

# Lead Report

## Hiring

### Employers Gradually Are Warming Up To Job Applicants Who Earn Degrees Online

**E**mployers that historically might have disregarded job applicants who earned a degree online increasingly are taking a closer look at such candidates as the degrees become more commonplace, the related technology evolves, and companies gain more sensitivity to employees' work-life responsibilities, analysts told BNA Aug. 24-27.

Nonetheless, proponents of online education said some employers still question whether the quality of an online degree is equal to that of a degree a student earns by attending classes on a campus.

"A lot of resistance to online education has come from educators and employers who don't understand that there's great variability in distance education or online programs," said John Ebersole, president of Excelsior College, a private, nonprofit institution in Albany, N.Y., that offers online undergraduate and master's degree programs geared primarily toward adults who already are working.

Some organizations are delivering "electronic correspondence courses," as opposed to degrees, Ebersole added, which results in critics concluding that all online education is "weak or of poor quality."

"You can have really bad online education," he said. "That doesn't mean online education as a whole is bad, just that instruction from a certain institution is not very good."

Similarly, Edward Borbely, director of the Center for Professional Development in the College of Engineering at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, said: "It's not whether or not a degree is online, it's who's offering it and what the requirements are and what the credentials are of that institution. Just because an institution is highly ranked, in terms of research volume, academic rigor, and admission standards, doesn't mean it's a good source of online learning."

A survey of 1,547 chief executive officers and small business owners, conducted for Excelsior in January 2008 by Zogby International, found that 43 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that a degree earned through an online or distance-learning program was as credible as a degree earned through a traditional campus-based program. But 32 percent of CEOs and small business owners somewhat disagreed with this statement, 19 percent strongly disagreed with the statement, and 5 percent said they were unsure.

**Most Colleges Offer Online Courses.** During the 2006-07 academic year, two-thirds (66 percent) of U.S. colleges and universities provided online, hybrid/blended online, or other distance education courses, according to the latest data from the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, found in *Distance*

*Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions: 2006-07.* Hybrid or blended courses involve completing courses both online and on campus.

"We have evolved to this online delivery system as the technology has evolved," Borbely told BNA. "There was a time not too long ago when we were using televised instruction and videotaped delayed delivery. Now, in the last few semesters, we have totally stopped the delivery in any other mode other than online."

Employers are more open to the prospect of having employees who earned their degrees online because companies are using the same technology in the form of e-learning tools to train workers, analysts said.

"In most respects, we've been led by the nose by patient people from companies like GM," Borbely said, noting that the University of Michigan has online education initiatives in its public health, social work, nursing, and business schools.

Michigan University's engineering department is collaborating with GM to offer a master's of engineering degree program as well as other online programs that address marketing dynamics and human factors in management, Borbely noted.

Robert Ubell, vice president for enterprise learning at the Polytechnic Institute of New York University in Brooklyn, said that online degrees have gained a level of acceptance to the point where they are not an issue for job applicants and employers. "When our students apply for a job, they do not need to mention that they have been awarded a degree online," he said.

**Northrop Grumman's Experience.** But even if prospective job applicants mention their degrees were earned online, this will not necessarily hurt their chances of being hired—at least not at Northrop Grumman Corp. in Los Angeles.

The company told BNA Aug. 27 in an e-mail message that online courses, certifications, and "degrees from reputable institutions" are gaining importance in Northrop Grumman's employee learning and development strategy.

"Northrop Grumman is a technology company that understands the importance of both efficiency and providing learners with choices," the employer said.

Northrop Grumman noted that about two-thirds of its internal learning is completed online. In addition, one-third of the Northrop Grumman's employees who are earning degrees under the company's education assistance programs are doing so through online classes.

"While the dominant source of our talent has earned degrees through 'traditional' education programs, we have seen an increase in the number of applications that reflect degrees earned from [online] programs," Northrop Grumman said.

**Work-Life Solution, Estimable Proponent.** Another reason companies are becoming more open to online education is because they see workers grappling with

work-life responsibilities, online education proponents said.

"In my experience many employers actually encourage workers to go online and earn degrees because it gives them an opportunity to work *and* earn their degrees," Ubell said.

Business guru Jack Welch, the former chief executive officer at General Electric, also is influencing employers' willingness to embrace online degree programs, various online education proponents told BNA.

In June, Welch and Chancellor University in Cleveland, Ohio, announced the launch of the Jack Welch Management Institute, an MBA program with classes offered both online and at the university's Cleveland campus.

"I have a chance to invest in something I believe in," Welch said of the program during the Society for Human Resource Management's annual conference earlier this summer (27 HRR 753, 7/13/09).

Meanwhile, 14 online education providers, including Excelsior, joined forces in August to launch College Choices for Adults, which allows employers and prospective students to compare online programs.

Another website created to highlight what good online learning looks like today is the Access to Learning Project. It includes testimonials from online education proponents at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the University of Massachusetts, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in Brooklyn, N.Y., among others.

**Accreditation Is Important.** Career advisers and proponents of online education said factors that influence the extent to which online degree programs produce qualified job applicants include whether an institution or the

specific academic program is accredited, the rate at which students complete the program, and the university's brand name.

"At [the University of] Phoenix and Kaplan [University], the way they teach is not different" from online programs offered at other colleges and universities, said Frank Mayadas, a longtime proponent of online education and program director at the Sloan Foundation.

Phoenix and Kaplan universities, for-profit, accredited institutions based in Arizona and Iowa, respectively, focus on meeting the educational needs of working students. A majority of their courses are offered online, which distinguishes them from traditional universities that offer some online courses.

"The only thing is if the employer looks at your diploma and it says 'Phoenix' or 'Kaplan,' they are likely to think: 'This is earned online,'" Mayadas said. "If it says 'Penn State' or 'Stanford,' they have no way of knowing."

Mayadas said the Sloan Foundation since 1993 has awarded about \$80 million to 120 universities for online education initiatives.

"Our most recent survey [which will be released later this year] will show that over 4 million students in degree-granting institutions took at least one class entirely online," Mayadas said. "That's almost a quarter of all students at American universities. It's not just scattered here and there. There's increasing acceptance of the fact that some courses will be online."

Indeed, the number of students enrolled in at least one online course is expanding at a rate far in excess of the growth of overall higher education enrollments, according to *Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008*, a report released last November and conducted by the Sloan Consortium, an affiliate of the Sloan Foundation, and Babson Survey Research Group in Wellesley, Mass. The results were based on responses from more than 2,500 colleges and universities.

This development signals that employers are likely to see more job applicants who have earned their entire degree or some portion of it online, educators and career advisers said, noting these applicants should be treated like all other prospective employees.

Northrop Grumman noted that how the degree is obtained is less important than where it is from. "We look at the institution's accreditation, rankings, curriculum or specific programs of study," the company said.

Betsy Richards, director of career resources at Kaplan University, where 55,000 of its 59,000 students take courses solely online, advised employers that if an applicant earned an online degree from an institution that is accredited, "don't interview the candidate any differently."

"My experience in career resources is the first thing an employer looks at is what is your degree in," she said. "Unless it's from Harvard or Stanford, all they want to know is you have a degree in the program that they're looking for, and you have the skills for the position."

BY RHONDA SMITH

### HR Professional's Perspective

**P**hyllis McDermott, an "office generalist" in the human resources department at automotive parts manufacturer Huf North America in Milwaukee, said her online degree has worked well for her, and her employer. She recently earned a bachelor's degree in business management online from Kaplan University.

"In a way it was nice that I could do this in my own home setting," she said. "I didn't have to worry about rushing to a campus, or not attending class if the weather was bad."

In Huf's HR department, McDermott explained, she assists with accounts payable, answers telephones, and does "a little bit of everything."

The 44-year-old said she needed a degree to advance in her career. "I think the main point was obtaining additional education in human resources, not the means that I chose," McDermott told BNA. "Kaplan University has a very good reputation and so far my employer has not discredited my education."

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