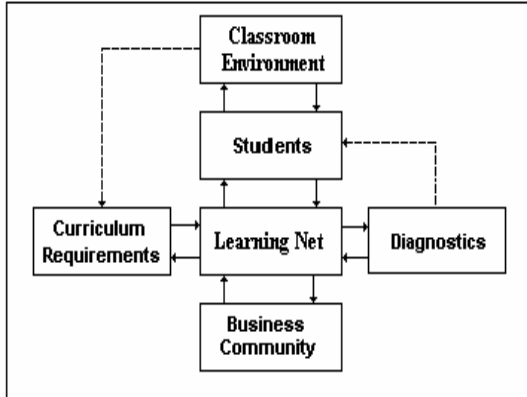


Figure 2 – Overall Design Concept

The HLN serves as the centerpiece of this learning process. It links the curriculum, business community, and faculty directly with the students and permits the ongoing monitoring of student outcomes. HLN can track individual student performance during the program of study including such specifics as simulation outcomes and faculty/peer reviews. More specifically, on-line business simulation offers an effective vehicle for assessing a student’s ability to integrate a variety of managerial functions (Thavikuiwai, 2004).

**3. EMBA CURRICULUM INTEGRATOR**

Modern business practice calls for MBA graduates to have both a global as well as an integrated business perspective (Schmotter, 2004). The growing role of globalization calls for insights into outsourcing as well as management practices in a variety of cultural environments (Friga, 2003). The focus of an integrated business learning environment is on how management functions such as operations, finance and marketing are linked. In this context the educational direction is away from “course silos” and towards “content integration” (Steiner, 2000). Many EMBA programs recognize the need for content integration; however, they fall short in the actual implementation. Some EMBA programs have begun to recognize how the Internet can deliver integrated content (Braunlich, 2000). HLN provide the platform for linking various core business disciplines into an integrated management perspective. Table 2 presents a typical EMBA curriculum

with some specific Internet based support applications.

Table 2 - EMBA Curriculum Applications)

Course/Area	Web Application
<b>Leadership</b>	
Change & Innovation	Threaded Case
Team Building	Blog
<b>Assessment</b>	
Financial Analysis	Virtual Computing
Operational Analysis	Simulation
<b>Technology</b>	
Information Systems	Virtual Tour
Decision Systems	Dashboard
<b>Globalization</b>	
Economics	Streaming Video
Marketing	Seminar
<b>Strategy</b>	
Business Planning	Simulation
Ethics & Law	Linear Case

Figure 3 highlights the integrative nature of the HLN concept design. In this perspective the system serves as both a gateway connecting the various business disciplines as well as a quality control integrator.



Figure 3 – HLN Curriculum Integrator

In the context of a gateway, HLN link the learning content from each course so that a student has continual access to supportive material. Some courses rely on themes and ideas developed in earlier courses, e.g., accounting and finance. HLN can serve as a “content bridge” in these instances. In this

regard, students tend to participate more in learning systems that are content rich and that feature extensive variety (Kathawala, 2002). HLN provide both an interactive and integrated learning environment at a time that is convenient for the student. Figure 4 shows the variety of learning modes associated with the HLN design. For example, the traditional classroom setting (Synchronous, Personal) tends to be effective for team presentations that require a great deal of face-to-face interaction. On the other hand, the threaded chat room environment (Asynchronous, Internet) supports the working manager's requirement for flexibility. In a threaded environment the focus is on message content, e.g., strategies for leading change and innovation. Analysis and comments are available for students who enter the e-room at a later time.

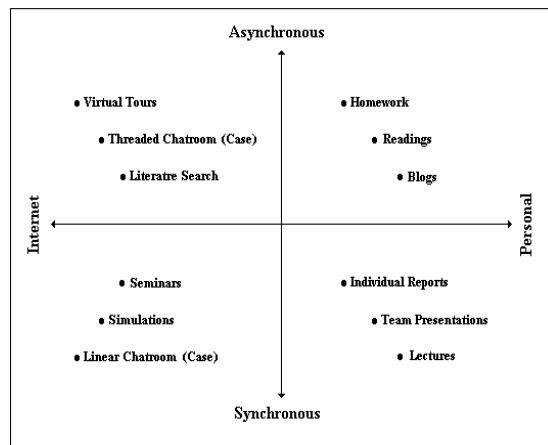


Figure 4 – Multi-Delivery Modes

The growing body of evidence indicates that flexible and customized learning systems such as HLN are particularly effective for working managers involved in a graduate level business degree program (Shih, 2003; Wang, 2002).

- HLN provide a high degree of interaction and collaboration that supports working managers.
- HLN present a long sought solution to the ongoing problems associated with working student education. Students can now have a dynamic and personal experience for continuous learning.
- HLN provide learners with a purposeful entry to the Internet and online resources, and to a new era of learning technologies.

- HLN connect learners and knowledge providers on a 24/7 basis. HLN also underpin new patterns of relationships between education and business that directly impact the curriculum.

A major learning objective in executive management education is to enhance decision-making skills. For example, an effective manager needs to have cognitive competencies such as problem solving, critical thinking, making informed judgments, inventing and creating new ideas, and analyzing and presenting data. Business decisions involve multi-discipline discussions featuring extensive interactions. HLN help students understand how to capture and process inputs from a variety of sources (Kinsinger, 2003). The key to effective learning is a customized and flexible lesson plan in which specific feedback is provided throughout the entire curriculum. Furthermore, linking students via the Internet represents a key factor in the successful implementation of the HLN paradigm (Veronikas, 2004).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The demand for cost-effective executive management education is on the rise. The purpose of this paper is to outline how hybrid learning nets can be used to support the challenges associated with executive management education. Today's EMBA curriculum calls for both a global as well as an integrated perspective. The HLN based strategy outlined herein is designed to provide the following:

- Integrated view of the curriculum
- Customized content on a 24/7 basis
- Enhanced student participation and interaction
- Improved quality control through content linkage

HLN optimize the use of the Internet to provide an effective learning context for business courses and programs while enhancing faculty and peer interactions. HLN offer extensive opportunities for collaborative learning that often positively impact the educational experience. An essential feature of HLN is feedback. Providing the broadest range of tutorial instruction to students with diverse backgrounds is essential for effective learning. The HLN paradigm is particularly

attractive for working managers who are experiencing increased job related demands including international travel.

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