



Nowhere is the impact of digital technology more apparent – and important – than executive education custom programmes. **Olga Alonso Pelegrín** and **Sergio Vasquez Bronfman** investigate the implications, particularly the use of ‘blended’ teaching

One area undergoing a true digital revolution in Executive Education is *custom/bespoke programmes*, since this is where technology is making a very deep impact in response to the highly dynamic environment in which companies and organisations are operating. This revolution applies to both training concept and training approach, since it affects management content, leadership models for training and the importance of the "learning experience" concept. Furthermore, digitisation increases the cost efficiency and return on investment of these programmes.

Custom programmes are the tool that has been used by companies for years to develop their executives' and managers' talent, and they are always aligned with strategic objectives.

Precisely because they work with strategic resources, such as key professionals, custom programmes are reinventing themselves to adapt to the digital contexts in which executives and managers carry out their everyday work and in which the internet, apps and social networking are an integral part of their daily activities.

We must go beyond the face-to-face/online dichotomy and look deeper into the changes that the digital age is imprinting on content, methodologies, channels and even the role of the teacher/trainer in custom programmes.

The first change affects management **content**. The content of any custom programme must now incorporate information about the ways in which digitisation is transforming business processes. In this area, most interest is focused upon the digital client's experience.

The second change affects the **leadership models** which are part of training in many custom programmes: the ability to "embrace" digitisation and disruptive technologies and the influence to make the organisation absorb this change are the new challenges that digital transformation now requires from leaders.

The third change refers to **the importance of the "learning experience" concept**. Custom programmes, in which executives and managers participate, require stimuli which provide them

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with a true experience during the training process. 'Learning technologies', with their variety of resources and channels (synchronous/asynchronous, collaborative, 'anytime/anywhere', Internet-based) allow for an attractive, flexible and stimulating environment to be created, which makes the experience much more enriching.

This experience is also enriched by the fact that technology opens up the possibility for the custom programme to reach global, culturally-diverse groups, greatly enhancing the **participants' communication and interaction processes**.

Furthermore, digitisation increases the ability of custom programmes to **"personalise" learning**, which also increases the participants' perception of having a 'positive experience'.

The fourth change relates to cost **efficiency**. The possibility of designing custom programmes based on the combination of digital and non-digital resources significantly improve cost efficiency, because it requires fewer hours in person from the expert teacher and reduced use of physical spaces. Likewise, it greatly reduces the demand for executives and managers to be present in person, outside of their 'working habitat'.

The fifth change is concerned with **return on investment** and the possibility of bringing down barriers between learning and application to daily work of what has been learned or acquired. The disappearance of the space/time concept from traditional training programmes with the introduction of "learning technologies" allows professionals to see, in real time, the way in which their learning impacts on their job; this is because

the learning-application-feedback process runs continuously, thanks to technological resources.

Finally, since all changes have their challenges, we custom programme providers must also **transform our mindset** and include digitisation as an integral part of our working methods.

The system of working in open environments, facilitated by digitisation, also has a direct impact on the companies that take part in these new custom programmes, contributing to development of innovation.

This is why the introduction of "blended" methodology is essential in Executive Education programmes, where executives and managers participate in environments which match the digital context in which they carry out their normal duties, allowing them to adapt the learning process to their own pace. This learning is, therefore, a continuous process that runs parallel to their daily work and always links to issues directly related to the carrying out of their duties.

For example, in ESCP Europe Business School's design of Executive Education Custom Programmes we have created the **"Blended Learning Solutions"** methodology, where we use technology to integrate formal and informal learning contexts, therefore successfully adapting to the new digital age.

This **"Blended Learning Solutions"** methodology is based on four pillars:

### 1. Teaching: active learning methods.

One of the main reasons for Executive Education's low ROI is the knowing-doing gap, i.e. the gap between what is learned in class and what is done every day in the workplace. Active learning methods (learning by doing, reflective learning, action learning, gamification techniques, etc.) allow for bridging of the knowing-doing gap. These methods have been known by educational innovators for decades and have been implemented in face-to-face education; the challenge is now to apply them to digital learning, especially distance education.

This is precisely what we have achieved at ESCP Europe by designing digital courses entirely rooted in professional practice, using it as a starting point, illustrating it with theories, concepts and methods, helping students to

learn to *do* a job rather than simply talk about a job and, last but not least, applying everything to their own professional practice. In Executive Education, especially in custom programmes, this is the best way to bridge the gap between knowing and doing and, consequently, to radically increase ROI.

### 2. Agile development techniques.

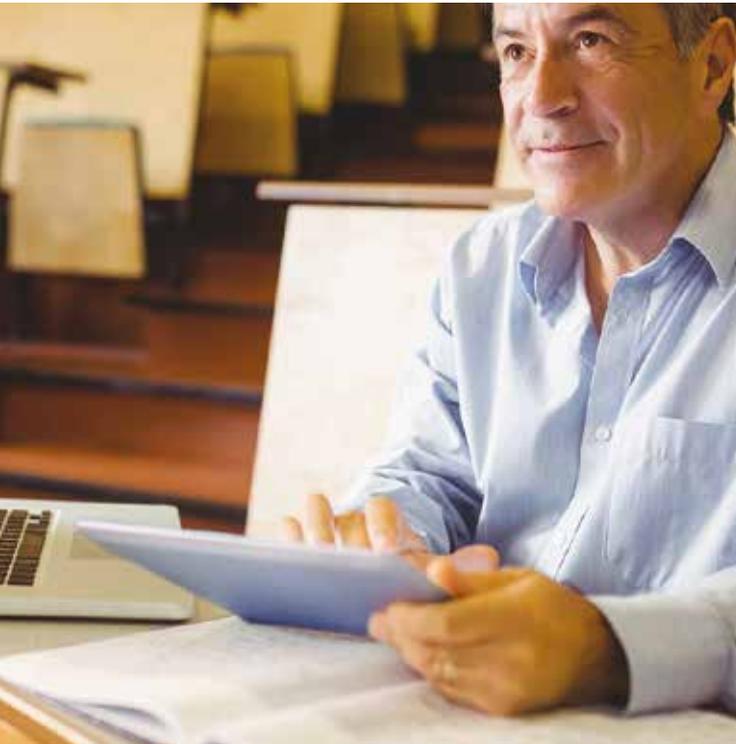
The traditional method of developing material in digital learning is called ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation). An important point here is the linear nature of this methodology: when you are at the Development stage, the Design stage has been and gone. One main problem of ADDIE methods is the gap between expectations of how a digitalised course will be and how it really is. This problem derives from the fact that the early steps centre around abstract notions. For instance, during the Analysis and Design stages, weeks can be spent discussing the objectives of a course with professors.

Instead of becoming bogged down in abstract notions, we have implemented agile development methods and, more specifically, **evolutionary prototyping**. As soon as possible, with the material at hand, we build a course prototype on the digital learning platform, evolving it until its result is deemed satisfactory by the teacher, the instructional designers and even some students. With this method, not only is there no gap between what is designed and what is ultimately produced ("what you see is what you get"), but we also reduce delivery time.

### 3. Re-usage of content.

The "atoms" of our digital learning courses are not courses themselves, nor their learning units. "Atoms" are assignments, interactive reading set by a lecturer, videos, etc. By storing and classifying all this material in a Digital Learning Library, we can reuse it when developing new Executive Education programmes. Additionally, content curation of digital learning material created by others enriches this Digital Learning Library and saves us from having to reinvent the wheel (so to speak). This gives ESCP Europe's Executive Education increased flexibility and responsiveness when it comes to developing new programmes.





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#### **4. Technology as a "possibilities opener".**

There is nothing like "digital pedagogy". Passive learning methods can be implemented in face-to-face learning (this is usually the case for lecturing) and in digital learning. Active learning methods are not unique to online education; in fact, most online programmes are based on passive learning methods and this is the main reason for their high drop-out rate. We have proven that active learning methods can be implemented in digital education; however, of course, these methods can be (and are) also implemented in face-to-face education.

Digital technology should be interpreted as a "possibilities opener". This is the role that techniques – and, nowadays, technology – have played in history from the point of view of entrepreneurship and innovation. Technology opens up new possibilities: doing things differently and doing things that were not possible before. For instance, allowing people to access education regardless of their physical proximity to the place where this education is delivered. Or providing access to learning material and professors regardless of being online at the same time. Or creating learning environments where students can experiment risk-free, etc.

Together, these four pillars facilitate a differentiated learner experience and a powerful business model.

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