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Building a Collaborative Model of Lifelong Learning

Abstract

An ancient African proverb reminds us that it takes a village to raise a child. So too we are well served to consider that it takes a community, or a network of relationships, to manage the span of human learning. In fact, it is the global village that today informs every stage of our development. Even so, there remains the lingering question of how to best coordinate available resources to meet the needs of lifelong learners. In an effort to address this question a technique known as stakeholder analysis is used to develop a collaborative model of lifelong learning. The article goes on to discuss how organizations can use the model to improve their overall operating performance.

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There is a growing awareness that the emerging knowledge economy is creating a new set of educational imperatives. While debate will continue over what will constitute the exact nature of these demands, it is generally accepted that the new educational philosophy will focus on learning as a lifelong process. But even as the educational paradigm is shifting, uncertain economic conditions combined with competing demands for limited funds is making it difficult for organizations to meet the emerging needs of the lifelong learner.

Historically, organizations have relied extensively on a competitive model for informing decisions on how to improve operating performance. Two factors contributed to this narrow view of opportunity. First, free-market economies are grounded in a kind of “survival of the fittest” mentality. This mindset, however can also result in mutually destructive competition. That is to say, excessive competition can effectively destroy opportunities that might otherwise result from collaboration. For example, consider the classic example of where two organizations form a buying group that enables them to purchase supplies at a reduced price and/or allows them to negotiate for higher levels of service. While neither of the collaborating organizations will have technically achieved a competitive advantage over the other, both organizations will have benefited by reducing their overall operating expenses.

The second major factor that encourages organizations to rely on an “I’ll do it myself” approach is the erroneous belief that the size of the “pie” is necessarily fixed. In other words, many believe that the gain of one organization is directly related to the loss of another organization. This is also known as a zero-sum view of exchange. Fortunately there is an alternative and frequently more constructive view known as positive-sum economics. That is to say, by collaborating or sharing resources it is often possible for organizations to achieve greater gains than would be possible if each group worked independently.

To develop a collaborative model for the field of lifelong learning it is necessary to first identify those parties that have a vested interest in, or potentially can benefit from, the new learning imperatives. There are, of course, the usual lifelong learning suspects:

1. community education providers
2. colleges and universities (private and public)
3. public policy makers
4. the individual lifelong learner

On closer inspection, however, several additional stakeholders can be identified. The purpose of this article, then, is to identify the major stakeholder groups that are involved in lifelong learning and to propose a model that illustrates their interdependence.

The core stakeholder will then be expanded to demonstrate how organizations can identify specific subgroups within each and with whom an organization can develop collaborative relationships.

Stakeholder Analysis

What exactly is a stakeholder? The basic definition is "any person, group or organization that is potentially affected by a given decision, or set of decisions, is known as a stakeholder." In terms of lifelong learning, the core stakeholder groups would be any organization or individual that can benefit from decisions that are related to the delivery or consumption of educational services. Given this definition, nine distinct interdependent groups can be identified.

Stakeholder theory, as this type of analysis is sometimes called, does not necessary mean that all parties have the same interests, rights or obligations. Nor does it suggest that one group is necessarily more important than another. Rather, the analysis is first used to identify interested parties and then is used to identify opportunities for collaboration as well as to anticipate areas of potential conflict.

Each core group is comprised of several interdependent subgroups. As will be discussed, some of these subgroups can be thought of as complementary while others may be in competition with each other. In yet other cases, organizations may have a choice of whether to collaborate or to compete. For example, two different schools can either compete with each other as they try to service the needs of students or depending upon their respective missions they can collaborate by specializing in different community needs. It is also possible for an organization to belong to more than one stakeholder group. For example, a company that provides in-house training for its employees is both a provider of educational services as well as a user of those services.

For sake of parsimony the complexities introduced by an organization belonging to more than one core group will be largely ignored in this paper. The subgroups within each of the nine core stakeholder groups do, however, merit further elaboration. To that end, each core group will now be discussed with particular attention given to practical issues each group represents.

Users of educational services must first be understood in terms of their underlying market structure. For example, students can be broken down into two broad categories: individuals and groups. While some readers may be tempted to translate this distinction into business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B) markets, readers are encouraged to think more broadly in terms of individual needs versus community needs. A community, for example, can be comprised of an organization or governmental unit (hence B2B, profit or non-profit) but it can also be thought of in terms of family units or other social units (e.g. the immigrant community, religious or secular communities, and a wide range of special interest groups). Consider for example the implications raised by the following questions: What does it mean to think of lifelong learning in terms of the family unit? Should family members be learning together to build a basis of stronger relationships? What kind of learning enables or hinders the development of a healthy family?

Individuals are often defined in terms of their demographic characteristics, usage patterns, lifestyle or benefits sought. It is also beneficial to understanding organizational users in terms of underlying market segments (e.g. large versus small, retail versus manufacturing, service versus tangible products, etc). In essence, although beyond the scope of this immediate paper, users must be segmented so that organizations can better target and subsequently prioritize their markets so as to maximize the allocated impact of their scare resources.

The benefits of focusing on key user groups, as opposed to "we must meet the needs of everyone" can be summarized as follows. First, target marketing allows organizations to focus their intelligence gathering activities so that they can better understand the evolving needs of the particular core group, or subgroup, that they are serving. Second, given an understanding of your core competencies, an organization is in a better position to match resources with expressed or identified community needs. Finally, given that an organization is in a better position to understand the needs of their market, they can develop a more precise product or services. They will be able to communicate more effectively and have a higher probability of delivering the right product at the proper time and place. As a consequence, the organization will be able to offer their product at a price that yields the greatest return for both the user and provider.

Providers of educational services should also be segmented into several different types of subgroups. For example, you can think in terms of credit or non-credit courses. You can divide providers between general education, career training and self-enrichment categories; as well as for-profit and non-profit organizations. One of the emerging trends for public schools is that states are beginning to centralize resources and as a consequence are expecting local education units to share both information as well as related resources. As a result, more and more operating units are looking to Web-hosted technology alternatives to help them reposition their resources for greater flexibility and to help them meet the emerging needs of the market. The Web-hosted technology also facilitates real-time data collection and promotes standardized reporting.

While statistics vary, a conservative estimate is that it costs 3-5 times more to establish a relationship with a lifelong learner than to maintain and build upon the relationship of a current student. Schools are finding that Web-hosted systems are also enabling them to better track, maintain and grow relationships with the students that they currently serve.

Pipeline facilitators refer to how courses and supporting educational materials are delivered and managed. Recent trends in business management have also encouraged organizations to develop value-added services within its channel of distribution and efforts to form strategic alliances within this arena have proven very beneficial for all parties involved. For example, a school can partner with a local employer to provide in-house educational services. Another example might be illustrated by the recent trend of book publishers to provide supportive online services such as access to blackboard or other Internet-based resources. As competition increases and as resources continue to decline, alliances will become more than an option, they will become a strategic necessity.

A strategic alliance is defined as when two or more interdependent parties enter into an agreement to share resources to help achieve common goals. As a general rule, the alliances are formed with the nearest member in the stakeholder community. For example, a community college (provider) may form an alliance with a software developer or book publisher (support services).

Support services can be divided into materials and services that are needed by the end user (e.g., books and related supplies) and those that are needed by the providers of educational services (e.g. software to enable online registrations, catalog printing services, syndicated online courses, management consulting services, trade associations, etc). For example, a school could partner with a software developer to create innovative system solutions for addressing emerging needs in the marketplace. The school is in the best position to know the needs of their students and a software developer know show to best take advantage of available information technologies.

Given the value of strategic alliances and the rapid pace of technology development, it is important to establish a relationship that is based not only on current needs but also upon the capacity to meet future needs. For example, the vision, dependability (e.g., financial longevity and security) as well as planned development initiatives must all be considered when looking to form a strategic partnership. In general, support services and education providers are idea candidates for strategic partnering since they are both subject to the same underlying market demand factors.

After-market sales & service opportunities also emerge as a consequence of the skills that are acquired through lifelong learning. Even the simple expression of interest in a particular subject can prove to be of great value to private organizations. For example, an individual that is learning how to cook may very well be interested in acquiring new cooking utensils, cookbooks, or even in exploring other cooking classes. An individual learning about the history of Europe or the Far East may be interested in other books, artwork, or even travel to these distance locations. Learning not only informs us but also expresses our preferences and serves as a leading indicator of future buying behavior.

The idea of linking commerce and education together is neither new nor is it without controversy. Nevertheless, a coalition of appropriate stakeholders, focused on mutually satisfactory outcomes, can yield enormous opportunity. For example, students taking a course in healthy living may very well be interested in products and services that support a healthy lifestyle.

Public policy makers are acutely aware of the shift in the learning paradigm. This is clearly evidenced by the number of governments and multinational organizations that have concluded that a lifelong approach to learning must be used in order to meet the economic and social problems that are emerging in the 21st Century. Resource management implications include a concern for the growing gap between the privileged and the disadvantaged, how to prioritize essential services and how to facilitate the creation of enabling infrastructure. While there is a trend towards centralization, policy makers should be encouraged to work with key stakeholder groups to develop flexible systems that allow each provider to meet the unique needs of their individual communities.

Sources of external funding are always of interest and concern to educational institutions depending upon their current level of dependency on these external resources. The usual sources of external funds include individual or organization donations as well as public and private grants. Donors can be further divided between patrons that give large sums of money from those that provide smaller sums of money. Donors can also be divided between current gifts (restricted or unrestricted) and promissory gifts such as those provided in wills or other contractual instruments. These examples, of course, illustrate only a few of the traditional sources of external funds.

Another one of the benefits of conducting a stakeholder analysis is that it can be used to identify additional opportunities for leveraging resources. The classic example is given by the story of Henry Ford who recognized that by paying his workers a better-than-average-wage they would be able to afford the cars he was producing. This in turn stimulated economic activity that helped his company to grow. A more contemporary example might be where a book publisher provides a school with grants so that they can purchase online registration software and in return the book publisher can sell required books directly to students.

Curriculum development in the area of lifelong learning is also needed to help learners to develop the skills necessary to navigate the uncertainties they will encounter. Unlike traditional curricula where a road map can be designed for achieving a given education outcome (e.g. a bachelor’s degree), the uncertain time horizon and the ever-evolving array of potential preferences can make curriculum design for lifelong learners a particularly daunting task. Even so, the importance of the task demands that we give this area greater attention.

While there are those that advocate the primacy of individual learner responsibility, it seems prudent to provide learners with the basic skills necessary for managing lifelong learning; not unlike the development of financial planning over the last decade. Ideally, some form of general curriculum can be developed to help people map out learning across a life span; given career and lifestyle preferences.

In summary, subgroup members will always form the basis upon which potential strategic partnerships can be developed. An immediate goal, therefore, is to have each organization identify as many relevant members as possible within each core stakeholder group. As a consequence, organizations will be in a better position to create meaningful alliances that will in turn give rise to new opportunities for leveraging resources.

Summary and conclusions

The goal of this paper was to map out the core stakeholder groups that are involved in the lifelong learning paradigm shift. This effort is viewed as a preliminary yet necessary step towards identifying the range of opportunities that exist for enhancing the delivered value of lifelong learning services and products. It is reasonable to predict, based on industry experiences over the last decade, that the sharing or leveraging resources between key stakeholder groups will dramatically reduce costs while also adding value to the lifelong learning experience.

A very simple example of how stakeholders might work together may help to illustrate the potential of the proposed model. Consider the case of a vendor (e.g., a book publisher or software developer) that is selling to schools that provide services for lifelong learners. The vendor needs several things in order to survive and prosper in the market:

1. profitable sales
2. information about local trends
3. healthy word-of-mouth communication
4. new product/service ideas
5. perhaps classroom space to conduct local meetings

Schools by contrast want:

1. low cost products and services
2. information about national and regional trends
3. product assurances that reduce future risks
4. training and support when needed
5. assistance with how to best use the tool/product
6. cost reducing and/or revenue enhancing ideas

Given this example, in exchange for a lower priced product, a school might provide a vendor with any or all of items 2-5 on the vendor's wish list. The items that the school would be offering have little cost to the school but big value to the vendor. In return, the vendor can also provide schools with services related to 2-6 on the school's wish list. Both the school and the vendor have increased the value of their exchange with very little increase in cost. The end-user, as a consequence, can also benefit from the opportunity by receiving an improved product/service at a lower delivered cost.

As the above example illustrates, there are enormous opportunities for stakeholders to explore and develop strategies for leveraging their respective resource base. In the final analysis, all of us are challenged to be good stewards of the resources we are entrusted with. Although competition can strengthen resolve and can serve to remind us to do our very best, we can also benefit from collaboration, or the formation of meaningful coalitions that can help us in our pursuit of common goals.

Although the future will always contain some measure of uncertainty, the character of our organizations and the people they serve will continue to be forged in the crucible of change. Fortunately we are not alone in the task. In the final analysis we must all ask ourselves, what kind of community do we want to build and do we want to build on a foundation of collaboration or competition?