



# Creative learning

Despite budget cuts and more responsibilities, employees are still finding ways to hit the books

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As companies saddle their managers with more and more responsibilities, but at the same time cut back on continuing education allowances, some local professionals are opting for alternatives to the MBA.

Katja Gehrt, U.S. public relations manager for London-based venture capital firm 3i Group PLC, took a C-level executive training course through the Silicon Valley Executive Business Program to prepare herself for a possible dip into entrepreneurial waters.

"Unlike the full-time MBA program, where it is very much a one-size-fits-all market, I was looking for a customized program that would allow me to stay in my job," says Gehrt, whose \$5,695 tuition was reimbursed by 3i.

Nearly into its second semester, the program -- offered through San Jose State University's Professional Development Center -- promises practical upper-level management skills in a 12-week fling without the two-year commitment of an MBA. The program is divided into modules, each covering skills needed by a specific C-level executive.

Mitchell Levy, founder and director of the program, says his target market consists of three main types of professionals: CEOs of small startups, managers suddenly given more responsibilities, and out-of-work and prospective executives.

For these types of professionals, he believes, the two-year MBA is not practical.

"I'm not a big fan of the actual sheepskin, whether it's an MBA or a Ph.D.," says Levy. "Other than Harvard or Stanford, there's not an institution where someone's going to see that and say, 'a-ha, you're part of the club.'"

Some traditional master's degree programs geared toward management goals offer incremental certificates along the way.

Oakland-based student Rachel Mulcrone is pursuing a two-year master's degree in computer science at Mills College in Oakland to market herself as an engineering manager. Prior to receiving her degree, Mulcrone will receive certificates that allow her to update her resume.

Competing as a computer engineer, she believes, just doesn't make sense in the current job climate.

"I figured it would be best to get some more credibility. My goal is to be a manager of engineers," Mulcrone says. "It's one of those extra things that makes you more attractive in general."

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Mulcrone, who majored in psychology as an undergrad but mainly worked as an engineer before the downturn, works as an overnight counselor in a group home. She says her edge in the job market -- especially once she gets her advanced technology degree -- is having experience and academic achievement in the areas of both technology and management.

Mulcrone realizes the future of employment in the tech industry lies in management, especially as lower-level engineering jobs are sent offshore.

3i's Gehrt says her coursework through the Silicon Valley Executive Business Program gives her a better idea of how executives work together, which she believes will prepare her for an entrepreneurial future.

"The modules help us to define different roles and responsibilities from different perspectives, which is important if you are thinking about how you want your own team and culture to look like," Gehrt says.

General enrollment for continuing education programs is down, says Carolyn Shadle, executive director for SJSU's Professional Development Center. Shadle was not able to give specific figures. She says the number of classes offered through SJSU has been scaled down, but that classes still fill quickly.

The biggest trend, says Shadle, is a decrease in technology courses and an increased interest in skills such as conflict resolution, team-building and communication. She says one of the biggest impacts on students is the decrease in monetary support of employees' education.

"Anecdotally, I've talked to potential students who say they'd love to get more training, but their employers no longer are paying for it," Shadle says.

Because of the holiday vacations, most Bay Area businesses contacted for this story did not return phone calls requesting information about their professional development policies.

Autumn Blatchford, a spokeswoman for San Jose-based Adobe Systems Inc., says the software company offers up to \$10,000 per year toward educational reimbursement for qualified employees. Also, she says, Adobe offers more than 130 technology courses and management programs internally.

Foster City-based software testing company LogiGear Corp. was forced to cut back on its training expenditures last year.

"If they got a B or above, the company paid for tuition and books. That has changed over the last couple of years," says Hung Nguyen, president and CEO of LogiGear. "We no longer reimburse for professional development in local colleges, but we do support specific skills training related to specific needs."

Nguyen says his company encourages upper-level managers to take executive courses through Stanford's Executive Training Program.

UC Berkeley, UC Santa Cruz and most other area universities and colleges offer continuing education programs for business professionals. Biz Ink was unable to reach representatives from many of them due to winter vacation.

Levy hopes the SV Executive Business Program offered through SJSU will stand out as an alternative to traditional courses.

"We modeled the program around how successful CEOs run the business," says Levy. "So the education the student receives is a very practical, hands-on exposure to the CEO and the CEO's staff."

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## A new twist on online education

After seven years in business, San Francisco-based e-learning company Ninth House Inc. is profitable and boasts household names such as eTrade Financial Corp., Wachovia Bank N.A. and the U.S. Department of Justice among its customers.

Used primarily for corporate training, Ninth House also offers online business management courses through university extension courses. The Silicon Valley Executive Business Program, offered through San Jose State University's Professional Development Center, is the latest to adopt its e-learning platform.

"We decided to put some of these things online to reduce some of the in-class hours," says Robert Greenleaf, custom programs and services manager for SJSU's Professional Development Center.

In addition to giving students PowerPoint lessons and assignments, the Ninth House component allows instructors to log into the system and track their students' progress.

Privately held Ninth House licenses content from mainly business leaders, including Ken Blanchard, author of "The One-Minute Manager," and produces audio-visual presentations.

"We've created courses by taking the intellectual property of gurus in soft skills and putting their courses onto the desktop," says Steve McMahon, vice president of learning services for Ninth House.

The company also produces simulations, which McMahon describes as "Hollywood-style movies with high production values," where lessons are applied to real-world situations.

Ninth House has a total of 14 courses and seven simulations. The SV Executive Business Program chose six courses and simulations to offer its students.

"When we invented this seven years ago, we were so far ahead of the curve that no one would use it," McMahon says. "In the last two years, companies have learned how to stream this through a firewall."

-- Steve Tanner