

Thought Leaders in Online Education: John Miller, Chief Operating Officer of Hands-On Learning

Blog by Sramana Mitra

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There is a huge gap between industry and academia today. Learn more about the lay of the land and identify opportunities for entrepreneurship.

Sramana Mitra: Let's start with giving our audience a bit of context about Hands-On Learning (HOL). What do you do? What major online education industry trends are you aligning with?

John Miller: I'm the Managing Partner and Chief Operating Officer of HOL. We're a distance learning technology and consulting company that is focused on aligning education and private industry for effective workforce development, specifically in the STEM disciplines. In my role, I'm focusing on both sides of the fence, but we have an initiative that targets bringing industry and education together to focus on those STEM-related fields. We have about 14 years of experience working with universities and hundred thousand students. We have a pretty good perspective on education and what it takes to affect distance learning as a delivery vehicle.

Sramana Mitra: Who are your clients?

John Miller: From the HOL product solutions, we have a thousand universities today and a couple of hundred thousand students that are utilizing our solutions. In the area of the STEM initiative, we're focusing on a dozen universities in North America building this unique relationship between the university and private industry. Historically, the relationship between those two entities has been limited in scope to grants and endowments. What we're endeavoring to do is initiate a meaningful partnership between those two parties.

If you talk to the educational groups and look at their perspective on a graduating student, how much of the skill set required to enter the workforce do they really have? The answer you get is typically 70%. From the industry side, their perspective is closer to 50%. There's a major gap and they both agree that there's a gap.

I can only speak of one because we're under non-disclosure agreements (NDA), and NDA with most but one has become public. That is a partnership between Cal State and Kaiser Permanente. Their focus is on educating their nursing community. We're working with them to essentially identify where the gap lies and how can it be bridged, and taking their existing workforce and bringing them back to the educational process, so they can continue to grow through the career path of nursing.

Sramana Mitra: Where is the gap? What are you learning in this process?

John Miller: A lot of it is around competency-based education. One of the big areas that have been a challenge for education is providing the clinical experience of effectively bridging some of those skill gaps. Partnering these two groups together helps facilitate that but it goes a wide stream. We can identify a lot of different areas.

A case example is that the primary tool that a nurse uses in her role revolves around electronic medical record systems. I don't know of any school that is actually conducting training with that primary tool. We do an assessment on both sides. On the education side, we look at their capabilities and the content and competencies they have relating to that. We can identify a number of gaps in that area. It's all over the place but competency-based education seems to be the solution that is most viable here.

Sramana Mitra: Then what do you do to fill those gaps? Do you develop content modules to be delivered over the Internet around those skill gap areas?

John Miller: What we are in the process of doing with our clients is identifying the gaps and then, building a goal alignment. We go through a very detailed assessment on both sides. We try to identify what lines of business in their arena are changing, and what are the talent requirements that are going to be needed going forward.

One of the areas that we found in healthcare is that there's a shift away from the hospital and the clinic, and moving into home healthcare as a direct fulfillment of this bubble that the baby boomers are bringing in. It was just unbelievable. Honestly, we're going to need somewhere between three and five times the amount of skilled nursing in three to five years. We can see that this is forthcoming. Yet there wasn't an initiative through education or between industry and education to really start to make that happen. In fact, we've found that a lot of universities were discouraging people going into nursing, because there isn't a significant demand at the current moment when in fact, in a relatively short period of time, there's going to be a huge need.

It's really finding these issues and doing alignment. What are the skills? What are the talents that are going to be required?

Sramana Mitra: What you just mentioned is not just skill training. That is a question of communicating with the educational institution on what professions the career development office should guide the students towards.

John Miller: Yes, absolutely. As you go down this path, the missing link is education does not know the next generation or the next strategic move by a lot of these industries they serve. Through this process, we're building a strategic alliance between industry and education so they can identify what are the skills and talent requirements going forward so education can impact that. All of the STEM challenge-related initiatives are really focused at K-12. We're one of the very different, or at least one of the few, that are really focused on today's workforce.

When we sit down and go through this with an industry, what we're finding is that they have a huge number of existing employees who want to go back to school. Honestly, what we're providing now is a new tool for education to engage that body of new students that'll be coming back in. Kaiser is talking about 40,000 employees who'll come back into that process.

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