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E-LEARNING
The benefits of virtual universities

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E-Learning: Benefit from
Virtual Universities

No more worrying about missing lectures because of work or not being able to complete a course! Thanks to e-learning, you can now log in to your lectures from virtually anywhere in the world. BY PRIYANKA TILVE

There is no denying the fact that having an additional degree can improve your career prospects. But once you start working, pursuing a professional course along with work can prove to be challenging. This is true even if you opt for distance learning or part-time courses. Distance learning involves mostly self-study, at times coupled with a few lectures before the exam. If you are a working professional, self-study mostly goes out of the window. Most of us end up not studying if there are no lectures that we need to attend. And even if you do, more often than not, you end up mugging up things without really understanding the subject. When it comes to part-time courses, you may not find time to attend classes. If you have faced a similar dilemma, then take heart, as you now have the option of opting for e-learning. While learning foreign languages online has been popular for few years, you can also opt for more traditional classroom courses like MBA, BBA, MCA, BCA, etc. through e-learning. Many Indian universities have collaborated with online platforms to develop content and offer e-learning courses.
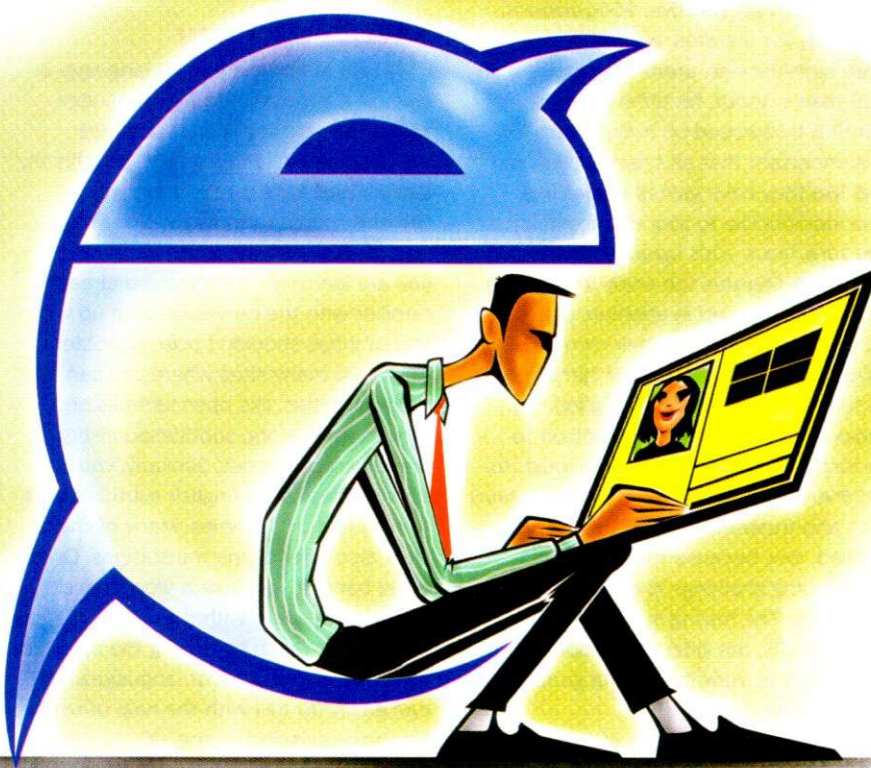
Why E-Learning?

E-learning has opened up avenues not only for working professionals, but even for those who are deprived of good universities in their home towns. You can choose amongst the finest of universities and opt for e-learning no matter which part of the country or world you reside in. All you need is a decent Internet access.

Speaking about the draw of e-learning, Raunak Singh Ahluwalia, Director, University18, which is an online education platform for universities like Don Bosco University and Karnataka State Open University, amongst others, says, "While cultures, business, technology and lives are becoming increasingly global, traditional distance education has stagnated to a large extent. Most distance learning or continuing education programs are limited to a geography – that of a 'study center'. In the two years of our existence, we've seen over three thousand individuals enroll at a 100% year-on-year growth rate. We've also been surprised with the kind of interest corporations and companies have shown in these programs, with several coming forward to sponsor their employees."

So what is it that gives e-learning an edge over distance learning? There are several factors that have fueled its growth; convenience and flexibility being the foremost amongst them. Right from selecting the university of your choice to determining the study pattern, to flexible examination pattern and easy installments for fees payment, these online education portals score over traditional distance education options.

Furthermore, Raunak points out the other important factors that work in favor of e-learning. "Online programs at U18 attract students from every corner of the world. You may just end up attending class with a global peer group, with the other students logging in from the United States, Africa, the Middle East or Australia. This adds to the diversity, hence contributes to the peer learning process and classroom discussion. Besides this, we can and do draw our faculty from just about anywhere. A typical Program has

Chaitanya Surpur

a professor from about eight different B Schools in six-eight different cities."

e-Learning Process

While there are different forms of imparting online education, do not get swayed by courses that claim to offer e-learning, but only offer study material online. An e-learning program is a blend of online virtual classrooms, reading material, both online as well as offline, online support and online examinations. In a typical e-learning program, the courses are conducted via virtual classrooms, with students and teachers logging in to a session at a pre-determined time. The students and teachers can then interact over chat as the class is in progress. So the basic teaching principles are simply replicated in the virtual world and one can quickly adapt to it.

Additional there are notes, presentations, etc. that you can refer to side by side, and you also have the option to download a particular lecture in case you have missed it. You can get the entire recording of the day's session, which you can then watch as per your convenience. For instance, if in middle of traditional part-time or distance education program, you are required to travel for work to another state or country, then you would not only miss out on the sessions for those many days, but worse still, you may have to abandon the course halfway. In case of e-learning that wouldn't pose a problem, as you can still log-in to your sessions from virtually anywhere and you also have the option to download them for later viewing. Apart from this, there are also additional tests that you can take from time to time to determine your own progress as well as forums to clear your doubts.

When it comes to the content, special emphasis is given to make it relevant to a larger audience and to make sure that it is up to date. Raunak explains, "While designing online courses in continuing education, it becomes important to ensure that the content and material is designed in a manner that is suitable for a wider variety of students. A classroom course at a University program can predict with fair accuracy the average age (18-20), IQ (100?), and experience (none) its candidates have. In online programs, age and the number of years

CHECKLIST BEFORE OPTING FOR ONLINE COURSES

☑ Just as you would with colleges and universities first and foremost check for accreditation, association with universities and ensure that the course is a certified one. Also, check the credentials of the university or of the distance learning institute.

☑ Secondly, look at what does the course contain in terms of how extensively will it cover the subject. See the duration of the course and also how many days in the week will the lectures be conducted. Also, ask to see a demo lecture, which will give you an idea of what to expect.

☑ Find out the faculty who will be teaching you. Look at their credentials and experience in the field. Check who has developed the course material and whether or not it has been approved by the university.

☑ Since the course will be conducted online, see what kind of additional support is provided. These may include ability to contact the faculty directly in case of queries, facility to download the lecture in case you missed one, offline / online course material provided, timely test etc.

☑ It's crucial to find out about the examination procedures. While some online course sites offer online examinations, some may require you to travel to the center to appear for the exam.

☑ These courses are mostly developed for the working professionals and so are highly flexible when it comes to lecture timings and even preference of choosing when you want to give your exam.

☑ Additionally, look for flexibility in payment of fees. Some may want you to pay the entire amount upfront, while some offer easy installment options. Also, see what the refund policies are in case if you wish to opt-out for whatever reasons.

of experience, and hence, experiential knowledge are key factors, given the fact that these are mostly part of 'continuing education' for candidates. We, for instance, see students in the age group of 30-40-50 in a larger number than those in 18-20. Hence, the content is designed carefully, so that it is both relevant and understandable to such a wide audience."

Most of these courses are aimed at working professionals and therefore focus on the knowledge and skills that are currently in demand. In keeping with the current trends, Raunak says that they plan to introduce new courses in 2012, "The key focus areas are entrepreneurship, business and technology in the new economy. The year 2012 will see the launch of a large number of Diplomas and Certificate programs, specifically targeted towards certified employability. For instance, the Don Bosco University Diploma Program in Web Design, a 12-month program covering fundamentals of software engineering, UI design, as well as programming and development on PHP/LAMP, is targeted at the nation's skilled programming workforce, who may not have graduated, but sure can code. These programs will give their coding skills a structured design and develop skills that give them an edge."

Who should opt for e-learning?

e-learning is a boon for working professionals, those who cannot travel due to some handicap, or those in towns that do not have good educational institutes. However, there are certain things one should keep in mind before opting for online e-learning programs. Raunak says, "Online education is the way of the future, and in my opinion, a very important trend in the development of the way we study and learn. While online programs are a smart choice for continuing education, students should understand that these programs require discipline, a fair amount of Web skills, and access to a good Internet connection.

Unlike in a 'study center' or college, a student in an online program would have minimal peer group support, (even though it would be common to see peer groups forming online), and would need to ensure he/she is disciplined enough to follow through with the program. If you're looking at enrolling in an online course because you assume that it'll be easier to pass, or is cheaper than the distance learning programs on offer from that Institute, or is of a shorter duration, then you should reconsider your motives."