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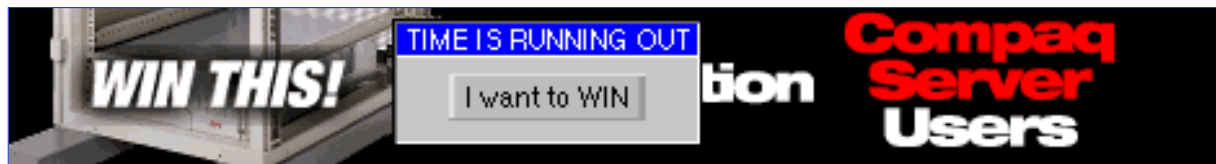
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INTERNETWEEK

March 15, 1999

Corporate Universities Grow

By JUDITH N. MOTT

Improving employee productivity and keeping staff in touch with the latest technology are top factors transforming the once traditional training program into a "corporate university."

The phrase is a catchall for any kind of educational commitment that extends beyond the standard tuition reimbursement and the new hires training companies typically offer employees.

Some large companies, such as Disney and Motorola Inc., have built their own university systems, boasting campuses worldwide. Others have gone virtual, developing intranet-based classroom instruction. While it's not a mandate by any means, the most popular type of corporate university features an alliance with an institution of higher

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learning. The relationship can be as simple as partnering with a local college for a course, or as complex as a specialized curriculum offered at several different campuses.

Bell Atlantic's Next Step Program, geared for telecommunication technicians, falls in the middle. And, unlike most, Next Step wasn't initiated in the training division, although it's now part of Bell Atlantic's Training, Education and Development department. The Next Step Program, which offers an associate degree in Applied Science in Telecommunications Technology, was a benefit hammered out during contract negotiations in 1994.

"This was the brainchild of leadership in Bell Atlantic and the unions, which both saw the need for the technicians to receive a college degree as well as technical training," says Tom Andruskevich, Bell Atlantic's senior specialist in training, education and development. "Both [sides] felt that having the best educated technicians in the industry would give Bell Atlantic a competitive edge."

Twenty-five community colleges-14 in New York and 11 spread across Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Vermont-offer technicians a custom-made curriculum developed by Bell Atlantic and the unions.

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The course load is one-third general studies, one-third electricity and electronics, and one-third telecommunications. Telecom classes could include an introduction to voice/data, a course on LANs and WANs, and another on advanced technologies.

Although courses are based on employee need and skills requirements, it's not all just math and science. Project leadership exercises and teamwork lessons are integrated as well. The program's first graduating class held commencement this past December, with 92 students awarded degrees. Bell Atlantic says the employees graduated with more than enhanced technical skills and business acumen.

About 1,700 students are enrolled in the 60-credit, AA program, which takes four years to complete since classes are held one day a week, on company time, for two semesters a year. Homework demands at least 15 to 20 hours a week. Interested employees are selected based on their seniority and are required to take the ASSET Test, a standard college entrance exam. The program is free for students, with Bell Atlantic paying tuition, fees and books.

United HealthCare Corp. took a much different approach to creating its Learning Institute. The health care provider

wanted enhanced training and education for its IT staff of 2,200 located nationwide. In addition, company research indicated that all employees wanted 24-by-7 training. Both factors led the company to use distance learning technology. Using a consortium model, United HealthCare partnered with United Technologies Corp., which had very similar training needs. The two companies then enlisted the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) to train the combined workforce of 200,000.

RPI, using compressed video technology, now delivers degree programs from Boston University, Carnegie Mellon, Stanford and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to specified United HealthCare sites. RPI also arranges nondegree seminars, technical courses and desktop training in management and education for the two companies.

The unique setup lets the companies leverage the combined user population to negotiate bulk-rate discounts for high-quality education, says Allen Stein, director of the Learning Institute. Initiated in January 1997, the Learning Institute first focused on IT needs, and currently more than 70 percent of the offerings remain IT-related.

In the first year, 50,000 training hours were logged. That number jumped to 70,000 last

year. "We needed to increase our IS training due to mergers, and we also want to attract and train the best IS people," explains Stein, adding that from the outset the company's goal was to establish "a world-class learning operation."

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