

# Capital One University puts employees in the driving seat

... while *“leaders as teachers”* proves a popular and effective program

**E**mployee development at financial institution Capital One is benefiting from the powerful combination of a corporate university that acts as a one-stop shop for employee development, plus innovative use of “leaders as teachers” in the organization.

The Capital One University, to which all the company’s 18,000 employees across the world gain access through the company’s intranet, has proved so successful since it opened in the USA in January 2004, that it now has a European equivalent based in the United Kingdom.

“Every year, as part of the Capital One People Imperative, the leadership team commits to ‘must do’ critical improvements based on feedback received from associates,” explained Siobhan Sheridan, head of Capital One University. “In 2004, building Capital One University was the key initiative, and the university was officially launched in the US in January of that year. A European equivalent was launched in the UK in November 2005, following the successful American pilot.”

## Employees control their own learning

Capital One University offers e-learning in addition to traditional instructor-led training, enabling associates to learn at their own pace, from the convenience of their desk or home. Associates have direct access to e-learning on a wide variety of topics. Employees are made aware of new interventions through internal communications updating them on new products as they become available. “Capital One’s learning strategy is to encourage lifelong learning that is owned by our associates. Because the corporate university is all managed online, employees take control of their own learning,” said Siobhan Sheridan.

Through the web site they can:

- review courses on offer;
- quickly find answers to learning questions;
- learn more about the products and services mapped to a “learning framework” that enables them prioritize their individual learning objectives; and
- obtain research assistance from the university library, which houses more than 2,000 business publications and periodicals, as well as resources available on CD and cassette.

Siobhan Sheridan explained: “Prior to Capital One University, decentralized Capital One training departments shared a learning management system (LMS). Although the system performed the major tasks required of a LMS, serious usability issues were apparent. The technology team began the process of upgrading the Learning Link, Capital One’s LMS. Four registration processes were merged into one system. Duplicative and outdated programs were eliminated to help to build efficiencies and enable the university to focus on the programs that provide the most value and return.”

**“Capital One’s learning strategy is to encourage lifelong learning that is owned by our associates. Because the corporate university is all managed online, employees take control of their own learning.”**

Among the improvements to the system were:

- alignment of the login process with corporate standards;
- organization of resources by the new learning framework;
- removal of unnecessary system functions; and
- improvement of the search capability.

The university currently offers around 300 instructor-led courses globally, 300 e-learning programs, and special learning events mapped to Capital One’s learning framework. “The university has developed a process that aligns learning solutions with business needs. Offerings are mapped to the learning framework, which enables associates to prioritize their individual learning objectives,” said Siobhan Sheridan.

The learning framework features five learning categories:

1. *Capital One fundamentals* – learning that prepares associates for success at Capital One;
2. *management and leadership* – basic management and advanced-leadership courses;
3. *corporate competencies* – learning that supports Capital One’s core-competency model;
4. *business-unit learning* – customized learning that meets unique needs or requirements within a specific business unit; and
5. *job-specific skills* – specific learning tracks for functional specialities, such as those involved in project management.

“The centralized learning platform and the variety of resources – from classroom courses to online resources to an on-site resource center – cater for all learning styles and ultimately help associates to engage, learn and excel in their roles,” explained Siobhan Sheridan.

### **“Learning agendas” support specific business initiatives**

The university has partnered leaders across the company to create customized learning strategies, named “learning agendas”, which aim to support specific business initiatives. A number of business units have already created specialized curricula and colleges:

- *Finance College*. For global finance associates, Capital One offers several courses to build financial knowledge. These include: understanding the balance sheet; funding strategies; understanding earnings calls; and financial metrics.
- *Credit College*. Some learning strategies are created to apply job-specific learning across multiple business units. One example is the curriculum in credit risk management’s Credit College, which includes topics such as: critical thinking and analysis; statistical methods and data; valuation and forecasting; and credit-risk foundations.
- *Supply-Chain Management College*. This was created to improve supply-chain management skill in capturing supplier value and mitigating risk to Capital One. The courses are designed for relationship managers, but can be taken by any Capital One associate who is involved with selecting and managing suppliers. Examples of SCM College courses include: introduction to supply-chain management; third-party management policy training; supplier-relationship management process; and managing third-party risk and performance.

The university also ensures that the company is compliant with regulation by providing courses on topics such as the Consumer Credit Act. The online management of such courses ensures the company can track who has completed the courses, some of which are compulsory to guarantee regulatory compliance. Courses and resources are also linked to the company's values and core competencies, on which employee progression is measured as part of the company's performance-management process.

Some 75 e-learning opportunities on leadership and development are available through the university's partnership with the Harvard Business School, and there are 200 other e-learning opportunities that focus on technical business skills available from another external provider, NETg. Courses are also taught in a classroom environment by external agencies such as Xpertise and Vantage.

"We are delighted to be part of such an industry-leading initiative," said David Brindle, of Xpertise. "We partner Capital One University to provide technical-training solutions that help Capital One employees to augment their existing skill and contribute to the company's continued business success."

Gabriella Salvatore, co-director, corporate education, at Vantage Partners, said: "As a partner with Capital One University, Vantage has had the opportunity to offer its Difficult Conversations course throughout the US, and we are excited to continue our work in the UK. The university is unique in its comprehensive and cutting-edge approach to learning and development. The breadth and depth of the curriculum, coupled with the innovative use of technology, have created a dynamic learning environment for employees and training professionals. We are proud of our partnership with the university and the positive impact it is having on employees' learning and development."



### Leaders as teachers

The university has developed the "leaders as teachers" approach to help to ensure that the knowledge and skills of its senior leaders are being fully used to develop those around them. The leaders as teachers initiative takes a number of forms: the executive-speaker series; business-leader workshops; short sessions with a senior leader speaking on an area of particular expertise; leaders delivering entire training programs on particular subject areas, such as change management; and leaders involved in particular sessions on training programs – for example, presenting the company's strategic imperatives during its induction program, OnBoarding.

University staff support the leaders as teachers program by helping the leaders to develop facilitation skill sets through facilitation-skill training for business faculty. This is designed for subject-matter experts who serve as training facilitators for the university. While providing an environment to learn and practise facilitation skill building, the course focuses on: the role of the facilitator in the classroom; adult-learning theory; facilitating versus presenting; handling questions; best practices for supporting materials and leveraging the leaders' guide as a facilitator.

"In the last quarter of 2005, in the UK, the leaders as teachers programs attained an average satisfaction rate of 85 percent," said Siobhan Sheridan. "In some cases they outperformed some of the external suppliers."

### A participant's view

One associate who recently attended a management-development program commented: "I thought the "managing with impact" course was one of the best I have been on. I used the problem-solving and delegation tools within an hour of finishing the course and have plans to use the feedback tool today. Most especially for me, the course showed how getting results, developing your relationships and following a best-practice framework are not exclusive – you can get all three at the same time by using these tools. The role-plays bridged the gap between the theory and practice through a safe, supportive environment where you could make mistakes, reflect and try again."

**“In the last quarter of 2005, in the UK, the leaders as teachers programs attained an average satisfaction rate of 85 percent. In some cases they outperformed some of the external suppliers.”**

### Internal and external benchmarking

A series of internal and external benchmarking studies has revealed:

- in 2004, 82 percent overall associate satisfaction – up from 62 percent in 2003;
- university-library usage more than doubled in 2004;
- almost 25,000 associates took part in training during 2004;
- almost 1,500 classes have been completed globally since January 2004;
- usage of job-specific e-learning courses has risen by 40 percent; and
- the business has realized an increase in efficiency and streamlining

Siobhan Sheridan concluded:

I am confident that the university is meeting our organizational-learning needs. Our approach of defining our people-capability needs through discussions with our executive-leadership team about organizational strategy ensures that the development approach that we take is fundamentally supportive of our organization's strategic direction. Our executive-leadership team members are very engaged in the discussions to identify those capability needs and are active sponsors of the learning solutions we put in place. This combination of strategic focus and visible, active sponsorship is a powerful combination for us.

#### *Keywords:*

Training,  
Financial institutions,  
Employee development,  
Corporate universities

### Note

This article was written by David Pollitt, *Human Resource Management International Digest* editor.

---

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: [reprints@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:reprints@emeraldinsight.com)  
Or visit our web site for further details: [www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.