

Business Education, Professional Bodies and Supporting Communities of Practitioners*

Prof. Colin Coulson-Thomas

For some senior managers business education might seem synonymous with the graduate schools of business which many of them and their peers attended. Yet within their organizations those with MBAs might be outnumbered by holders of various forms of professional qualification. The contribution of professional bodies to business practice, development and history should not be taken for granted. Nor should their continuing relevance be assumed.

Business schools based at universities, or associated with them, have long been significant players in the business education marketplace, but many professional bodies also have a long pedigree. Established professions in the developed countries can trace their origins back to the nineteenth century or earlier. In respect of some of their activities, a diversity of business schools and a raft of professional institutes and associations compete with each other and private training firms.

Different elements of the business education marketplace sometimes collaborate as well as compete. Some universities and business schools grant holders of professional and other qualifications certain exemptions from academic course requirements, while some private and professional providers seek academic validation of their offerings. Students now have opportunities to pursue programmes of study leading to both academic and professional qualifications.

To what extent are business schools and professional bodies influencing business history and practice, and to a degree determining them, or are their staff observing from the sidelines, monitoring developments and trying to make sense of what is going on in the business and market environment around them? Are business schools making history or endeavouring to understand selected aspects of it? Do professional qualifications reflect developments or influence them? Are communities of professionals vibrant workshops or protective closed shops?

Communities of Knowledge Workers and Professionals

According to Peter Drucker (1999) knowledge and knowledge workers are the most valuable assets of contemporary corporations. Yet the extent to which relevant knowledge is applied to certain key activities, and how knowledge workers are supported, can be critical determinants of the extent to which organisations can benefit from these assets. Many organisations have a dispersed workforce, and the management challenge may be to support people in different locations who need to collaborate and interact in the performance of particular tasks (Dong et al, 2011).

A previous *Effective Executive* article examined how performance support can contribute to corporate learning (Coulson-Thomas, 2013a). This article will consider how it can address the challenge of ensuring that communities of knowledge workers and professionals remain current and excel, especially in roles that impact upon customers and clients. Citizen clients are also important for public sector bodies. Providing better support to communities of professionals, especially those in the front-line, can be the key to transforming public services (Coulson-Thomas, 2012b).

We will see that performance support could also re-energise professional organizations. Leading professional bodies can have more members to develop, support and keep up to date than the number of knowledge workers employed by all but the very largest of organizations worldwide. They seek to attract, develop and qualify appropriate people, retain them as members, and enable them to remain employable and competent to practice throughout their careers. Like those who employ their members, they are ostensibly concerned with ensuring the highest standards of

practice and ethical conduct and compliance with relevant guidelines and codes.

How many of the approaches, tools and techniques used by communities of practitioners have emerged from business schools and/or professional bodies, as opposed to being developed by consulting and other professional firms or innovative companies? Do business school academics investigate them after their adoption and professional bodies include awareness and understanding of them in their syllabi once they have proved their worth.

Importance of Role Relevance

Maybe the issue is not where developments come from but their relevance and how they can be made available to a community of practitioners as and when they require help. Most professional bodies approve of and disseminate new approaches that are sound and effective. They aim to address particular issues felt to fall within the domain of their particular profession, rather than generic business issues, hence their relevance to those with jobs within their area of practice.

Recognising the significance of supporting people in particular roles and adding value to them at earlier stages in their careers, more business schools now offer specialist degrees, including specialist MBAs, in addition to general business qualifications. However, other than offering short courses, most business schools are not as geared up to providing continuing and job-based education, training and support as some professional bodies are within their areas of competence.

Are business schools facing a relevance challenge? Across leading universities, science faculties and technology departments generate income from breakthroughs, patents and spin-off companies. They develop, license and manage intellectual property. Innovations and discoveries can yield tangible benefits such as lives saved, increased crop yields, reduced pollution, stronger materials, safer transport, faster communication and better protection. In comparison, what have business schools produced?

Excessive Complexity

How relevant to communities of practitioners are some business school research agendas and how useful are their outputs? How many new enterprises are established because of what they discover? Given the contribution of some business school academics to the creation of complex financial offerings that were marketed by sales teams who did not understand the full implications of their widespread adoption one could also ask whether the impacts of business schools are always benign.

In 2008 certain financial institutions and elements of the world's financial system seemed close to collapse. Economics students have joined the questioning of why business school and other university-based economists failed to predict the financial crisis and whether they have been over-focused on mathematical models and approaches and failed to challenge prevailing views (Inman, 2013). Many academic articles appear arcane and lacking in relevance to some practitioners.

Reporting on student and other concerns, Inman (2013) quotes Paul Krugman (2009) who expressed the view that: "As I see it, the economics profession went astray because economists, as a group, mistook beauty, clad in impressive-looking mathematics, for truth." There was a time when a general reader could understand the writing of a John Maynard Keynes (1936) at the boundary of applied economics and his suggestions for action to address macro-economic problems of the time. Today's academic outputs, particularly those in scholarly journals, frequently contain mathematical equations and often employ terminology that would be unintelligible to a general reader.

Avoidance of Generalisation

While an acceptable degree of rigour in terms of validity and reliability may be important, so are relevance and intelligibility if findings are to be used by communities of practitioners. Much of business education is concerned with general principles. Academic discussion sometimes appears to practitioners to be abstract, general and concerned with the interesting rather than the relevant and the important, and with principles rather than specifics and 'what to do' in certain situations.

Certain business schools have also had a penchant for business policy, strategy formulation and planning. Activities at the 2013 London Global Convention organised by the Institute of Directors of India included the 13th International Conference on Corporate Governance and Sustainability. A degree of impatience and concern, if not scepticism, was evident among some delegates. Speakers stressed the importance of implementation, and action to move beyond generalisation and turn noble aspirations into the reality of concrete achievement.

One also sensed an appetite for “progress on the ground” rather than further investigations, more reports and additional codes. Many practitioners have particular challenges to address and problems to tackle. There is little point in principles, laws, policies and rules that are not implemented. Calls for action need to be matched by the adoption of proven, sustainable and affordable ways of ensuring compliance, changing behaviours and supporting responsible decision-making.

Generalisations need to be challenged. Perhaps we should be more concerned with the negative consequences of rules, the cost-effectiveness of regulation, and the affordability of sustainability policies. A green energy strategy that makes home manufacture uncompetitive can move production offshore to a location in which greater damage might be done. Governance and sustainability assumptions, generalisations and policies should not go unchallenged (Coulson-Thomas, 2013b).

Addressing the Particular

Thoughtful directors relate general principles to their particular situation and corporate and market context. Governance arrangements and board policies that would suit a listed multinational corporation might not be appropriate for a family owned business or an SME. The Anglo-Saxon approach to governance and unitary boards represent one model. What works in one context might not succeed in another. Board membership and operation should be kept under review as a business grows, significant changes occur, and new challenges and opportunities appear.

Discussion at the convention revealed national differences of practice and differing viewpoints on such questions as whether there should be a majority of non-executive directors on a board. While views expressed may reflect local experience and/or governance codes, actual practice can have implications. For example, board dynamics and non-executive impact can change once independent directors become a majority. Practitioners may need more than general principles when addressing what to do in a particular situation and context. They may require support as and when issues arise.

Where there are differences of opinion and differing national practices, encouraging debates and allowing views for and against particular practices or proposals to be expressed, and matching action to requirements and priorities may be more helpful than presenting a general and abstract solution. Questioning and challenge are at the heart of effective governance. Perhaps helping people to think and discuss are arenas in which business schools could have a comparative advantage.

Challenging Business Education Providers

Certain business schools are long established, and during their evolution their roles and contributions have been questioned (Coulson-Thomas, 1975, 1982 and 2013a). They have not stood

still. Strategies and offerings are periodically reviewed, and certain business schools have developed into international organizations with campuses and activities in different continents as they seek to serve a global clientèle. Some also support communities of distance learners.

The role of professional bodies has also been questioned and there are new approaches which they can adopt to remain relevant (Coulson-Thomas, 1988, 2012a & b & 2013c). To a greater extent than is the case with some business schools, the aim of many professional bodies is to ensure new members are able to make an effective contribution from qualification. In contrast, leading business schools have traditionally been more focused upon preparing people for future leadership positions.

Companies in competitive markets have to address current issues. In insecure and rapidly changing contexts, and when future requirements are difficult to predict, remaining competitive and addressing contemporary challenges with an existing team may be a more pressing talent management issue than preparing a cadre of future leaders (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a).

Many professional bodies face financial challenges. Other players are encroaching upon their space - from developers of websites to serve the networking and support needs of particular communities of professionals to universities and colleges eager to offer new work and practice related qualifications and courses. Professional bodies need a close, if not intimate, relationship with employers of their students. These organisations face significant up front investment costs during the period of qualification which may need to be recouped during subsequent employment.

Focusing on Particular Communities

A focus on particular work-groups, communities and/or networks is not new (Andriessen, 2005), but the centre of interest of performance support is on performance, understanding and knowing how high performers do things rather than knowledge *per se*. Performance support is particularly relevant to communities of practice (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). It could simultaneously address multiple challenges of professional institutes and associations and improve performance and standards in a number of areas (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a & b, &2013c).

Performance support can use the knowledge base of a profession and associated tools to support the training, assessment and qualification; continuing professional education and development; communications; member updating; practice support; compliance and standards; and other activities of a professional body. It can focus on critical success factors for key roles and hence it can help to address the issue of identifying the knowledge requirements of knowledge workers and professionals (Shah et al, 2007).

The approach makes it easier for professionals to handle complex tasks, and average practitioners can be enabled to emulate the approaches of high performers, whether within the community or elsewhere. Evaluations have shown that high and multiple returns on investment have been quickly obtained when only one or two of a number of possible outcome measures have been used (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a &b, & 2013c). Benefits include greater understanding, improved performance, reduced costs, quicker responses, less stress, higher standards and enabled and evidenced compliance. Protecting the public by ensuring compliance with the highest standards of professional practice is a priority requirement for professional bodies and many organisations.

Providing Accessible and Usable Support

Providing support and updating facilities is one thing, ensuring people use them is a different matter. Too many corporate learning centres are like chapels of rest, while many updating facilities are not used. Too often e-learning and other forms of help fail to engage, are not relevant to

problems that arise, or are not available 24/7 at a point of need and when required, and they do not quickly and directly impact on performance (Fuller, 2010).

Problems with standards of professional practice, especially when new developments occur, often arise because individual practitioners are not always systematic in their attendance at meetings and in perusing professional journals. Even when they do notice and read a relevant briefing they may have difficulty in remembering it, or relating it to particular situations and problems.

Performance support can provide practising professionals with easy access to the information and knowledge they require and day to day support to help them to adopt the approaches of high performers when confronted with difficult tasks. An overview in a journal article can be supplemented or replaced by a support package, including check-lists and templates, processes and procedures, and documentation that can be bespoke for individual clients, algorithms and tools.

Such support can build confidence and equip a professional to assess and address an unfamiliar situation. Performance support can be used to capture and share good practice and built-in checks can ensure compliance with relevant standards (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a & b, & 2013). Support can also be designed to raise professional standards by ensuring that users learn with each application, while on-line up-dating can ensure they remain current with regulatory and other developments.

Education, Training and Qualification

A similar approach can be used to support the initial training, development and preparation of new candidates for a profession, as one of its strengths is helping people to understand complex requirements. Self-assessment tests can be used by students to help them assess their suitability for professional practice, its relevance to their personal aspirations, and to judge their readiness for examination, performance in certain roles or joining particular communities of practitioners.

School leavers and college or university alumni may also need to be inducted into the ways of particular professions, just as new employees are inducted into an organisation. The integration of social networking into this and other areas can facilitate communication and interaction within a community of practitioners, and enable those with relevant experience to comment on issues and questions raised while they are still current. Direct access to a profession's continually updated repository of knowledge and best practice ensures the exposure of students and trainee professionals to current thinking and provides early exposure to a way of working that can ensure they remain up to date throughout their professional careers, while at the same time generating evidence of their commitment to continuing professional development (CPD).

More professionals have to consider growth and development within a role as an alternative to advancement by moving from one job to another. The lack of promotion possibilities in slimmer and flatter organisations (Patterson, 2009) is another problem that performance support addresses. It enables the focus to shift to building capabilities and enabling individuals and teams to understand ever more complex situations, and handle ever more difficult problems.

Continuing Professional Development

The value of an expensively acquired and developed talent pool may quickly erode if its members are not kept current, and their knowledge and skills are not relevant to contemporary issues. The CPD requirement is an increasingly important one and this is an arena in which the latest approaches to supporting communities of professionals excel, particularly when they are operating in fields that are inherently complex and frequently changing.

Support can be off-line or on-line. Working professionals can be provided with relevant practising and CPD support as and when they need it, wherever they might be. Help and updating can be sought and provided at whatever time is most convenient for a particular individual. With applications that can be delivered via laptops, palm tops and the latest generation of mobile phones, support is available at the point and place of work, even when people are on the move.

Most existing methods of updating are relatively ineffective in comparison with the use of professional support tools. Events and courses can be difficult and expensive to organise and run. They require people to leave their place of work and inputs provided are often quickly forgotten. The relevance of what is read or said may only be perceived after the event, as and when certain situations arise and when what was imparted may have been forgotten.

Integrating learning and practice so that support is available as, when and where required is preferable from a member perspective, particularly when it is provided in such a way as to help understanding, raise standards of practice and directly benefit clients. Studies have shown that the preference of employers is to bring working and learning together (Coulson-Thomas, 1999; CIPD, 2007). Performance support can achieve this and its use can build understanding, confidence and competence rather than de-skill as other approaches sometimes do.

Communications and Interactions Within and Across Communities of Professionals

The extent to which the potential of talented people is realised can depend upon the extent to which and how they interact (Hidalgo, 2011). Performance support can also enable the members of a network or community to help each other, for example by ensuring that effective ways of doing things are acknowledged and shared.

Some companies and other organisations have not found it easy to develop an agreed policy for social media and social networking, as while their advantages may be clear, so are some of the risks. Performance support can incorporate and embrace social networking and provide a framework for its responsible and beneficial use. Once again, its strategic adoption and a joined up approach can address a number of issues.

Performance support is particularly suited to communication with members and can be much more accessible, current and cost-effective than traditional alternatives such as journals, newsletters, reports and events. When done properly it can also be more engaging and enlightening. The dissemination of technical updates can be automatic and instant, which can speed the adoption of innovations. Mechanisms can be built in to allow instant and continuing feedback and the sharing of insights and ideas.

The greater speed of reaction can be critical in rapidly changing and crisis situations. Traditional alternatives sometimes find it difficult to cope with the unexpected. Having struggled to 'turn people on', their users may find it hard to quickly 'turn people off', for example getting them to stop doing something that might be counter-productive or even harmful. With performance support, in worse case situations blockers and red traffic lights could be programmed in - perhaps overnight - to prevent certain courses of action, to be quickly followed by the programming in of explanatory windows that will open at an appropriate point and provide an explanation.

Supporting and Monitoring Professional Practice

Far too often practitioners are offered general briefings when what they need is specific help and support that is directly related to individual assignments and the problems of particular clients. Receiving what they need in a format that is easy to use and understand is greatly appreciated by

busy professionals. A one-off evening meeting at an inconvenient time and location is no substitute for on-going day to day support as and when required.

Each professional may have a different requirement, and many people specialise in particular areas of practice. The support they receive needs to reflect this, and be capable of accommodating career moves and new assignments, perhaps from recently acquired clients. Other investigators have found that people are more receptive to development support that meets their particular role requirements (Chow et al, 2008). Hence the value of personalised performance support.

With the experience that has been obtained, it is relatively straight forward to build regularly updated performance support for different and distinct professional communities, including the ability to assess the requirements of individual clients, identify and select preferred courses of action, and generate any bespoke documentation that may be required. Built in checks can ensure that users cannot generate reports, forms, proposals and other documentation that do not comply with regulatory and other requirements, and that they contain appropriate clauses.

Should it wish to do so a professional body could monitor the use of the information and support it provides. Information generated could include the proportion of members accessing a particular update, and the extent to which members are fulfilling CPD requirements. Monitoring information could inform the updating, refinement and extension of the help provided.

Demanding users of specialist services expect advice given to be up to date. This can be a challenge when a knowledge base is extensive and rapidly evolving (Burkhard et al, 2011). Performance support enables developments such as new technical requirements, regulatory changes or legal decisions to be quickly disseminated. Users can be directed to the relevant sections of long documents such as particular provisions in new and complex legislation as and when it is relevant to a particular task they are undertaking through their use of the appropriate tool.

Professional Bodies and Business Education

The strategic use of performance support could replace and improve a number of the existing services provided by a professional body and complement others (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a & b, & 2013c). It could both embrace and offer a more accessible and cost-effective channel for the delivery of many of the core activities of professional institutes and associations.

Professional bodies may have an inbuilt competitive advantage over companies and professional firms when it comes to updating performance support. They sometimes have easier access to those whose role is to monitor developments and remain current. When commissioned on a project basis, and when people change jobs, ensuring support commissioned for a particular purpose is kept up to date can be a challenge for an individual company or professional firm.

The professional knowledge frameworks and support tools that can deliver 24/7 performance support across large and dispersed communities can not only benefit from the involvement of professional bodies, but one could argue that they actually need it if their full potential is to be realised. They can enable existing activities to be undertaken more quickly and cost effectively, and provide a noticeably enhanced service to members and a new rationale and sense of purpose.

Evidence from early adoptions of performance support suggests that professional bodies could be revitalised to such an extent that the heyday of many of those institutions that originated in the nineteenth century may be yet to come (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a & b, & 2013c). They could be instrumental in creating a better future for their members, business and the wider public.

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Author

Prof. Colin Coulson-Thomas is an international adviser and consultant and an experienced board chairman of award winning companies who has served on private, public, voluntary and professional sector boards and held general management and process vision holder roles. He has held professorial appointments in Europe, North and South America, the Middle East, India and China – including as the world’s first professor of corporate transformation. He has helped over 100 boards to improve board and corporate performance, and has reviewed the processes and practices for winning business of over 100 companies.

Colin is the author of some 40 books and reports, including *Transforming Knowledge Management*, *Developing a Corporate Learning Strategy*, *Winning Companies; Winning People*, *Developing Directors* on building an effective boardroom team, *Talent Management 2* and *Transforming Public Services*. He has spoken at over 200 national and international conferences in over 40 countries. A fellow of seven chartered bodies he obtained first place prizes in the final examinations of three professions and has received international recognition as a change agent and transformation leader.

Colin was educated at the London School of Economics, the London and Aston Business Schools, the graduate school of international relations of the University of Southern California (graduate school distinction) and the University of Chicago (Deans List). He is currently chairman of Adaptation, Bryok Systems and ELMS Global, a part-time academic at the business school of the University of Greenwich and an adjunct visiting professor at the department of geopolitics and international relations of Manipal University. His latest publications can be obtained from www.policypublications.com and he can be contacted via www.coulson-thomas.com.

*Note

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