

The Future of Corporate Education: Beyond the Corporate University

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1. Overview

Corporate education is a deeply confusing field. Information about efforts in this domain is scattered, programs are hard to compare and assess, and continuous advancements of technology are driving workforce training into a game of catch up. Moreover, many institutions offering these programs call themselves corporate universities, which evoke the concept of *university* without fully conforming to their structure, standards, assessments, degree formats, curriculum, or faculty qualifications.

Learning is becoming a lifelong journey rather than a one-stop degree-earning effort. At MIT Open Learning and MIT ACE, we consider it important to understand this growing education field. We interviewed *corporate education and training program* (CETP) executives from a range of businesses (including Microsoft, GM, GE, Google, JetBlue, IBM, Deloitte, SAP, Hilton, and Infosys) who lead, manage, and oversee learning and education programs offered to their employees. Our goal was to explore how universities such as MIT can support every worker's continuous education journey, regardless of industry.

Our study revealed the following:

- The workforce and society at large need to constantly upskill and reskill. Most CETPs seek innovative education models for continuous learning that meet companies' needs, going beyond the models established by onboarding and regulation compliance.
- The CETP field is extremely heterogeneous. CETPs operate with vastly diverse delivery formats, assessments, and expected outcomes. Even the definition of CETPs itself is confusing, since some equate themselves with corporate universities, a concept that is itself usually misused.
- CETPs are growing in number as corporations focus on keeping up with the increased use of digital technologies but lack clear standards for easy comparison and evaluation of these programs.
- Most CETPs tie their programs to business/strategic goals instead of the employees' personal goals. Companies that focus on the former differ from those that emphasize their employees' own learning journeys.
- Academic institutions have an opportunity to leverage their experience in education and training to support CETPs.

Our interviewees made it clear that corporations and industries require new educational models to upskill and retrain their workforce. In this ever-growing educational field, how should universities participate?

2. Introduction

Industry and education seek to respond to society's current and future challenges through innovation. Consequently, new technologies, skills, and content knowledge need to be shared not only in academic

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settings but within the workplace as well. Companies are constantly requiring employees to update their skills and knowledge, but this is complicated by rising employee turnover rates and the inefficiency of external hiring. In the last five years, employee separations (departures from their current position in the company) have risen from 42.6% to 57.3%, growing 12.2% alone during the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020, as reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [USBLS, 2021]. Additionally, compared to internal workers who are promoted to similar jobs, external hires seem to “receive significantly lower performance evaluations for their first two years in the job yet are initially paid around 18 percent more.” [Bidwell, 2011].

In response to these factors and more, companies have established corporate education for their current employees to meet their upskilling and reskilling needs.

3. Corporate Education

3.1 Corporate Education and Training Programs (CETPs): Our research started with an exploration of the concept of corporate universities. However, the variety of corporate-driven approaches and structured programs for training the workforce led us to define a broader concept of *corporate education and training programs (CETPs)*. We found this to be an important distinction, since many of the companies interviewed did not present a training structure consistent with that of a university. For Mark Allen, a corporate university is “an educational entity that is a strategic tool designed to assist its parent organization in achieving its mission by conducting activities that cultivate individual and organizational learning, knowledge, and wisdom” [Allen 2002]. But while corporate universities evoke the concept of *university*, in most cases, they do not follow a university’s academic structure, clear assessment approaches, and learning journey pathways led by trained faculty. For these reasons, we prefer the more general and inclusive term CETP.

As corporations and society evolve, the goal of CETPs has gone beyond serving the business and corporate mission to supporting employees’ continuous learning journeys to address both personal and organizational needs. We define CETPs as educational programs focused on enriching employees’ continuous learning journeys while aligning training (and some of their outcomes) to the organization’s strategy, mission, and needs. Finally, it is important to highlight that, as education continues changing and evolving, so will the definition of CETPs.

3.2 The History of Corporate Education: In the U.S., CETPs, commonly referred to as corporate universities, date back to the General Motors Institute established in 1919, which focused on training car salesmen, managers, and accountants [Eurich, 1989; BPI Group, 2016]. Northrop Aeronautical Institute followed a similar approach after World War II, creating a program to research aircraft designs and train industry professionals, evolving into what came to be known as one of the first corporate universities, Northrop University [Eurich, 1989]. In the late 1950’s, GE Crotonville, GM’s Kettering, and McDonald’s Hamburger University solidified the concept of corporate education and training [Eurich, 1989; Benson-Armer et al., 2018]. A report by Martha Peak suggested that in 1988 the U.S. had 400 CETPs, and Kolo et al. reported that these numbers doubled from 1,000 in 1997 to 2,000 in 2007 [Peak, 1997; Kolo et al., 2013]. We believe this growth was boosted by the availability of online resources and platforms.

In Europe, by the 1980s, France recorded 30 different organizations offering CETPs. In the late 90s, CETPs in the UK started to gain traction, including those created by Unipart (founded in 1994), British Steel (later called CORUS and started in 1997); and British Aerospace (later known as BAE Systems and

created in 1997) [Prince & Beaver, 2001]. In 1998, Lufthansa became the first organization offering a specific CETP in Germany [Andresen & Lichtenberger, 2007]. By 2000, Parshakov & Shakina reported a total of 200 CETPs in Europe [Parshakov & Shakina 2018]. In 2004, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and the Netherlands each had five organizations offering CETPs, while Great Britain and Germany each had 12 CETPs [Furlan, 2004]. At least half of the CETPs in Germany had a global impact, including those of Bertelsmann AG, Daimler AG, Deutsche Bank AG, Lufthansa AG, and Messer Group e mg AG [Furlan, 2004]. By 2018, Parshakov & Shakina estimated that 28% of European companies had CETPs, with over 100 programs in France and 25 in Russia, respectively [Parshakov & Shakina 2018].

The history of CETPs in other regions of the world is harder to track. In South America, Brazil had its first CETP in the early 90s with the Academia ACCOR [Eboli, 1999; Impulso, 2012], followed by the CETPs offered by BankBoston, Amil, Brahma, and Datasul, among others [Eboli, 1999; Alperstedt, 2001]. In Asia, Liu et al. reported that Motorola first introduced the concept of a CETP into China in 1993, while the Hisense and Chunlan corporations established their own CETPs in 1998. By 2012, China had 1186 CETPs and over 2500 by 2014 [Liu et al., 2017]. In Australia, the first CETP was launched by the federal ministry for education in 1999: The Coles institute was set up with a partnership between The Coles Myer Group (which had over 430 stores and 56,000 employees in 2002) and Deakin University [Allen, 2002; Blass, 2005; DeakinCo, 2014].

Our summary on the origins of CETPs revealed some commonalities guiding their efforts. Please refer to *The Corporate University Handbook* [Allen, 2002) for a more detailed historic perspective of CETPs and corporate universities.

4. Employee upskilling and reskilling

We identified different motivations driving continuous corporate retraining: innovation and technology advancement; government, industry, and association regulations; and internal and external corporate assessments.

4.1 Innovation and technology advancement Technology continuously revolutionizes the way societies evolve and businesses are run. Innovation creates new services and goods while making others obsolete. At the same time, technology affects how companies interact and conduct business with their employees and customers. These changes require a workforce trained to use new technologies for the benefit of their businesses and society in general.

As a result, training budgets (see figure 1) and the number of CETPs seem to have increased over the past decades, with the complexity and sophistication of these programs following suit [TMIR, 2000-2004; TMIR, 2005-2010; TMIR, 2011-2016; TMIR, 2014-2019; TMIR, 2020]. Contributing factors to this growth in the past decades have been the emergence of the internet, AI, and online education. This growth in training budgets, new technologies, and the labor market reflects the urgent need for companies to prioritize their employees' upskilling and reskilling.

4.2 Government, industry, and association regulations: Upskilling and reskilling are also driven by local, national, and international regulations. These apply to many industries, spanning diverse areas such as insurance, financial, hospitality, mining, and airline businesses. Companies must constantly update their training to keep up with the latest industry standards and technology. These regulations stem from government, industry, or associations, and have been increasing dramatically over the last decades: In the U.S. alone, the overall number of U.S. federal regulations issued by executive branch agencies

doubled in 2020 from 2019, and has increased five-fold from 2017 [George Washington University Regulatory Studies Center, 2021].

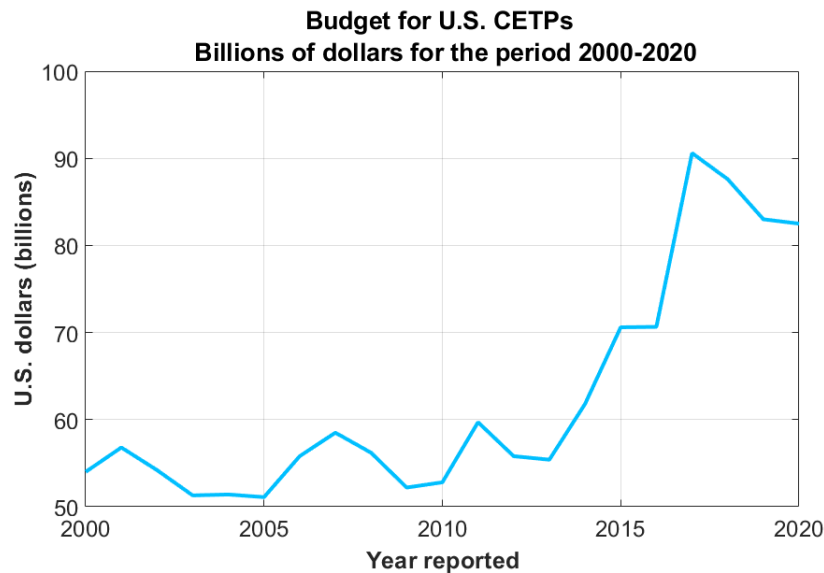


Figure 1. Self-reported budgets for CETPs (internal upskilling and reskilling programs) in U.S. companies. Data compiled from Training Magazine *Industry Reports* from 2000-2020 [TMIR, 2000-2004; TMIR, 2005-2010; TMIR, 2011-2016; TMIR, 2014-2019; TMIR, 2020].

4.3 Internal and external corporate assessments: In a highly competitive landscape, businesses are constantly assessing their performance in the market. Internal and external assessments are important tools for discovering shortcomings, comparing a company to its competition, and reevaluating or setting new goals for the future. Such assessments, if carefully conducted, can also reveal knowledge and skills gaps in their workforce and how these impact their business.

In our interviews, we found that a majority of companies (including Russian Railways and Santander Bank) consistently rely on their HR departments to understand their employees’ skills and content needs, while some (such as JetBlue, GE) also seek to obtain insights directly from their workers about what is needed to make their activities in the company more engaging and productive.

Corporations can fill their workforce skills gaps through either new hires or by upskilling and reskilling their current workforce. A 2020 McKinsey survey revealed that 87% of companies report existing skills gaps or anticipate facing skill gaps within the next five years, and “more than one-third of respondents say their organizations either have reskilled at least one group or have a pilot or a program to do so currently underway” [McKinsey & Company, 2020].

5. Motivation

At MIT Open Learning and MIT ACE, we understand the future of education requires a more flexible, agile, and continuous model serving the full spectrum of professionals, from full-time students to full-time employees. This drove us to explore the field of corporate education to understand its challenges and opportunities. This study is part of a bigger goal of exploring emerging educational institutions and assessing ways MIT can support their programs and learners.

Table 1. Summary of the companies and CETPs explored, and their role in the CETP landscape.

Company or Person name	Region of Influence the company or person covers	Name of the CETP or institution providing CETPs	Role in the CETP landscape				CETP details		
			CETP	Provider or consultant for CETPs	Organization ranking CETPs	Indirectly supports the CETPS Landscape	Company requires mandatory training	Offers soft/ professional and technical Skills	Company culture training
CEMEX	Global	CEMEX University	✓				✓	✓	✓
DTEK	Ukraine	DTEK Academy	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Engie	Europe	Engie University, Engie Schools	✓					✓	
General Electric	Global	GE Crotonville	✓				✓	✓	✓
Hilton	Global	Hilton Worldwide University	✓				✓	✓	✓
JetBlue Airways	Global	JetBlue Academic Programs, JetBlue Scholars	✓				✓	✓	✓
Russian Railways	Russia	Russian Railways Corporate University	✓				✓	✓	✓
UBS	Global	UBS University	✓				✓	✓	
United Wholesale Mortgage	USA	United Wholesale Mortgage Training Team, Business Innovation Group	✓				✓	✓	✓
Deloitte	Global	Deloitte University, Deloitte Cloud Institute, The Guild Program	✓	✓				✓	

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Google	Global	Google HR's Corporate Learning and Development, Google Education and University Programs	✓	✓			✓	✓	
IBM	Global	IBM Skills Academy, IBM Global University Programs	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Infosys	Global	Infosys Global Education Center, Foundation Program, Wingspan Academy, Lex	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Microsoft	Global	Microsoft learn, LinkedIn learning, GitHub	✓	✓			✓	✓	
SberBank	Russia	SberBank Corporate University, Sber School 21	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Duke Corporate Education	Global	Duke Corporate Education		✓				✓	
Ed2Work	USA	Ed2Work		✓				✓	
Mark Allen	Global	NA (not applicable)		✓					
Strategic	USA, Australia	Strategic Education Inc.		✓				✓	

Company or Person name	Region of Influence the company or person covers	Name of the CETP or institution providing CETPs	Role in the CETP landscape				CETP details		
			CETP	Provider or consultant for CETPs	Organization ranking CETPs	Indirectly supports the CETPS Landscape	Company requires mandatory training	Offers soft/ professional and technical Skills	Company culture training
Training Industry	Global	Training Industry, Certified Professional in Training Management (CPTM™)		✓	✓			✓	
Global Council of Corporate Universities	Global	Global Council of Corporate Universities			✓				
Training Magazine	Global	Training Magazine			✓				

Company or Person name	Region of Influence the company or person covers	Name of the program explored	Role in the CETP landscape				CETP details		
			CETP	Provider or consultant for CETPs	Organization ranking CETPs	Indirectly supports the CETP Landscape	Company requires mandatory training	Offers soft/ professional and technical Skills	Company culture training
Kettering University	USA	Kettering University				✓		✓	
Santander Bank	Global	Santander University				✓		✓	
SAP	Global	SAP				✓		✓	
League for Innovation in the Community College	USA	League for Innovation in the Community College				✓		✓	

6. Methods

We conducted 28 interviews covering four continents, encompassing CETPs in industries from mining, airlines, finance, consulting, and others. Our research followed a three-pronged approach, covering the founding fathers of corporate education, the top companies in corporate education rankings, and world-renown corporations that are currently pushing the online education envelope.

- To understand the origins and history of corporate education, we reached out to some of the first companies to provide corporate education programs, including GE and GM.
- Seeking to identify and learn from the current leaders in corporate education, we interviewed three corporate education ranking organizations: [Training Magazine](#), [GCCU](#), and [Training Industry rankings](#). This led us to connect with top-ranked companies including [UWM](#), [UBS](#), [SAP](#), amongst others. It is worth mentioning that all these rankings rely on *self-reported data*, a topic that we address later when exploring standards used by CETPs.
- As a complement to the historical and current drivers of corporate education, we also talked to companies that are making a major impact on the corporate world and that are currently focusing on digital online education, including [Google](#) and [Microsoft](#).

The interviews took place between November 2020 and July 2021 over video conference. Each discussion lasted 30 to 60 minutes and included at least two members from our team and one executive representing each CETP. We inquired about the basics of each CETP and dug deeper into a range of specific topics covering training sources, professional and technical skills, content creation, structure and delivery; certifications, assessments, business outcomes, and online educational programing.

7. Results and lessons learned

Rapid technology evolution means companies must upskill and reskill their workforce faster than ever: The impact of technology and the reach of online education have increased exponentially: In 2014, Deloitte estimated that 24 million people had already tried online education [Haims et al., 2014], while in 2020 alone, Microsoft sought to train 25 million people worldwide in digital skills and education through the [Microsoft Global skills Initiative](#). In our conversations with Microsoft, we learned they “...believe that the future road is one made up of lifelong learning, re-skilling, and upskilling.”

The scale, speed, and frequency of changing technologies are driving these retraining efforts. In our conversations with Google, they reported their systems and infrastructure are changing so rapidly that it is pushing their employees to upskill their engineers at an accelerated pace, resulting in training a large percentage of the engineering population in iOS, Android, machine learning, and AI in the last five years. All interviewees reported their programs use online platforms for content delivery and even apps, so learners can be trained on the go. The current trend is a digital change towards more online learning.

CETPs are confusing and heterogeneous: Corporate training is a fragmented industry. It’s unclear who the leaders are in the CETP field, CETP performance is difficult to measure, and most of their data is self-reported and not curated by external parties. CETPs are offered by a vastly heterogeneous landscape of providers: Their content can be created internally or by third-party vendors; delivered and assessed online or in-person by internal employees or externally hired partners; and can take the form of coaching, lectures, learning by doing, or peer-to-peer learning. All CETP executives interviewed (15/15, see table 1 for more information) mentioned using outside resources to develop their curriculum, create

assessments, or provide facilitators. In addition, definitions of successful completion of these CETPs range from program attendance or getting an online badge or certificate to obtaining a university bachelor's or master's degree. Finally, their goals are diverse, ranging from personal growth to fulfilling industry specific ROIs.

CETPs lack clear standards of comparison and evaluation: We've noticed a trend of corporations forcing corporate training efforts into HR departments, since corporate education is part of professional development. However, as CETPs grow in number, there is a clear need for corporations to set up defined units or departments to oversee all training efforts. Without leadership trained in pedagogy, education, and the science of learning, supported by qualified personnel, businesses will be left in the dark regarding how to create and deliver effective CETPs. Moreover, the absence of such units and personnel promote the use of inconsistent standards and assessments, making it hard to compare and evaluate these CETPs. This challenge became clear from our interviews with [Training Magazine](#), [GCCU](#), and [Training Industry](#), which provide CETP rankings that rely solely on self-reported data.

Focusing on business and strategic goals vs. employees' lifelong professional development: In our interviews, we found wide diversity in how companies create, deliver, and assess their CETPs. Some fulfill their training efforts by strictly outsourcing online content to third parties, without performing any skills-gap analysis or tracking workers' learning journeys. In contrast, other CETPs center on the work done by a designated unit and constantly assess workers' skills and knowledge gaps, responding to these by creating or outsourcing new courses, including constant follow ups and 1-on-1 mentorship.

In our conversations with many companies, we learned their upskilling and reskilling efforts are not only about what workers can do for the company, but rather what the company can do to support their employees' professional growth. For example, "...unlike a lot of companies, JetBlue does not have a requirement that learners must stay at the company upon completing their degree through the JetBlue Scholars program. Learning is the goal." This program serves both the company's strategic objectives as well as the employee's personal ones. Their program relies on coaches who have experienced the same learning journey.

However, without clear standards and metrics of evaluation, it is difficult to measure the difference between CETPs focused on their employees' personal and professional growth and those focused on only meeting business goals and requirements.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

- **CETP Goals:** Business and strategic goals will shift over time, so keeping employees motivated to continuously learn will grow in importance and result in more productive, committed workers.

As education increases its focus on upskilling and reskilling the workforce, we believe that programs supporting the employees' own learning journeys instead of simply business goals, requirements, or regulations will be better off.

- **A growing, heterogeneous field:** CETPs can range from one-day training programs to full-fledged university degrees. The number of CETP offerings has increased over time due to more accessible and remote educational resources, allowing the workforce to learn on the go. We identified three key consistent components of all CETPs: content creation, delivery, and platforms. Content can be created internally or outsourced, its delivery can be managed

internally or by third parties, and the platforms used can be specific to the company or provided by external vendors. In parallel, we found a common challenge for CETPs is identifying training needs through proper gap analysis and assessment. Regardless of their type, it is critical that CETPs focus on enriching the employee's continuous learning journey while aligning their training (and some of their outcomes) to the organization's strategy, mission, and needs.

- **Academia must participate:** There is potential for a diverse knowledge-sharing corporate/academic ecosystem in which all CETPs and universities benefit from each another's knowledge and resources. This will help both businesses and universities to meet their training needs while serving as a central hub for corporations to plug into for learning resources. Companies are now reaching out to a variety of sources rather than just single institutions to support their programs. Their distributed networks of resources include universities, consultants, field experts, and even companies with their own CETPs. They not only seek customized programming delivered by external field experts, but most will provide their own expertise as well. Academia has already started exploring the CETP landscape, but there is value in expanding its reach. Universities could leverage their experience in standardized assessment, innovation, technology, and upskilling to meet CETP needs as a more involved consultant, tapping into their alumni and faculty, and providing customized programming, content curators, and presenters with a background in the science of learning, educational platforms, and certification.

The corporate education ecosystem is deeply complex and constantly evolving as companies adapt to new upskilling and reskilling needs. What remains clear is that for companies to avoid moving backwards as the rest of the world moves forwards, continuous learning needs to become part of every employee's job requirements.

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