

# The University-Workplace Gap: A Relationship Long Past Due



By Dr. Chance T. Eaton

When I completed my Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration in 1999, I vividly recall much of my education not being very applicable to work. I fully recognized that there was great benefit from the solid theme of critical inquiry that ran through all curriculum, but there seemed a disconnect between the specialized upper division courses and what I was actually seeing at work. Apparently, I am not alone. In a recent Gallup blog (Francis & Auter, 2017), 96% of chief academic officers believe their university and colleges are effective at preparing students for the workforce, whereas only 11% of business leaders agree. Students also recognize this misalignment; only 35% of college students feel they are prepared for the workplace. Further, college enrollment rates continue to fall across the country, largely due to increasing cost of higher education, and students are beginning to question the value of a college education.

It is easy to point fingers at higher education for not effectively preparing students for the reality of today's workplace, but I would argue that corporations are not doing much better at preparing their current internal employees for effectiveness in the workplace either. It is estimated that training and development costs U.S. companies between \$50 Billion (Kellerman, 2012) and \$156 Billion per year (American Society for Training & Development, 2012). Of this, leadership training alone is estimated to be around \$20 Billion per year (ASTD, 2012). Despite the large dollars spent on training, the return on investment doesn't appear to be paying off. The Conference Board has been surveying job satisfaction for the past 25 years, and they have found that job satisfaction has declined at a steady rate from 61% in 1987 to 47% in 2012 (Adams, 2012). HR consulting firm, Mercer, has found that across the globe between 28% and 56% of employees want to leave their jobs, and 32% want to leave their jobs in the U.S. alone (Adams, 2012). Gallup Organization continues to find that

employee disengagement numbers remain steady around 70%. Despite the significant dollars invested in employees, the education is often soft fluff lacking in basic rigor.

When I ask higher education administration about the need to improve workplace engagement and bridging the gap between higher education and corporations, the only response I hear is using internships. Though they can be part of the solution, they often result in limited scope and subtle in benefit. When I ask corporate executives about the need to improve workplace engagement and bridging the gap between higher education and corporations, the most common response is to bring in another consulting firm to survey needs and make recommendations for workplace effectiveness.

It is my opinion that many corporate training firms are not versed in the rigors of social sciences, and higher education is not versed in the relevance of what business needs. It would seem natural that these institutions work together in strategic partnership developing current and future employees. Let me be clear, I am not referring to traditional relationships seen in funding research or marketing opportunities at sporting events, I am talking about meaningful strategic relationships that directly effect education.

I am proposing a simple yet potentially powerful solution to this misalignment between higher education and the workplace – make it common practice for corporate trainers to be contracted as adjunct higher education faculty. Universities possess a rigorous process for validating curriculum, and most important are at the cutting edge of research; corporations know how the information needs to be delivered for relevance and represent the ultimate practice of theory and research. Following is a sample description of what a university adjunct-corporate trainer may look like.

Ashley is a corporate trainer, and from internal analysis, she has identified the need for mentoring and coaching training for her company. She is also an adjunct for a local college; not as second employment, but as a condition of her employment. She works in conjunction with the college in developing curriculum that contains both the scientific rigor and business relevance. As a result, she creates the following courses totaling 36 hours to be delivered over 6 months: Exploring Emotional Intelligence, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Mentoring-Coaching Foundations, and Strength-Based Development. In addition, she creates 18 hours of action learning assignments where employees will practice mentoring-coaching with real employees with a trained mentor-coach supervising

the sessions. The college helped Ashley build valid and reliable assessments into the curriculum, course objectives, program evaluations, relevant academic references, and most important, latest research on best practices for mentoring and coaching. Now that the college has confidence in the curriculum, they also validate the program with a “Certificate in Mentoring-Coaching”.

The corporation that Ashley works for receives high quality research based curriculum that will benefit its employees at a significant level. Not only does the corporation benefit from having confidence in the quality of the education, but the program is also validated by the college adding tremendous motivation for participation and status of obtaining a college certificate. The college benefits from earning tuition from the corporation because the program contains a validated college certificate. Further, by working with the corporation, they are learning first hand the needs of today’s workplace, and will inspire them to supplement their current curriculum with learning that is more relevant.

There are lots of little, and I mean little, nuances to building these types of arrangements; finding university faculty willing to work directly with companies, adding courses to School of Record, Board of Regent approval for certificate programs, and contracts for corporate trainer to be adjunct. These are natural challenges and doable. The biggest challenge will be for both systems to think outside their familiar comfort zones, and more important, each party must be willing to let their tremendous egos down. It is not news to anyone that both universities and corporations silo and departmentalize to satisfy importance and significance – both of which are low maturity and survival mentality. Next generation companies and universities must move to higher levels of maturity and constantly look for natural collaboration efforts.

There is a need to revolutionize how education works, and not just higher education, all education. Higher education possesses the rigors for quality education, versed in research, and has the ability to generate validated certificates. Corporations possess demand and application of education, versed in relevance, and has the ability to put college validated certificate to good use. The University-Workplace gap is well past due and strategic partnerships are a key to the future of employee preparedness, growth, and development.

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*Dr. Chance Eaton has over a decade's worth of experience working in the field of learning and organizational development. Due to his unique educational and work experiences in finance, psychology, leadership and management, education, noetic sciences and agriculture, Dr. Eaton provides his clients with relevant business solutions grounded in theory and research. To learn more about Dr. Eaton's services, visit [HRSolutionsInternational.com](http://HRSolutionsInternational.com).*



