



Insights from an Industry Advisory Board about Online Education for Practitioners

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Higher education institutions are increasingly using media and Internet for teaching and learning. The 2011 Survey of Online Learning reported that the number of students taking at least one online class was 6.7 million (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Sixty-five percent of higher education organizations perceive online education as a necessary part of their long-term development strategy (Babson Survey Research Group). Moreover, online education not only applies to college students, but also expands to continuing education of industry employees. Increasing technical skill requirements in apparel companies cause employees to need continued training, to keep up with the ever-changing work environment.

A body of research has been published about online education from the student perspective; however, little research has been done to investigate the need from employers especially in the apparel industry. Thus, the current study aims to gather preliminary data from a focus group conducted with a mid-western university's apparel and merchandising program's industry advisory board to: (a) explore expectations, (b) determine training needs, and (c) understand perceived advantages and disadvantages of online certificates from their perspective. The information gathered will be used to guide the development of a larger survey of industry and actual constituents of a potential online apparel and textile design certificate program.

Methods

Data were collected from an audio taped two-hour focus-group session (IRB approved) with six industry advisory board members who currently hold or have held executive positions in the apparel/textile industry. Represented companies ranged from small to large, and were in the retail or manufacturing sectors. The focus group discussion was guided by questions on the following topics: (a) types of training courses employees need to update or increase their skills, (b) thoughts or experiences about taking online courses (c) importance of obtaining a certificate, (d) topics or courses desired, (e) time employees would have available to take courses, (f) financial assistance companies would provide for additional training and (g) benefits of completing a certificate for employees in the apparel industry. Using a grounded-theory approach, data were analyzed using the constant comparison method of qualitative analysis. The audiotapes from the discussion were transcribed and two trained coders analyzed the transcripts with 0.90.1 inter-coder reliability.

Findings and Significance

Two super-ordinate themes emerged from the data analysis: *Desired Skills* and *Considerations*. (Figure 1.) The industry participants felt that there were four main areas of skills that they desired their employees to gain proficiency in through participation in an online design certificate: (a) the ability to *Build Garments* (writing specifications and writing construction skills), (b) *Pattern Making*, (c) *Technology/Computer Skills* (CAD and creating/analyzing spreadsheets), and *Textiles* (properties, vocabulary, and fabrications). In regard to items considered while developing an online design certificate two categories emerged: (a) Pros (convenient, continuing education, efficient, flexible, needed, university support, update skills, and value-added) and (b) Cons (employee time, cost money, and other company-sponsored trainings).

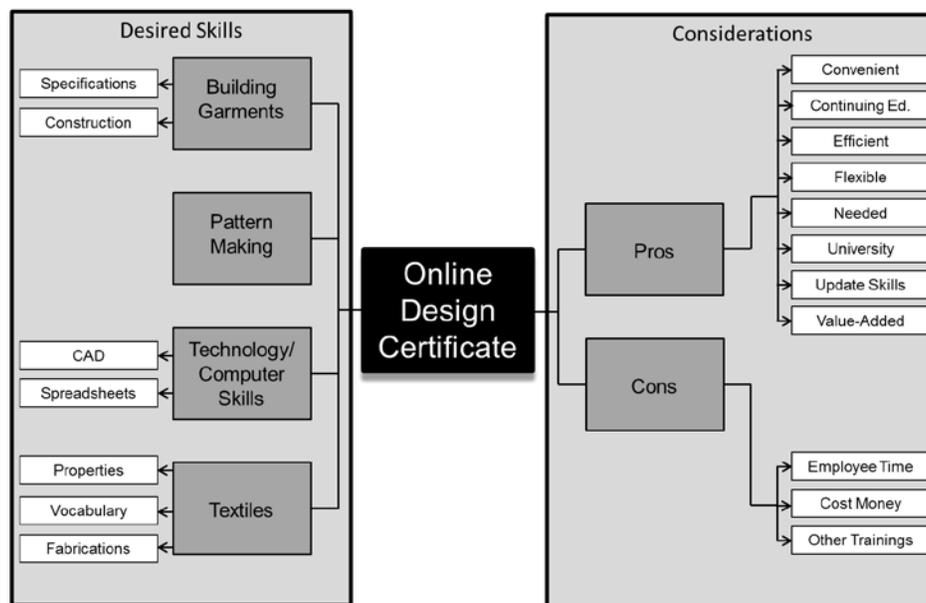


Figure 1. Taxonomy of industry focus group themes for developing an online design certificate

The findings provide an initial understanding of the apparel industry needs in relation to continuing education and the pros and cons of such a program from an industry perspective. The emergent themes define variables that may be tested by collecting quantitative data from a sample of industry professionals and potential students of an online design program. This study may provide guidance to other academics considering developing continuing education courses.

References

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