



Stu Gilkison, president and founder of Alkaline Consulting, recently completed an online certificate program through the University of Florida. He preferred the flexibility of the online program, which allowed him to better balance the demands of family and work with his continuing education.

PHOTO BY SHANNA WOLF

# Accessible Learning

Continuing education is a must in the complex work world, and online delivery is becoming the accepted, go-to choice for today's business professional

By Amanda N. Wegner

Without a doubt, continuing education is a must for today's business professional.

"Statistically, we will have seven careers in our lifetime," says Louis Loeffler, department chair and assistant professor of instructional technology at Cardinal Strich University. "In order for that to happen, you have to continue to expand what you know and continue your learning. Plus, there are jobs today that didn't exist 10 years ago, and jobs that no longer exist that did 10 years ago. You have to stay relevant and get the skills and knowledge to continually succeed."

Adds Karen Alesch, director of instructional development and delivery, Fox Valley Technical College: "Lifelong learning is more important than ever. In just about every area, change is happening quickly. It's important to stay abreast in every industry, especially since technology is embedded in every one."

Colleges and universities are increasingly using the Internet to deliver instruction and content. And with a decade of e-learning experience, online programs offer results that are as good as—and sometimes better than—the traditional classroom setting for today's busy business professional.

"E-learning has gone a lot further than being a computer version of a correspondence course," says Dr. Michael D. Besch, vice president of academic operations for Concordia University Wisconsin. "Now, it's all kinds of interaction and shared conversation, and students and faculty often spend more time learning in an e-environment than a [traditional] class."

## EDUCATION TO MEET YOUR NEEDS

Across the education spectrum, there's a move to "meet students where they're at," says Rovy Branon, interim associate dean, Online Learning and Technology for University of Wisconsin-Extension, which offers the UW System eCampus ([www.ecampus.wisconsin.edu](http://www.ecampus.wisconsin.edu)). And that's especially important for professionals seeking to expand their knowledge and skills.

"We try to avoid the traditional comparisons of in-person and online delivery," says Branon. "There are different methods of access, and it's important to recognize when each method is appropriate given the individual needs of the student and the content."

One factor is location; online programs open the world to students.

"Online learning provides flexibility in a cost-efficient way," says Alesch. "For that single mother who's a displaced worker, lives miles from a school that offers programming in her field to gain new skills, online is the best option for her." Regardless of one's position on the work ladder, e-learning is an option to not only balance work and life, but allows individuals to gain skills that might not be available through their local educational institution.

Such was the case for Madison's Stu Gilkison, president and founder of Alkaline Consulting, which offers life care planning, vocational evaluations for the Social Security Administration, and disability-related assistance to the business community. (Life care planning is the process of obtaining and sharing information from a team of rehabilitation professionals to analyze and project future medical costs for clients with catastrophic medical conditions.) Gilkison completed an online certificate program in life care planning through the University of Florida; that program prepared him for the national exam, which he passed in November.

"There are a few programs that provide a certificate program in life care planning, so it was sort of a forced choice to go online rather than a traditional classroom setting. That being said, an online program provided me flexibility to take a self-paced program. This allowed me to be an active father and spouse without the restraints of having to be out of the house at a specific time."

Bringing diverse voices together is a perk of online education, says Branon.

"It brings together students in a way that you can't do in a face-to-face classroom. Online, you might have students from China, Germany and Wisconsin, a working mother, a soon-to-be veteran trying to get a headstart on his degree for when he returns to civilian life, and a business professional learning to get ahead," says Branon.

"It allows you to be much more diverse and have great discussions since people are coming from all places. Each of them brings a different perspective, which mirrors the 'real world.'"

While online learning seems impersonal because of its virtual nature, Branon and Loeffler contend that there's more personalized attention in online classrooms.

"There is nowhere to hide; you can't sit in the back and not be seen," says Branon. "When you post something, it's visible to everyone. That makes a really big difference in the level of personalization you get in online learning."

Loeffler's program at Cardinal Stritch is synchronous, meaning students meet in a virtual classroom that can be divided into sections for small group work. There's a virtual whiteboard, Loeffler offers online office hours, and he can respond to students' questions with video e-mails to better explain concepts.

"We try to structure things so there's personal attention. We are building a community in a virtual environment and work with each other, but students have the flexibility of time for homework and self-learning," says Loeffler.

However, there will always be the need for in-person education, says Alesch.

"Depending on the field, students certainly have to practice their skills. There is a lot of learning of concepts that can happen online though and can shorten the amount of time it takes to finish a degree."

"The campus experience will not be replaced," says Branon, assuredly. "Campuses play vital roles as hubs for communities, and they are well-suited as places for young students to make the transition into adulthood. They are hubs for research and innovation and collaboration. Campuses provide something very different, and it really depends on the needs of the student."

#### **ONLINE, ON YOUR OWN**

Learning style plays into the "needs" of the student. "E-learning is best for someone who is more intrinsically motivated," says Besch.

Author Jessica Riggles knows the importance of self-motivation in e-learning; she is working on her MBA via an online program through Missouri's Columbia College.

"It really helps if the student is self-motivated. No one is holding your hand during an online program to make sure you are doing what you need to do. Read all materials thoroughly and ask questions when you don't understand."

Riggles originally was getting her MBA to further her insurance career, but has been downsized since starting the program in 2008. "I'm off that track, but I feel an MBA is a versatile enough degree to benefit me in wherever my career takes me."

Basic computer and web literacy skills are required as well. But in a well-designed online program, says Branon, technology should "move into the background as quickly as possible. Even if there is a slight learning curve, it should diminish quickly." And support should be available to those who need it.

#### **E-ACCEPTANCE**

Today, online programs (through accredited, reputable colleges and universities) are equivalent to their in-person counterparts.

"The official line is that online programs are as good as traditional programs," says Besch, "but I think you're going to find two other schools of thought."

There's the old guard, he says, that believes the only way to learn is in a classroom for a set number of hours for a set number of weeks. "Nothing's going to change that group."

There's also the group that believes online learning is superior to traditional learning.

"There's a fairly good body of knowledge in academe that says not only are learning outcomes in e-learning equivalent, but in some instances, superior," says Besch, with respect to communication skills and the ability to problem solve.

Branon echoes that: "What employers want are outcomes, and a lot of graduates of online programs are as good, and in some ways, superior."

"One of the nice things about online learning is you end up working harder, putting in extra time to understand things. You are no longer walked through something step-by-step," says Loeffler. "And that accounts for deeper learning."

While acceptance is still uneven at a national level, education professionals are seeing a greater acceptance of e-learning. "As more managers themselves have gone through e-learning, maybe they earned their MBA online or just took some professional development courses, they've realized the value themselves," explains Branon. "As such, they've become more accepting of it for employees as a way to further their careers."

#### **NOT ALL PROGRAMS ARE CREATED EQUAL**

Unfortunately, not all programs are created equal, particularly on the worldwide web.

Besch relayed the story of an individual who wanted to be an instructor for Concordia, but because his degree was from a non-accredited online program, he didn't qualify.



"It is so easy to set up an online school," says Besch, "so you have to really watch." He's heard of programs that were self-accredited.

Check for accreditation through the Higher Learning Commission ([www.ncahlc.org](http://www.ncahlc.org)). Besch adds that a bricks-and-mortar presence isn't a hard requirement, "but it sure helps. And, if you haven't heard of the place, be cautious."

Consider brand as well. Branon suggests speaking with human resources professionals and upper-level managers and executives to get a sense of what is—and isn't—acceptable, both online and in-person, in your career field in regards to continuing education and professional development.

"Ask, 'Is there a reputation factor I need to be aware of?' Fields vary, and brand value is really important."

In Gilkison's fledgling field, the University of Florida's life care planning program presented itself as the most established and respected available. "Many of the life care planning journal articles that I have read were written by UF graduates and a good portion of the national experts matriculated there."

A program's rigor is another consideration, says Loeffler. "Look for something that stretches you beyond what you already know. You're paying for it, so look for something you have to work at to get something out of it and show that you have grown professionally."

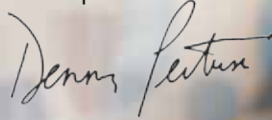
Gilkison adds that individuals who are considering continued education in any format should do plenty of research.


"Take the time to interview graduates of the program. People are honest about what they experienced. Make a pros and cons list between the online and on-site learning experience. Be brutally honest." For all the perks and convenience of online learning, it boils down to individual choice. And regardless of that choice, make an informed decision to best suit your needs and goals.

"We live in a complex world, and the quickest way to gain skills to survive or grow is through education," says Besch. "What format you choose has to do with learning style and individual need and will change, but the need for lifelong learning will always be there." CRW

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