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From Learning to Career Success: How Corporate Universities Shape Tomorrow's Careers? A literature review

CHANTOR, B¹, HOUMID BENNANI, A²,¹ Laboratory (ERMOT), Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco,
*Btissam.chantor@usmba.ac.ma*² Laboratory (ERMOT), Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco
asmae.houmidbennani@usmba.ac.ma.

ABSTRACT

In the era of the knowledge economy, companies are placing emphasis on updating knowledge by establishing their own training structures, known as Corporate Universities. This phenomenon has spread internationally, becoming a key concept adopted by large organizations to support the rapid evolution of the global economy. These organizations implement training programs specifically designed to help employees adapt to technological, organizational, and environmental changes while enhancing their ability to innovate and solve complex problems. The strategies of Corporate Universities aim to encourage collaborators to unlearn obsolete skills and acquire new ones necessary for their continuous professional development.

This article examines how Corporate Universities contribute to career success by leveraging the theory of upward mobility and that of human capital, highlighting the importance of investments in skills to improve both organizational and individual performance.

Keywords: Corporate universities, training, Organizational Learning, Career Success

1. INTRODUCTION

In the face of socio-economic changes, innovation, and the evolution of the socio-technical system, traditional organizational practices are giving way to new approaches aimed at closely aligning with the economic climate and the orientation of the institutional environment. This transition seeks to inject a new momentum for change and growth.

Indeed, the focus is now on new management strategies that foster change and innovation within the organization, encouraging the development of a "proactive attitude towards the future." This approach enables the organization to stand out and thrive in a context of competitiveness and creativity.

In fact, the shift in managerial practices rests on two pillars. On the one hand, the promotion of learning as a key factor for success, and on the other hand, the development of robust human capital capable of keeping pace with the evolution of the company and its surrounding environment.

In this perspective, many organizations have chosen to establish their own training space, thereby promoting not only the identity and position of the organization in relation to its external environment but also the development of skills and the career success of its collaborators. Corporate Universities represent one of the solutions aimed at addressing several organizational challenges, particularly the professional success of collaborators.

The aim of this article is to align the different strategies of corporate universities and to understand how they are mobilised to support the career success of employees.

Throughout the article, we will draw on literature to explore the history of the corporate university concept, understand its place in human resource strategy, and its contribution as a tool for employees' career success.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW.

2.1 THE HISTORY OF CORPORATE UNIVERSITIES: FROM AMERICA TO EUROPE.

Investment in training has become a major concern in the organizational field, where learning is becoming increasingly important and structured. The impact of competence on organizational development has challenged traditional organizational practices, prompting organizations to rethink and reclassify their strategic priorities by emphasizing new learning models. As a result, on-the-job training has become a widespread practice in organizations, especially when it becomes strategic.

Indeed, the phenomenon of corporate universities emerged at the beginning of the 20th century and was one of the learning models in the United States. The first corporate university was founded on 20 October 1919 in Flint, Michigan, under the name of "The School of Automobile Trades," headed by Major Albert Sobey, with the aim of providing first-class training for talented profiles in the automotive industry.

By 1923, this phenomenon had blossomed, offering a comprehensive cooperative education program to over 300 full-time students over four years. As part of this development, the Corporate University was renamed the Flint Institute of Technology. Following its success, the school was renamed the General Motors Institute (GMI) three years later, following its acquisition by the General Motors Corporation. This success led the Institute to add a fifth-year thesis requirement and to become a university awarding unique degrees and committed to continuing cooperative education. By 1956, General Motors Institute had become one of the world's leading engineering and management institutes.

However, in 1982, General Motors formally dissociated itself from the institution's original identity by converting it into a private university without direct financial benefit, subsequently renaming it the GMI Engineering & Management Institute (GMI-EMI). The institution was later rebranded as Kettering University in honor of its founder, Charles Kettering (1876–1958).

The emergence of additional corporate universities occurred approximately two decades later. A seminal example in the evolution of corporate universities is General Electric's facility located in Crotonville, New York, established in 1955. This initiative was spearheaded by the company's Chief Executive Officer with the objective of developing a cadre of skilled managers equipped to capitalize on post-World War II market opportunities. This necessitated the acquisition of novel managerial competencies to enhance both individual and organizational performance within the context of decentralized corporate structures prevalent at the time. General Electric is widely recognized as one of the most successful enterprises of the twentieth century (Bucifal, 2009). The institution remains under the ownership and governance of General Electric.

The proliferation of corporate universities accelerated during the 1950s, commencing with the foundation of General

Electric University, followed by the establishment of Disney University and McDonald's corporate training programs in 1961. Presently, corporate universities are instituted by both large multinational corporations and medium-sized enterprises, frequently designated as academies, institutes, campuses, or corporate schools. Empirical data indicate that approximately 90% of Fortune 500 companies currently operate corporate universities or have strategic plans to develop such entities (Nixon & Helms, 2002).

The phenomenon of Corporate Universities also originated at Motorola in the United States, recognized as a key pioneer in this movement (Shaw, S., 2005). In 1979, Motorola's founder, Bob Galvin, established Motorola University to offer an MBA program tailored for 400 senior executives. However, the outcomes of this training initiative were considered unsatisfactory. Subsequently, with the establishment of Motorola's Training and Education Center (MTEC), leadership replaced the MBA program with a platform dedicated to company employees, guided by a dual objective: engaging employees in the company's management processes and enhancing quality management over a five-year period. The latter objective catalyzed the development of the Six Sigma methodology. Under the leadership of CEO George Fisher, MTEC was rebranded as Motorola University in 1989 to broaden its appeal and impact (Wiggenhorn, W., 1990). The expansion of the Corporate University concept during the 1980s was largely driven by Motorola University's ambition to operate on a global scale.

Furthermore, the Corporate University evolved into a strategic management function, enabling the dissemination of managerial thinking worldwide through the implementation of the Six Sigma methodology, which has since become a critical organizational practice. Consequently, Corporate Universities serve as essential instruments for multinational corporations to cultivate the managerial competencies required to support and sustain global growth (Shaw, S., 2005).

Several companies have established their own corporate universities under various names to foster specialized training and managerial development. In Canada, examples include the Eaton School of Retailing and the Learning Institute of the Bank of Montreal. In the United States, widely regarded as the birthplace of the concept, notable institutions include the AT&T School of Business and Technology, Coca-Cola Company Learning Center, Federal Express Leadership Institute, Disney Institute, Motorola University, Sprint University of Excellence, and Xerox Management Institute. In Europe, similar initiatives have emerged with institutions such as AXA University, Danone University, Lufthansa School of Business, and Ericsson Management Institute. Despite their diverse labels, these corporate universities share a unified purpose: cultivating managerial expertise and aligning organizational goals with strategic growth.

The phenomenon of Corporate Universities has also gained significant traction in France, positioning itself as a "European leader" in this domain (Renaud-Coulon, A., 2002). Since the 1980s, this movement has accelerated within French organizations, leading to the establishment of over thirty

corporate universities (Philippe X & Sorreda, T., 2020). These institutions have become integral to fostering managerial capabilities and adapting to the demands of globalization and competitive markets.

2.2 THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY: A CONCEPT AT THE HEART OF HR STRATEGY.

The establishment of an educational structure within an organization is often a large-scale undertaking that addresses the development of human capital, whether it is classified as "specific" or "generic" (Becker, 1964). Typically, organizations rely on external training providers to enable their employees to obtain certificates and/or diplomas that validate their skills, or they may delegate the entire training process depending on the context (Meignant, 1991, cited by Alves et al., 2011).

Recognized for its capacity to simultaneously promote learning and develop competencies aligned with the organization's strategic objectives, the Corporate University—characterized by its diverse and adaptable forms—addresses numerous strategic challenges by emphasizing human capital as a key driver of organizational development.

The definition of the corporate university phenomenon remains complex, as noted by Meister. He proposes that the Corporate University is a concept that transcends traditional market frameworks and is more than just a label. Meister defines it as a means to "develop and educate employees, customers, and suppliers to respond to an organization's business strategies" (Meister, 1998, p. 29). This concept falls within the broader domain of human resource development (Stewart & McGoldrick, 1996; Walton, 1999, as cited in Prince and Stewart, 2002).

The notion of the corporate university is embedded in knowledge management concepts and the process of organizational learning (Meister, 1998), as well as in communication tools and facilitation of social, technological, and organizational practices that influence organizational learning practices. These links make the HR function an entity responsible for leading the change process and effectively guiding the organization's projects. The corporate university then constitutes a ubiquitous tool whose primary mission is training.

In the same vein, the establishment of the Corporate University is considered a means of organizational elasticity, implemented to adapt the organization to its environment's requirements and take advantage of opportunities that can spark or rekindle its momentum. Corporate universities "are ideally subordinated to the board of directors or management and are understood as a strategic organizational unit" (Andresen, 2003). It is an HR tool that relies on modern and sophisticated functions. Here, the role of HR has become strategic and cannot revert to being a mere support function.

Given the close relationship between corporate universities and human resources departments, these training structures are often integrated into the strategies of these departments to support the professional development of collaborators and achieve the organization's strategic objectives. This

collaboration manifests through various aspects, such as employee training and development, talent management, recruitment and integration, performance management, career development, skills needs analysis, partnerships with external organizations, etc.

In summary, the corporate university represents a high-performing HR tool, allowing for the introduction of a new wave of recognition and motivation among collaborators. It is a renowned structure that enables the preparation of quality training programs tailored to the needs of both collaborators and the enterprise (Philippe, X. 2012). Although it is a tool for operationalizing organizational strategies, the corporate university plays a major role in "the development and liberation of human expertise" (Andresen, M. 2003).

2.3 THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY: A NEW PARADIGM FOR LEARNING.

Continuous learning, skill development, the democratization of knowledge, performance enhancement, sustainability, and other strategic challenges are central to the training tools employed by corporate universities. To design precise and targeted training programs while establishing a prestigious reputation, corporate universities often form partnerships with industry professionals, subject matter experts, and traditional academic institutions. These collaborations enable them to leverage external expertise, enrich cognitive frameworks within the organization, and ensure that training content remains relevant and aligned with evolving organizational needs. Furthermore, such partnerships foster an environment of exchange and knowledge sharing, transforming training into an opportunity to refine and adapt organizational knowledge.

Engagement in research is indispensable for generating innovative ideas and fostering a decision-making climate conducive to organizational growth. Additionally, these partnerships serve as valuable sources of information to enhance the cognitive capacity of corporate trainers. A defining characteristic of corporate universities compared to conventional training centers is their reliance on in-house trainers who are specifically trained to integrate the organization's strategic vision into learning initiatives. This targeted mission ensures that the company's vision is embedded at the core of its managerial approaches, positioning corporate universities as strategic tools for aligning learning with organizational objectives.

It is important to emphasize that corporate universities are recognized as catalysts for organizational change. The establishment of a corporate university reflects an organization's commitment to adapting to the evolving external environment and its capacity to assimilate innovative techniques that facilitate learning and enhance accessibility for employees. In this context, technology serves as a critical management tool by enabling rapid dissemination of information, supporting skill development, optimizing time management, and ultimately improving performance and efficiency. Among these technological tools, e-learning plays a prominent role.

One of the primary objectives of corporate universities is to

cultivate a digital culture, which is achieved through programs collectively referred to as "Digital Inside." These programs are delivered through in-person, remote, or hybrid formats and encompass a variety of modalities, including:

- **Massive Open Online Course (MOOC):** A free, internet-based training accessible to the public, comprising courses, videos, and quizzes, culminating in certification.
- **Corporate Online Open Course (COOC):** An online training platform accessible exclusively to a company's employees and clients, designed to keep current and prospective collaborators informed of the latest developments. Companies such as SFR and Renault were early adopters of this tool.
- **Small Private Online Course (SPOC):** A restricted-access online training program available to a limited number of participants for a defined period.
- **Gamification :** A pedagogical approach that incorporates game elements to create an engaging and enjoyable learning experience, effective across all age groups by facilitating learning through play.
- **Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR):** Advanced online learning modalities that simulate exceptional or hazardous scenarios, particularly useful for training in physically demanding or high-risk occupations.
- **Micro-Learning:** A flexible distance learning approach tailored to the specific needs and preferences of learners and organizations, delivering content in concise, focused segments.
- **Virtual Classroom:** A synchronous online learning environment where participants interact in real-time via digital platforms, guided by an instructor, enabling collaborative learning through discussions, document and video sharing, quizzes, and screen sharing.
- **User Experience (UX):** A digital tool that personalizes content delivery, allowing learners to access training materials aligned with their interests and needs, thereby sustaining motivation.
- **Adaptive Learning:** A contemporary pedagogical method that customizes instruction based on the individual learner's characteristics and proficiency level, identifying strengths and areas for improvement.
- **Machine learning:** A technology closely linked to artificial intelligence and big data analytics, which utilizes data processed through pre-established learning algorithms to enhance training effectiveness.
- **Social Learning:** A collaborative learning approach that emphasizes knowledge sharing and interaction among learners, aiming to reduce learner isolation and foster community engagement.

The executive committee, to accustom employees to new training, must sponsor the aforementioned programs practices, ensuring they are adapted to the specific needs of learners and the company's projects.

The digital tools used by corporate universities promote what is called networked learning. An Italian-Ukrainian industrial group called Finmeccanica implemented a technological network-learning project named Mindsh@re, with the mission of :

- Promoting and sharing technological know-how.
- Detecting and recognizing good organizational practices.
- Promoting common objectives.
- Managing the Research & Development network between
- Organizations within and outside the group (Allen, M., 2010).

Additionally, in a digital article published by José Maria Plaza Zamora in 2018 , titled "How Do Corporate Universities Help Managers Lead Digital Transformation?" the author highlighted a technique called "reverse mentoring," which relies on acculturation and intermediate mentoring in favor of junior employees.

In summary, technology represents a vector for transferring and sharing knowledge, but it is not a magic key to solving problems without measuring its cost relative to its contribution to the organization's learning system.

2.4 FOLLOWING THE PATH TO SUCCESS: THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY AS A CAREER SUCCESS DRIVER.

The concept of a corporate university is rooted in the idea of aligning with the organization's evolving needs and catering to the individual by providing essential training programs that foster their growth. It equips them with the necessary tools to capitalize on insiring career opportunities. The corporate university acts as a bridge between learning initiatives and both organizational and individual goals (Dealtry & Rademakers, 2005), ultimately enhancing "the organization's performance" (Shaw, 2005).

Given that career success is linked to individual experiences and both objective and subjective criteria related to the work environment (Super, 1951), it is defined as the set of concrete outcomes and perceptions accumulated by individuals throughout their professional careers (Judge et al., 2001) and tied to "feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction" (Judge et al., 1999). Its duality appears to be a social and dynamic construct, distinct from objective reality (Adamson et al., 1998; Savickas, 2002), requiring emphasis on elements related to the individual, organization, motivation, and situation (Cox and Harquail, 1991; Guérin and Wils, 1992a; Ng et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 1999; Vardi, 1980).

In light of the above, to analyze the duality of career success, one can refer to Turner's theory of upward mobility (1960), which involves two types of mobility through which an individual can achieve professional success, namely contest mobility and sponsored mobility. The former is based on the individual effort of employees, while the latter refers to the role of organizational support and sponsorship.

• Succeeding in Contest Mobility:

Contest mobility is largely based on the human capital that each individual possesses. This type of mobility is akin to a racing competition where success is not limited to the first ones, as long as they invest more in developing their skills (Ng et al., 2005). In this context, the skills of individuals are crucial for achieving career success. The human capital theory provides additional insight into the role of knowledge in the

professional success of individuals.

Also, career development is strongly linked to the quality of the educational system and the nature of the knowledge acquired, which are necessary to initiate a career. At this level, the knowledge capital and the training pursued in parallel with one's career also constitute a key step in career success.

Based on the meta-analysis by Ng and Feldman (2014), several studies highlight the importance of motivation in professional success. Indeed, some authors emphasize that it is difficult for individuals with low motivation to succeed and provide the productivity and performance that the company desires (Hirschi et al., 2013). Additionally, internal stimuli enable individuals to devote more effort to acquiring the skills necessary for their continuous career development (Sturges et al., 2002; Susan & Ensher, 2001; Verbruggen & Sels, 2008).

Individual attitudes at work also constitute one of the major determinants of career success (Costa, 2017; Rode et al., 2008; Yan, A et al., 2002; Wille et al., 2013). These attitudes are reflected in personality traits, which allow individuals to interpret their personal or professional trajectories positively or negatively (Staw and Ross, 1985). Individual differences are a source of diversity that enriches the organizational field. This diversity appears to be a frame of reference that can serve as a basis for comparison, encouraging individuals to feel satisfied with their situation and accept the specificities of their workplaces (Judge et al., 1998).

• Succeeding in Sponsored Mobility

As for the second approach, sponsored mobility is based on elite status. This form suggests that individuals holding higher positions have been "sponsored" by an elite group (Turner, 1960).

Indeed, social mobility relies on the support and accompaniment of individuals until their promotion. Selected individuals receive special attention (Ng et al., 2005; Wayne et al., 1999). This support refers to the importance that the organization places on its individuals to help them succeed in their careers (Miller et al., 2005; Ng et al., 2005). Various forms of support are suggested, such as mentoring, supervisor support, training opportunities, and access to organizational resources, all aimed at assisting and maintaining individual development (Wayne et al., 1999; Wolff and Moser, 2009).

2.5 CAREER DEVELOPMENT AT CORPORATE UNIVERSITIES: WHAT MODEL FOR A SUCCESSFUL CAREER?

Before discussing career development strategies, it is important to recognize that corporate universities serve a variety of functions that are primarily aimed at enhancing individual competencies. The figure below shows the functional model of corporate universities as presented by Wang & al. (2010).

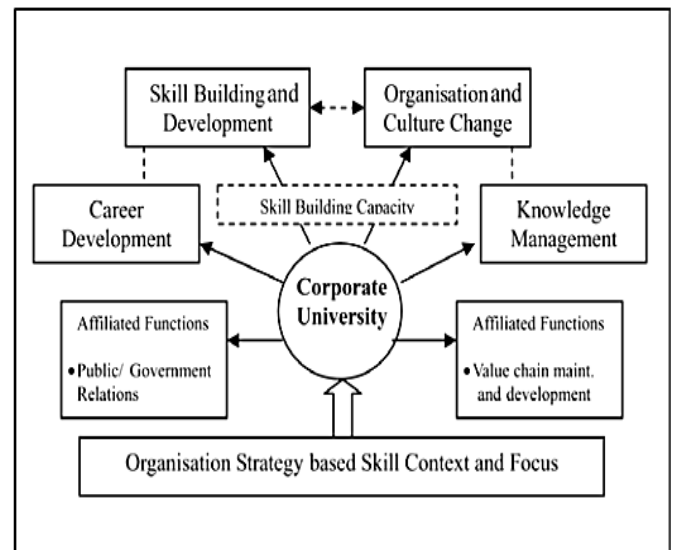


Figure 1: The functional model of Corporate Universities.

The corporate university provides training at both tactical and strategic levels to support the organization's evolution and competitiveness. In addition, as a key player in skills development, the corporate university contributes to the development of social capital at both organizational and individual levels (Wang et al. 2010). As a core function, individual capacity building revolves around four elements:

- Skills development and consolidation;
- Organizational culture change;
- Knowledge management;
- Career development;

These functions are closely linked to human resources management policy. In addition to training, the social and cognitive capacity of individuals is also developed through coaching, guidance, and mentoring of managers (Wang et al., 2010).

The development of individuals through corporate university strategies is not limited to coaching or mentoring but also to other fundamental training functions in order to continue the fashion effect instilled by certain organizations. In this respect, Wang et al. (2010) point out that the emergence of corporate universities aims to ensure skills development at all levels.

The training programs offered by corporate universities are systematic, proactive, strategic, and personalized, particularly for certain key positions. With this in mind, corporate universities are committed to providing employees with a contemporary, technology-driven learning mode (teleconferencing, e-learning), granting learners extensive learning flexibility, with a view to maximizing their development opportunities (Meister, 1996).

Several authors stress the importance of personalized programs. Partnerships with renowned schools or universities provide the organization with a framework of supremacy vis-à-vis its ecosystem. In addition to building individual loyalty, customized programs such as the MBA (Master of Business Administration) give employees the opportunity to strengthen their skills, clarify their vision, and increase their chances of career success.

In short, employee career success requires the joint effort of the individual and the organization. As the protagonist, the organization offers its employees considerable support in terms of training and coaching. In addition to the traditional educational system and university training, the corporate university, in conjunction with the human resources department, offers its employees a variety of instruments to enhance their knowledge and skills, thus promoting career success.

A distinction is made between :

- **On-the-job training:** This form of training involves the use of various HR tools, such as internships, job rotation, coaching, temporary assignments, etc.

- **Off-the-job training:** This is training that takes place outside working hours, involving the individual's immersion in a range of activities, such as case studies, role-playing, gamification, travel, laboratory exercises, and manager development schemes.

3. CONCLUSION

In sum, the relationship between Ralph Turner's theory of upward mobility and corporate universities remains complementary, explored through skills development, professional opportunities and the impact of social identity. However, these institutions face challenges such as strategic alignment, training customization and managing resistance to change, while integrating new technologies to effectively support employee upward mobility.

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