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A new design for tailored executive education is emerging –  
**Gert-Jan van Wijk** and **Jamie Anderson** report on the Platform Model

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# Customised Executive Learning

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A BUSINESS MODEL FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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**Traditionally, the world of customised executive education has been dominated by top-tier business schools that are generally positioned in the top twenty-five of rankings such as the *Financial Times* and *Business Week* lists. More recently we have seen the emergence of a new customised executive education model – what can be termed the ‘Platform Model’ – that is being leveraged by some of the world’s largest corporations.**

The Platform Model for executive learning recognises the existence of what has become a two-sided network, entailing a triangular set of market relationships. On one side of this network are the individuals and firms that possess specialist skills and expertise, and on the other side are organisational clients seeking learning solutions. The need for these two groups—the network’s “sides”—to interact with each other efficiently has created the opportunity for the emergence of intermediaries – what technology-based industries commonly call platform providers. The Platform embodies an architecture —a design for services, and infrastructure facilitating network users’ interactions—all at low delivered cost. Platform providers can be small, such as Netherlands based ‘*the world we work in*’ or substantially bigger: such as Antwerp Management School, the Lorange Institute of Business, Mannaz of Denmark and London-based Duke CE.

The platform is a boundaryless organisation, which drives executive learning ROI, through customisation, real action learning assignments and teamwork of faculty who integrate the learning. These characteristics are not the exclusive domain of platform intermediaries, but we have witnessed that executive education buyers increasingly value these characteristics in their decisions to source executive learning. This development potentially creates a disruptive effect in the market, and will require top-tier business schools to re-evaluate their approach. The implications reach beyond the world of executive education to all professional services, such as consulting and advertising, where intelligent networks of independent people co-creating solutions with clients could be the future of competition.

### **The Platform Model**

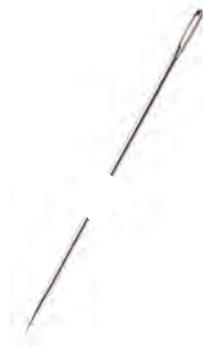
Platform intermediaries build client relationships by becoming trusted advisors, and act as open gateways to introduce corporations to a linked network of professionals. The platform model transforms executive education into executive learning: the architecture ensures that all design, development and delivery activities are aimed at the participants of the programme, rather than faculty teaching or facilitating the programme (see example at Diagram 1 – overleaf).

Program design within the platform ecosystem focuses on outcomes and learning processes rather than business/academic content. Furthermore the platform ensures that all programmes are sourced by faculty who are interested in the client’s business reality and show a willingness to collaborate with others to create an integrated programme. Finally all people involved realise that learning comes from facilitated action learning in which participants are given the concepts, tools and skills to apply in real business challenges.



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*All people involved realise that learning comes from facilitated action learning*



### Drivers of the Platform Model

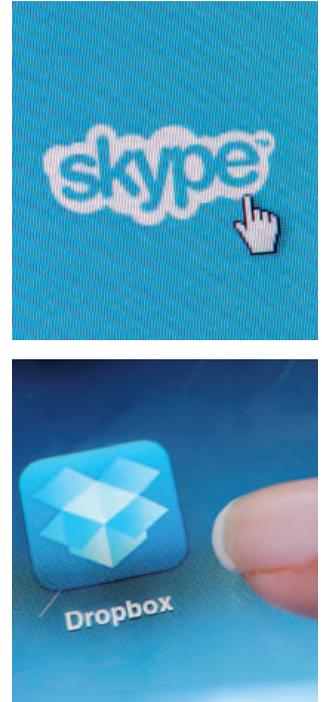
The platform model is primarily driven by a changing client demand for return on investment (ROI). In recent years client demand has evolved around demonstrating the ROI of executive learning through the enhancement of the practical skills of executives and the implementation of tangible business results. The requirement to prove ROI has led to a much closer involvement of buyers in the design of programmes and generally a higher level of sophistication amongst clients. They know what creates a real impact and they will demand it regardless of departmental or institutional domains.

This increasing sophistication of client demand pushes the world of customised executive learning to customise and innovate beyond the boundaries of a single institution or knowledge domain. The client may request different providers to work together, previous consultants' work to be integrated, or certain professionals to be included in the offering because of their know-how, skill or relationship with the company. Concurrently we have observed clients asking to integrate divergent management disciplines, research areas, and learning methodologies. Increasingly the skills of open collaboration and innovation have become differentiating capabilities of a customised executive education provider, because in practice these capabilities can hardly be attributed to a single institution.

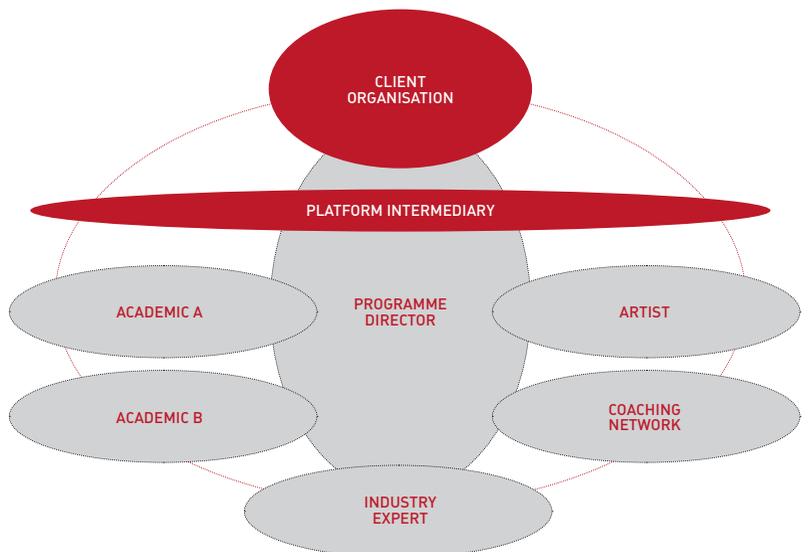
Clients have also become familiar with the benefits of working with professional practices outside the academic domain. They recognise that their executives' development needs cover the physical, emotional and spiritual, as well as the intellectual. In order to meet these demands a broad range of professionals from literature, the performing arts, media, wellness and sports bring expertise to address broader learning needs. Clients understand that "non-academic" programme elements can create a high impact, if they are well integrated in the overall design and linked to the academic contribution. The role of the platform intermediary is to bring entirely different worlds, mindsets and people together and ensure that everyone involved can translate their profession to the business world, and understand their role in the overall programme.

The Platform Model has been underpinned by an explosion in the number of intellectual free agents who desire to collaborate openly with

other individuals and institutions. These free agents are knowledge workers who determine their own work portfolio and integrate their own work/life tradeoffs, without a contractual commitment to a single employer. In the executive education world the free agent has often once worked for a business school, where the classic divide between tenure track academics, non-tenure track faculty and 'administrative staff' often limits career possibilities. Academics who haven't chosen the tenure-track route, can be marginalised or even forced-out of traditional business school hierarchies, regardless of their executive education capabilities. Talented executive educators often choose a free agent role wholly or partially outside the boundaries of the business school. Their commitment and values are with the clients, the learning process, the delegates and their disciplinary know-how, and they value the collaboration in the kind of open network offered by the platform model. In turn, this networked collaboration has been empowered by the pervasive spread of low-cost information and communication technologies, such as the communication service Skype and the file sharing service Dropbox, that are enabling virtual teams to deliver integrated educational offerings.



**Diagram 1**  
**The Platform Model (example)**



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**Guiding philosophy of the Platform Model**

Ultimately many of the tangible building blocks of a more traditional organisation such as buildings, physical infrastructure, systems and job contracts have been replaced by intangible pillars like trust, relationships, collaboration, agility and quality of execution. These pillars are solely dependent on the capabilities and commitment of the professionals involved – it relies upon “locking-on” clever people through a deeper sense of commitment, reciprocity and shared purpose rather than “locking-in” faculty through formal contracts and formal performance measurement tools. In this sense all the professionals are viewed as clients rather than resources. The ability to accelerate change and transform client organisations must be reflected in the transformation of all professionals involved.

The platform model is underpinned by independence, and the role of the intermediary between the two sides of the network is to be impartial and authentic. The approach is solutions oriented and focused on achieving the best outcomes for clients and partners. A prerequisite is that the platform “creates an environment in which...clever people can thrive” (2007, Goffee & Jones). The possibility that people will thrive is

enhanced if the platform can link the professionals directly to their commitment, development and values. The underpinning core values of this organising model are trust, transparency and continuous learning.

**Limitations of the Platform Model**

Successful platform intermediaries excel at what Ghoshal (1999) called: “managing the intangibles: people, process and purpose”. The Platform model strengths (speed, entrepreneurship, agility and passion) are based on these pillars. Simultaneously it also shows the limitations of the Platform Model:

**People:** Relationships and (virtual) collaboration are the cornerstones of each team working on a client project. The subtle difference between real open collaboration and ‘going through the motions’ is sometimes hard to detect. Yet ‘going through the motions’ clearly is not good enough. The Platform Model is built upon working with professionals who are usually self aware, (overly) confident and deeply uncertain and anxious to deliver good performance, and do at least as well as their peers on the programme. Client expectations, participant evaluations and the free agent status may add to this insecurity. In order to deliver excellent programs all these anxieties need to be overcome individually as well as a team. It requires careful relationship building, continuous encouragement and mutual feedback.

**Process:** Excellent programmes rely on clear and well-run support processes executed by colleagues often in the early phases in their careers. The collaboration between faculty and programme coordinators is as crucial as between faculty and the result of anything less than flawless teamwork is immediately visible in the delivery of the programme. Since the platform members are involved in various different networks with different procedures, it requires an extra effort to get them to understand the administrative processes, focus attention on building a relationship with coordinators and adhering to these processes.

**Purpose:** With distributed leadership, open boundaries and sometimes little management in place, all the emphasis in the platform is focused on creating immediate outcomes for clients. As professionals are typically paid on a per diem basis, it can be a challenge to get people involved in the longer term continuity of the platform. Creating rituals, a brand and meaning beyond today’s work is



**Textbox 1**

**Comparing the Business School and Platform Model for Executive Learning**

Compare and contrast easily creates ‘archetypes’. This text box paints the ‘black and white’ picture of the two models. Many organisations display features of both models.

Dimension	Business School	Platform Model
Reputation	Brand as quality guarantee	Track record of professionals and intermediary referrals as quality guarantee
Boundaries	Clear institutional boundaries	Immediate access to professionals
Purpose	Primary aim is research	Primary aim is a program with impact
Starting point	Academic content led	Broad range of perspectives and professionals included underpinned by academic insight
Orientation	Teaching, faculty orientation	Facilitation, participant and result orientation
Connections	Connecting disciplines	Integrating holistic learning experience
Collaboration	Collaboration has no incentive	Multiplicative effects of open collaboration
Proposition	Leading edge knowledge and ‘right’ answers	Further strategy execution and people development
Ownership	Proprietary	Shared

complicated by the fact that many are dispersed around the globe. The moments of togetherness, celebration and loss are rarely shared by the whole community, whilst we know how powerful these are to build community. Can we really talk about community here? Are we entering new eras of community building?

**The Dilemma for Business Schools**

Traditional top-tier business schools face a number of dilemmas in responding to the Platform Model. Top-tier business schools typically draw from their internal faculty pool for the teaching of executive education programs, with the belief that academic faculty best understand the latest insights and are best placed to explain these insights to an executive audience. Indeed, one of the main differentiators communicated by top-tier business schools has been the leading edge research of their core faculty. Not surprisingly, most business schools are strict with regard to who can teach on executive education programmes. Many top-tier institutions forbid the use of external faculty and especially non-academics (ie. non-PhD qualified consultants or practitioners) thereby severely limiting access to the wider fields of knowledge offered by free agents.

Unlike the non-hierarchical philosophy underpinning the Platform Model, academic faculty at top-tier business schools typically monopolise the ‘intellectual’ design of executive education programmes. This approach can be limiting for a number of reasons: academic faculty are experts in a specific management discipline and often tend to frame client issues through their own field of interest; academic faculty can be reluctant to collaborate and share their intellectual content with other faculty on a programme, making integrated design difficult; research-oriented more traditional learning approaches such as lectures and case studies, and; formally trained academics can be dismissive of learning approaches

that have not been academically validated, which can be rather limiting when integrating approaches. It is instructive that very few top-tier business schools include teaching performance as a key element of faculty evaluation.

Some long-established business schools have taken the path of more open collaboration, with Duke University’s off-shoot Duke CE probably the most widely recognised in this respect. But the vast majority of business schools are still grappling with proprietary approaches more appropriate for the industrial era than the 21st century knowledge economy.

**Conclusions**

It has been our aim to describe an emerging model for delivering customised executive learning programmes, which is gaining significance in the world of management development. The continuing proliferation of intermediaries that bring together free agents and clients to deliver customised executive learning programs will pose an increasing challenge to the dominance of the proprietary model of most top-tier graduate management schools. Especially, in these dire economic times, the platform model’s approach has the potential to outbid the top-tier Business Schools and gain a foothold in the market for executive learning. They may then establish what the Business Schools’ current advantage is: a brand that makes them a trusted advisor and provider of services. This could potentially be a disruptive development for Business Schools. **gf**

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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