

online higher education makes its mark on the business world

by Kimberly Merriman

**“The initials after your name
lend credibility.”**

Karen Cheatham has certainly learned that firsthand. Having recently completed her MBA online, she is now pursuing a Ph.D. on the Web as well. Lucky for her, the workplace values formal education and is increasingly recognizing online learning as a means for employees to obtain it.

John Dooney, manager of strategic research for the Society of Human Resource Management, an association of human resource professionals, has observed the evolution of online learning firsthand. “Ten years ago organizations were skittish – now they’re funding online programs,” he says. In fact, approximately 29 percent of corporate tuition reimbursements now go toward online or blended courses versus traditional programs, according to a March 2005 survey of 151 learning executives by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD).

From employee career benefits to corporate competitive advantages, online learning is making its mark on the business world.

Career-Track Benefits

John Clark, a recruiter with Benchmark Recruiting, LLC, a national executive search firm based in North Carolina, finds that his corporate clients view online degrees on an equal footing with traditional degrees. “An MBA is an MBA as long as the information is verifiable and creditable,” he assures. However, Clark stresses that an individual with all the right degrees but a lack of experience will have a difficult time getting hired. “If you can say ‘I worked full time while completing my education,’ companies respect that.”

Online education is able to provide those in the workforce, like Lori Keam, with the flexibility to do just that. After starting her schooling years ago at a traditional college, she went online to complete her bachelor’s degree in management of technology, then landed a better position in her field. Lori says she couldn’t have garnered the total package of work experience and degree any other way.

A Better-Educated Workforce

Increasing learning opportunities for employees is the foremost reason why organizations support online higher education, according to the ASTD survey. Representatives at Merck & Co., a global pharmaceutical company, would agree. “Whatever benefits we can offer to

employees to continue education is advantageous," says Julia Parastino, human resources business partner at Merck & Co. in Blue Bell, PA. Parastino feels that supporting online education draws more employees to pursue degrees, benefiting the company in the long-term.

Kimberly Summa, a production material planner with L-3 Communications Systems-East (Camden, NJ), is completing her master's degree in engineering management online at Drexel University. Kimberly says she was only casually considering programs when the online learning platform sold her. Even though she is closer to Drexel University, on-campus courses weren't an option with her busy work schedule. When joining L-3, Kimberly says her pursuit of online degree was a "big selling point." Even better, L-3 reimburses 100 percent of tuition and textbook costs.

"It's a good retention tool," explains Barry Lem, manager of training and development at L-3. He attributes the company's current turnover rate of less than 3 percent to employee perks like tuition reimbursement.

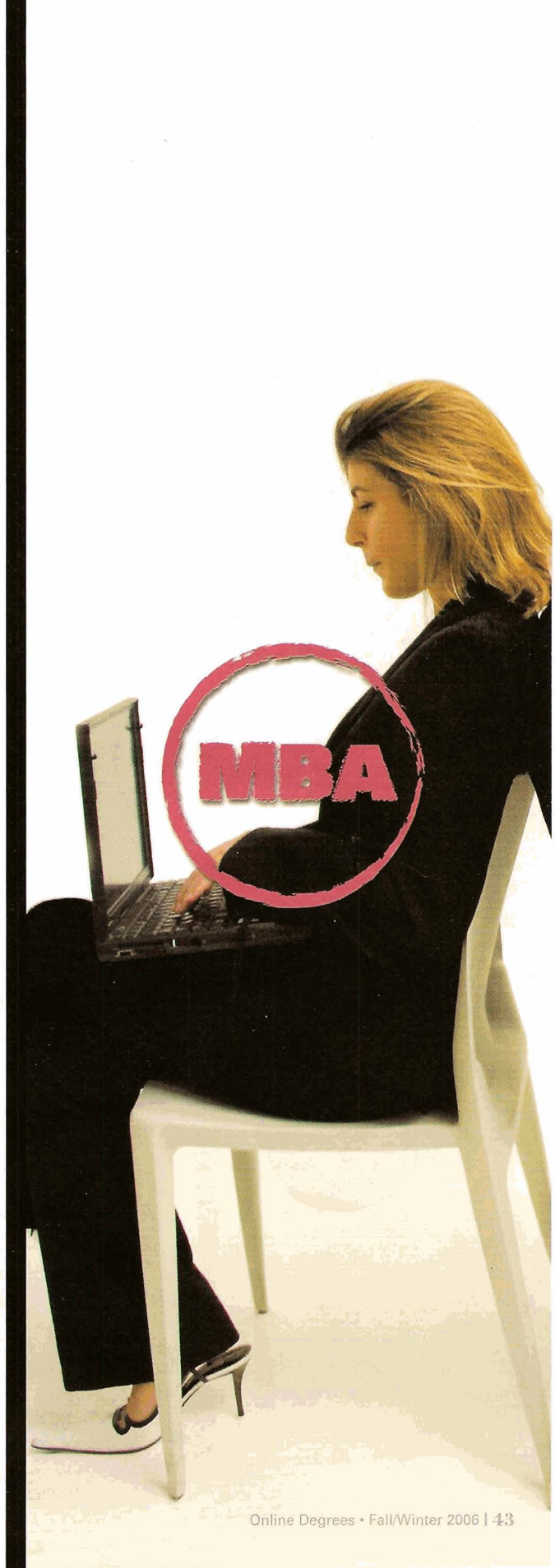
Satisfied Employees

Increasing employee satisfaction and retention is the second most important reason given by organizations in their support of online higher education, according to the ASTD survey. Rock Primas, director of learning and development for PHH Mortgage in Mt. Laurel, NJ, partnered with Drexel e-Learning (part of Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA) two years ago to satisfy employees. The company also supports an on-site MBA program, but finds employees favor the online school. "Online education is geared toward working professionals seeking part-time education. It's a good fit for our company," says Primas.

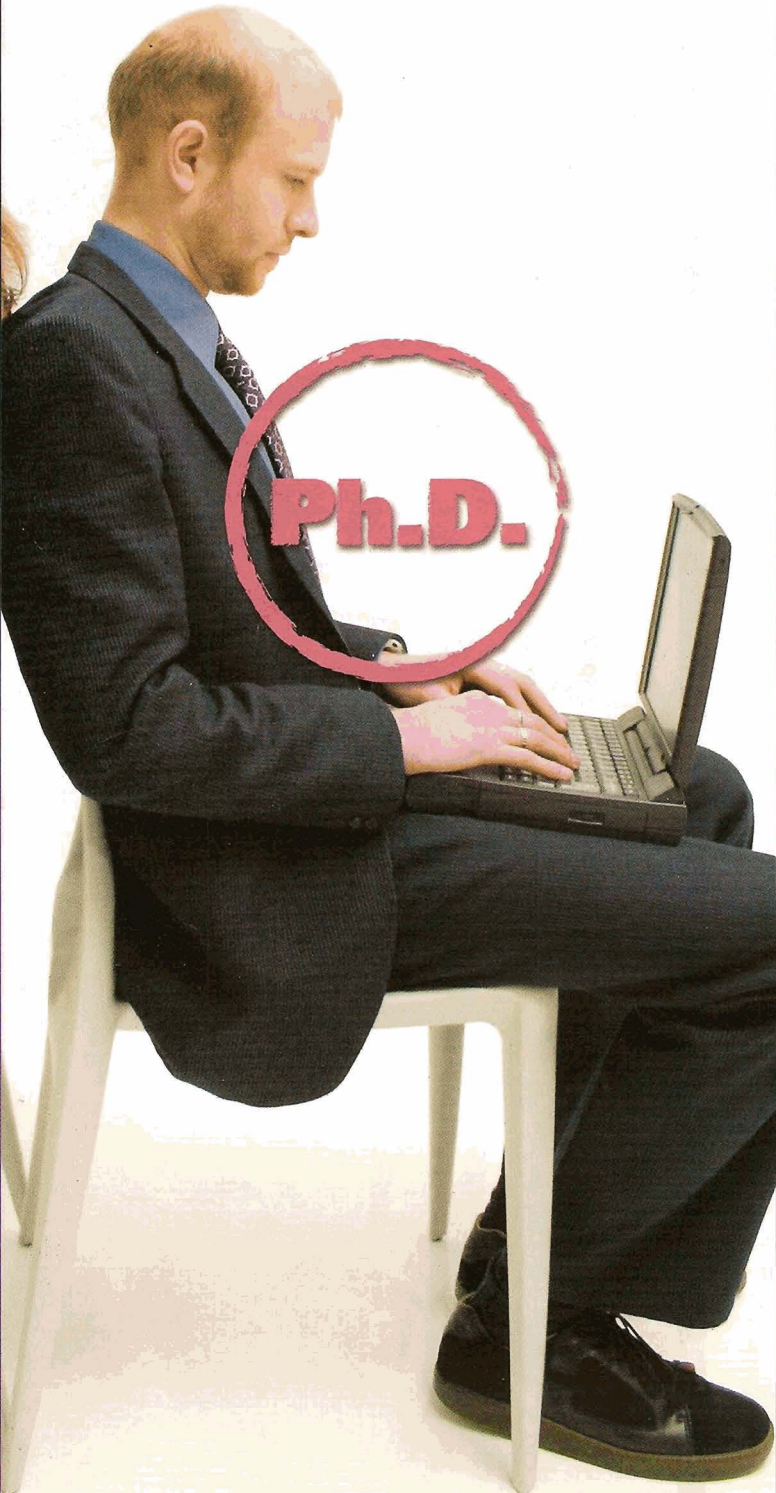
Solution to Geographic Boundaries

"If you have a highly mobile workforce, employees can still participate in class," points out Kenneth Hartman, academic director at Drexel e-Learning. Rob Gibson, a sales manager for Lufthansa Airlines who is earning his Ph.D. in business administration online, provides testimony to his online endeavor with Northcentral University. "I no longer hang around hotels on business trips with nothing to do. Now, my travel time has become my most productive time since there is no interference of any kind."

Of course, geographic issues can affect stationary employees, too. Valeri Lee, manager of training and development at Lockheed Martin Corporation's missiles and fire control unit, says online degrees are a way for employees to get the degree they want when it's not offered locally. Their engineers attend Arizona State University's master in optics degree program from Florida virtually. >>



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Productivity Pluses

Another longtime supporter of online learning is the Chicago, IL-based Boeing Company. Rick Coffey, director of manufacturing, functioning and employee development training, notes that many Boeing employees use it for the convenience. "It's a much more agile and flexible way of learning," he explains. "It helps employees find the time for classes without as much disruption."

Sydney Koerner, principal and director of human resources for Kling, a 400-employee architecture and design firm based in Philadelphia, PA, agrees. "The main advantage of online education is that it saves time," says Koerner. "Typically employees will consider the cost of their time and commute to school, making online courses a more effective choice." At Kling, tuition reimbursements for online and classroom courses are treated the same.

A Better Way of Training

Companies and their employees also benefit by using online higher education for training purposes. For instance, by using courses that are part of a school's regular curriculum, employees gain credit toward a degree in addition to meeting employer training goals.

Higher education courses also provide a formal assessment of student learning – a final course grade – something that is often missing from corporate training. In some cases, employees pay for the course up front and get reimbursed by the company if their grade is appropriate. "This shifts the onus of responsibility back to employee shoulders," says Hartman.

A Growing Trend

Given the many benefits, it's no wonder that 58 percent of the companies surveyed by ASTD expect the role of online higher education to increase in their organizations over the next two to three years. Koerner sees "online as the present and future for continuing education in many areas." Evidently, online learning is a trend that makes good business sense. ■