Executive Education and HBS Online

Since launching its first Executive Education program in 1945, Harvard Business School has set the standard for executive training, providing a blueprint for management courses around the world. In programs centered on the hallmark HBS case study method, participants learn from globally-renowned faculty as well as peers who share perspectives from diverse management functions, companies, and industries.

Known for creating a distinctively engaging learning experience, HBS Executive Education innovates continuously to maximize the educational value of each program offering. An inventive collaboration between Executive Education faculty and colleagues at the School’s online learning initiative has brought distance learning modules of HBS Online programs to HBS executive programs. The result? Participants from varied business backgrounds are arriving on campus with the skills, fluency, and confidence to excel in the classroom from day one.

The Challenge

“Executives in our comprehensive general management programs typically are extraordinarily talented in a particular discipline or industry—say marketing, nonprofit management, military strategy, or education—but they may have gaps when it comes to the basics of accounting or economics,” notes Professor Michael Tushman. “We want to use our participants’ limited time on campus in the most high-value manner, so we were looking at ways that PLD’s distance-learning modules could give them a better background in the basics before they arrived. The HBS Online Credential of Readiness (CORe) program has been perfect for that and is getting positive reviews from faculty and participants alike.”

Introduced in 2014 as pre-MBA primer for students considering graduate work at HBS and elsewhere, CORe was designed to bring distinctive features of the HBS classroom—real-world problem solving, active learning, and peer engagement—to an online format. Now accessible to students around the globe, CORe offers courses in Financial Accounting, Economics for Managers, and Business Analytics on a platform that includes multimedia cases, polls, virtual cold calls, and peer interactions.
Professor Eugene Soltes, who teaches accounting in PLD, began talking with colleagues at HBS Online about the possibility of using elements of CORe in the executive program’s curriculum early in 2015. “We were looking specifically at incorporating Financial Accounting and Economics for Managers in PLD, and that presented HBS Online with a challenge,” Soltes notes.

Professor V.G. Narayanan, who developed the Financial Accounting course for the original CORe program, explains, “CORe was designed as a credentialed program with three segments and an exam at the end. Unbundling the segments was not part of the original vision.”

PLD program manager Peter Lewek worked with colleagues at HBS Online to make sure the merging of the HBS Online and PLD teaching platforms was easy for participants to navigate. “It was a team effort,” says Lewek, who himself completed CORe. “It took expertise on both sides to think through all the details that go into customizing a new technology like this.”

“Both operations were fully committed to preserving the integrity of the material we had developed,” says Narayanan. A partial roll-out of the learning platform took place in December 2015, and more extensive integration of both the economics and accounting courses in PLD’s two distance-learning modules began in July 2016.

“Given that the original market for CORe was for students just beginning to embark on a business career, its appeal to seasoned executives has been remarkable,” says Soltes. “Even participants already familiar with accounting or economics are enthusiastic. We made completion mandatory, but the platform lets you move faster if you understand the concepts. Our completion rate is 90-95%, and many participants are asking for information to pass along to others in their companies who could benefit from the CORe program.”

“I especially liked that after each new concept was introduced, there was immediately a chance to practice it. I loved this learning method. Big congratulations for creating such an effective, simple, and practical tool.”

— Sibel Akgun
PLD Participant
Regional HR Director
Merck Biopharma

“HBS Online accelerates the on-campus learning. It sets up a livelier classroom experience, making it even more fulfilling to teach.”

— Eugene Soltes,
Jakurski Family Associate Professor of Business Administration

“HBS Online has become crucial to the success of the distance learning modules in PLD. It’s a big reason why the distance learning modules of PLD are working so well now.”

— Michael Tushman,
Paul R. Lawrence MBA Class of 1942 Professor of Business Administration