

Boost your company's tuition program from simply a necessary employee benefit to a strategic asset.



How to Choose an Educational Partner and Take Advantage of All the Benefits

By Tamara Carrillo

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Across the country, approximately 1 million students benefit from their employers' tuition assistance programs. According to Edcor, an education benefit service organization that assists companies with running their tuition reimbursement programs, its clients spend an average of \$3,175 annually per participant. As such, there are many questions training and human resource practitioners should be asking to make sure they're getting the most out of their investments, not only for their companies, but also for their employees' development.

"Due to economic pressures, companies are looking for creative ways to find more value with less resources," says Sara Van Wagoner, vice president of corporate growth strategies at Edcor. The proof is in the numbers, as more and more companies are establishing educational partnerships. Ashford University, one of Edcor's partners, has seen its corporate alliance program grow 70 percent during the past two academic years.

Making a tuition program a strategic tool rather than just a necessary benefit can seem a daunting task. Companies want to do it, but struggle with what to look for when

choosing a potential educational partner. Here are some key steps to help your team outline the process.

Create program goals

The first step is to bring training and development staff, benefits representatives, and department leaders together to identify the specific needs of each business unit and the company as a whole. Do you want to add more benefits to your corporate training or just supplement it? Is it your goal to develop employee career paths? Do you want to stretch your program dollars or broaden offerings to include more employees?

Many organizations add value to their internal training programs by working with an institution's prior learning assessment (PLA) department. PLA programs provide a means for awarding college credit to students who bring college-level learning experiences acquired outside of a traditional classroom setting.

Such experiences may include continuing education programs, workshops, or formal and informal training. This type of nontraditional learning can convert to college credit, which can lessen the degree completion time, save money, and increase access to higher education—and thus can broaden the talent pool for upper management.

Having your training initiatives assessed isn't the only way to integrate your program with an education provider. For example, Avis Budget Group's organizational development and performance team is working with Mike Reilly, executive dean of Ashford University's College of Business and Professional Studies, to match individual courses to specific competencies that are important to Avis. Providing collegiate-level courses adds to the training options available to create more robust development plans for future leaders.

In addition to training benefits, many institutions will offer monetary incentives. These incentives come in many forms, including fee waivers, course materials, or tuition grants, which complement what the employer already offers its workforce. Such benefits can allow

employees to cover more of their overall expenses and potentially cut some of the expense for the employers.

Matching your needs

Once you've decided what outcomes you want, look into partnering with institutions whose programs align with your company goals. Do the employees in your succession plan need managerial skills or more industry know-how? Of Edcor's client base, about two-thirds of students participate in industry-specific majors, whereas one-third are in general business or management programs.

When participating in an educational alliance, don't forget to let your employees know the opportunity is available.

A great way to begin is by pulling information from your current tuition reimbursement program, if you have one, and examine where your employees are already going to school. If those schools' programs match your company goals, aligning with them will create an immediate impact by potentially saving money for your organization and employees.

Knowing what degrees are offered at universities can help you to decide what educational partnerships to make. Pay attention to specializations offered within those degrees because they may produce better learning outcomes.

Employees with unique needs will benefit from multiple options, so diversifying the institutions your company partners with is another key element. When researching local institutions, keep your company's major employee bases in mind and look for community colleges and four-year universities in those regions.

For remote employees and those with limited schedules, invite institutions with online degree programs that match your company's development goals. If your industry calls for employees to take continual training to maintain licensure,

there may be nondegree education providers that also would align with your needs. "The goal should be quality partnerships that meet your needs," says Van Wagoner, "not just large quantities that are cumbersome to maintain."

For online and traditional colleges, accreditation plays an important role in the long-term value of a degree. Generally, four-year institutions should have regional accreditation, which serves as the recognized standard to identify quality in American higher education. Two-year institutions and trade schools generally have national accreditation. You can find accreditation information on the U.S. Department of Education's website.

In the case of nondegree education providers that offer continuing education units, make sure the provider is recognized by the association that approves licensure or membership.

Beginning a partnership

Once you have an idea of the schools that fit your needs, the best place to start is by calling the registrar's office, where transfer credits are processed. Staff there should be able to direct you to the appropriate contacts in the PLA department and the corporate partnership team, if they have one. If your tuition is managed externally, contact your provider first—it may already have established relationships and can facilitate introductions.

"To really get the most value out of a partnership, human resource leaders should bring their training and benefit teams together," says Van Wagoner. "Having a one-sided conversation with educational institutions means you're potentially missing out on the full value of a partnership."

During conversations, find out what reports the institution can generate during the partnership to give you additional insight to your employees' educational needs. Most institutions are regulated by the Department of Education, which means details on specific employees is probably out of the question. But aggregated information can provide you with the number of your employees attending the institution, degrees enrolled

in, amount spent on tuition, and savings earned from the partnership. Using this information to cross-reference and help track spending can add hard ROI to strategic benefits and show how you are making an impact on employee development.

When participating in an educational alliance, don't forget to let your employees know the opportunity is available. Empower your employees by encouraging their growth and development. Many institutions will be willing to offer an onsite information session or education fair to share information on their degree programs, discuss admission, and lead virtual classroom tours. Introduction webinars are another great way to make

information available to employees with irregular shifts or remote locations.

Once a program is in place, don't let it go stale. Biannual or quarterly updates should be implemented to touch base, talk about new trainings or best practices, and review up-to-date reports.

The most important part of all this work, says Van Wagoner, is "breaking the process into smaller steps [to] help you transform your organization's philosophy on tuition programs from an entitlement benefit to a strategic tool."

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