Silver Winners | Category: Professional Development

Zain Group | IE Business School

Rewiring a Telco Workforce from Within: The Zain–IE University Master in Digital Transformation (MDT)

How a large-scale online learning programme (IDEU) helped embed capability across eight countries.

In 2023, Zain Group launched one of the most ambitious workforce development initiatives in its history. Faced with an urgent need to upskill over 8,000 employees across eight countries, Zain set out to embed learning into the very fabric of its organisation – not just to train employees, but to rewire how the company builds digital capability from within.

Partnering with IE University, Zain offered its employees a fully online, modular Master's in Digital Transformation (MDT) programme: a scalable, inclusive, and applied learning model designed for real-time business impact. Two years later, with more than 2,000 employees enrolled and tens of thousands of certificates earned, the programme is now widely regarded as a benchmark for modern corporate education.

IDEU- A Strategic Imperative, Not a Side Project

Zain's transformation journey was driven by both technological disruption and internal ambition. As the telecom industry rapidly adopted AI, 5G, and digital-first business models, Zain's leadership recognised the need for a workforce ready to lead – not just follow – those changes.

That urgency led to the creation of IDEU (Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity University), Zain's internal corporate learning centre designed to make digital capability a strategic advantage. Its flagship initiative was the MDT programme, co-developed with IE University to align directly with business needs and operational realities.

The guiding principle was clear: learning would no longer be optional. It would become an integral part of how Zain operates and evolves.

A New Kind of Master's: Built for Learners, Aligned to Business

IE University designed the MDT programme from the ground up for working professionals. It had to be flexible, scalable, and rooted in real-world business applications. The result was a curriculum of 38 courses, grouped into four thematic modules, with certifications awarded at key milestones: after one course, five courses, ten courses, and upon full completion of the Master's.

2000

The programme launched in May 2023 with 190 students. Six months later, more than 1,000 employees were actively enrolled. By April 2025, that number had doubled, with 2,000 learners representing every function, every level, and every operating company within the Zain Group.

The programme covered key areas of digital transformation – including data science, cybersecurity, customer centricity, agile leadership, and emerging technologies – ensuring alignment with Zain's most urgent priorities. Each course combines asynchronous content with interactive elements: live sessions with IE University faculty, hands-on projects, individual coaching by learning facilitators, and proactive academic support. A Capstone Project, co-developed between IE and Zain, ensured direct relevance to business needs.

In short - this isn't a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). It's a professionally supported, human-centred learning experience – accessible from anywhere and designed to drive lasting engagement.

Scaling Learning Without Compromising Quality

The programme launched in May 2023 with 190 students. Six months later, more than 1,000 employees were actively enrolled. By April 2025, that number had doubled, with 2,000 learners representing every function, every level, and every operating company within the Zain Group.

To support this growth, IE University built a robust operational infrastructure. Monthly cohort onboarding was standardised while allowing room for individual learner needs. A custom analytics dashboard enabled real-time engagement monitoring and early identification of at-risk participants. Faculty teams were coordinated across time zones and languages.

Meanwhile, the teaching team expanded to over 100 professors and learning facilitators, spanning more than 25 nationalities and disciplines. This diversity didn't just reflect IDEU's values; it ensured cultural relevance and a richer, more inclusive learning experience.

Despite the programme's scale, quality indicators have remained exceptionally high:

- 92% average completion rate
- 93% satisfaction with professors
- 92% satisfaction with learning facilitators
- NPS has steadily increased year-on-year, reaching +69 in 2024–25
- Several courses now score in the 'Excellent' NPS tier, including Cybersecurity (79), Marketing (76), and Customer Centricity (75)

Learning That Sticks – and Scales

The learning gains are both measurable and meaningful. Among the first 7,077 pre- and post-course assessments, the average median score jumped from 46% to 80%, a 33-point increase. More significantly, the gap between top and lower quartile performers narrowed by 54%, showing that the programme helped raise the floor, not just the ceiling.

Learners also excelled in applying skills to real-world contexts. Final project scores averaged above 86% across courses like Data Visualization, Customer Centricity, and Cybersecurity – reflecting strong performance in practical, business-relevant execution.

From Learning to Business Results

For Zain, the impact has extended well beyond the classroom. According to internal reporting, the MDT programme has:

- Reduced reliance on external consultants.
- Accelerated innovation cycles, especially in digital product design.
- Improved customer experience through more personalised, data-driven engagement.
- Enhanced cybersecurity practices in response to regulatory and operational risks.
- Strengthened internal talent pipelines, supported by a new mobility initiative known as IDEU+.

Equally important is the programme's role in shifting Zain's culture. Learning is no longer seen as a separate track; it's a shared mindset. As one learner put it, "This programme gave me a better purpose in life." Others noted stronger cross-department collaboration and a deeper sense of contribution. "We're not just being trained. We're being transformed."

54%

More significantly, the gap between top and lower quartile performers narrowed by 54%, showing that the programme helped raise the floor, not just the ceiling.

What We've Learned: Five Takeaways

The Zain–IE partnership has shown that large-scale learning can be strategic, applied, and deeply human. Here are five key insights:

1. Design for context, not just content. Make sure what is learned maps directly to what is needed.
2. Flexibility matters, but so does human support. Learners thrive when they feel seen and guided.
3. Use data for continuous improvement. Analytics enable timely interventions and smarter decisions.
4. Integrate learning into HR systems. Training should link to leadership pathways, mobility, and promotions.
5. Think like co-owners. Shared risk, shared decisions, and shared accountability drive better outcomes.

> "We're not just being trained. We're being transformed."

What's Next

The journey is far from over. Module 4 launches later this year. Capstone project design is beginning, a joint project between Zain's Strategy team and IE University. And new spin-offs like the Regulatory Academy are expanding the model to other capability areas.

At IE University, the programme continues to inspire innovation, from piloting new pedagogical interventions in partnership with OpenAI to enhancing learning analytics and improving personalised support for students.

For Zain, the IDEU- MDT programme has evolved from an ambitious initiative to a strategic enabler. Learning is no longer a support function; it's a competitive edge and an essential part of how the company leads.