

Harrison Monarth gives us his regular flavour of L&D life on the other side of the Atlantic. This month he enrolls at the corporate university

An executive of one of America's most prolific corporations tells of a colleague who ran into some old friends, who asked what he'd been doing lately. His answer was that he had just graduated from Hamburger University, the learning arm of the McDonalds Corporation. The jokes followed on cue – with questions like “did you major in Deep Frying?” and the inevitable references to Professor Ronald McDonald and the ‘Hamburglar’.

Of course, corporate universities are anything but a joke. They are sprouting up all over the Fortune 1,000 and beyond; names include McDonalds, Starbucks, Quiznos, Disney, Oracle, Motorola, Toyota and General Electric on a prestigious and growing list.

And if you think it's just a marketing gimmick, consider that the costs of establishing your very own corporate university can run up to two and a half times that of a traditional learning center, with forward-thinking executives signing the cheques in expectation of a solid return on investment.

The first corporate universities appeared in the late '80s in the US. Two primary reasons get credit – the feeling that academic universities were too out of touch with the skill and knowledge demands of corporate America, and the need for brand-specific training that aligned with the corporate vision. Where traditional corporate training was primarily task-specific and therefore somewhat generic, the corporate university was all about a specific company position on a wide variety of issues, from branding to customer retention and leadership. Where regular universities perhaps focused on

traditional real-world concerns, the corporate university focused on company concerns that were waiting just outside the door.

Today's corporate universities span a breadth of missions and focuses. Some use outsourcing to teach a specific core competency, while most apply internal expertise to transfer the in-house learning curve.

But building a corporate university isn't without risk, because if there is even a remote element of gimmick and shallow branding, everyone from line staff to the executives

to the board who sanctioned it will see through the façade very quickly.

It's safe to say, according to many colleagues in the L&D sector, that the C-level suite rarely graces the halls of a traditional corporate training facility, but the university model seems to draw them like alumni to a fund raiser. Beyond the prestige factor, they're aware of the opportunity to deepen the company brand while strengthening loyalty and retention, not to mention a quantifiable connection to the bottom line. Because, despite the cost, improved turnover rates and fortified market image translates to profit and that is as good a reason as any for some executive handshakes and photo ops.

The primary risk hovers over those companies that adopt the strategy in name only, without executive involvement and without developing curricula strategically. Participants in poorly-executed plans exhibit greater cynicism and, too often, the programs are so driven by sales and image that the learning becomes detached from the real world. Companies must take care in crafting the branding strategy for their corporate university, and to populate it with skilled academics who bring a seasoned corporate perspective to the classroom.

Executed properly, the CU strategy can give birth to a life of its own, complete with sporting teams and insignia. Sometimes this new training identity is so strong that other departments want in, creating a synergy that positions the in-house school in a way that traditional training rarely experiences. Instead of a departure from work, employees see their university time as an investment in their future, which is precisely how the successful models view it.

So, while mentioning to outsiders that one has graduated from Starbucks University might not invite the same admiring glances as are awarded to, say, alumni of Oxbridge, it is a sign that said graduate is not only on the corporate fast-track but is someone who will make sure that your Venti Decaf Cappuccino is made the same way in London as it is in Seattle.

Until next month – Cheers from across the pond! ■



Harrison Monarth is a speaking and presentation coach in the US and president of GuruMaker – School of Professional Speaking. His clients include senior executives from the Fortune 500, political candidates and professionals from all industries. He can be contacted at info@gurumaker.com