

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMS IN STUDENTS SUCCESS MINDSET AND INTEGRATION WITHIN THE ECONOMIC-BUSINESS CONTEXT

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Abstract

This article examines the scientific and educational approach of the students practical training as well as the resulted intangible outcomes acquired on the working ground, within the contemporary business context, based on the literature review and the recent theoretical and empirical developments in terms of research, theory and practice.

The purpose of this research paper is to provide an analytical framework based on the existing literature of the actual educational and business context, within the dynamic global economic landscape and propose a complementarity relationship between the societal, entrepreneurial and leadership dimensions and the students growth mentality, in their journey towards educational and professional development.

The quantitative research methodology of this article provides an examination of an international exchange program within the tourism industry (U.S. Summer Work and Travel) aimed at students enrolled in academic educational programs. The role of education was highlighted through assessments of findings of the literature review pertaining to the importance of a success mindset in students achievements, from the cognitive perspective.

In the first part, the article focuses on theoretical and conceptual explanation of the characteristics pertaining to the personality, motivational, and self-influence of the great achievers, while in the second, as part of the research project, a 360 degrees evaluation is performed based on a survey addressed to students, related to the U.S. Summer Work and Travel - an international cultural exchange program organized by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs within the U.S. State Department.

Keywords

International exchange programs, internships, academic education, growth and success mindset, global business context, entrepreneurial leadership.

JEL Classification

I25, I26.

Introduction

The greatest force transforming the global business and economic context within our century, is without a doubt, the unstoppable trend of globalization as competition sharpens the strategy of every business, conglomerate entities capable of generating economies of scope and scale are being eroded by the emergence of smaller and more flexible networked

forms of enterprises, challenging the traditional strategic management and reshaping the dimensions of the business world.

Under the auspices of numerous factors leading to instability in all the industries the successful individual chooses to adopt an entrepreneurial mindset, employing the best knowledge of the past models and rapidly adapt it to the current conditions (Gunther McGrath and MacMillan, 2000). Today's knowledge revolution, the dynamic changes of the economic, technical and social landscape, is forcing organizations to continually adjust their practices and keep the pace with the transformations. The traditional industrial business enterprises and corporations are going through a metamorphosis, leaving behind hierarchical and top down forms of organization, in the favor of outsourcing most of their processes. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in June 2003 signaled that the historically unprecedented economic dynamism of the last two centuries and the divergence in performance across countries are the two most important features of the world we inhabit. The dynamism is the product of institutions, practices and attitudes that emerged in Western Europe over an extended period, while the divergence is the result of the uneven spread of this form of rapid growth. New world requires new approaches, and learning is the key to the strategic management of an accomplished life, from both the educational and professional career perspective. Learning becomes a continuous necessity throughout life, rethinking the way in which we do things, embracing experimentation under the state of uncertainty (Lüftenegger, Schober, Van de Schoot, Wagner, Finsterwald, Spiel, 2012). Everything around us changes at a staggering pace and by far the rate at which technology evolved had doubled in just the past couple of years essentially affecting industries, economies, markets, but most importantly, the way we do business and how we position ourselves within the global economic and social environment (Carnall, 1990).

Just as the business environment, all the other aspects of life are equally affected by the continuous state of change, particularly education plays an important role in the development of the young students as it provides them with the building blocks they need for the future, helping them decide about the career path they will be pursuing. On a global scale, it appears that an increasing importance is attributed to the developing international exchange and internships programs, considered as an ideal way to test drive possible jobs and explore different career options for the young students. The U.S. Summer Work and Travel Program is designed to reach educational goals through international cultural contacts, as well as providing an excellent working experience benefiting the students future professional career path as well as the social environment that will later on assimilate them.

Problem statement: The increasing importance of strategic vision

The nature of the environment in which we make our choices is rapidly changing and an individual such as a business, has to well know its own capabilities, the elements of its potential and weaknesses and how to acquire the resources necessary that will lead to progress and development. As such, in these times of uncertainty, strategy becomes more and more a consuming concern for everyone, from business leaders, regular citizens to students who have to continually adapt their lives to the dynamic transformations, as their aspirations grow and achieve greater complexity, their strategic choices become more significant and the context is as important as their own identity. Just as in the case of a business entity, students choosing a career path are confronted with the challenging process that requires thoughtful decision making and strategic planning. A series of determining factors have to be taken into consideration from the early stage of the process, particularly as the future depends on the choice they make early on in life (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, Dweck, 2007).

It becomes apparent the transitional aspect of our lives and the consequences that are very dependable on the importance attributed to the strategic decisions employed, as well as the

mindset of organizations and individuals (Drucker 1999). A success mindset is acquired based on continuous learning, creativity and exerting innovation, and bold initiative is the differentiating element of today's successful individuals (DeHeaven, 2008).

Breaking certain patterns of habits and trying to do things differently poses some challenges for certain people who may have difficulties with it, however just like everything else, creative thinking is a bundle of skills and techniques that our brain is able to quickly learn (Greenfield, 2013). The greatest opportunities are found in volatile environments and scarce times, and only those individuals who have cultivated a success mindset and to whom dealing with challenges seems embedded into their DNA, manage to outgrow the pressure of complexity and confusion (Krass, 1999). A growth and success mindset incorporate a set of character traits and skills which enables the individual to use the uncertainty towards its benefit by identifying potential opportunities in areas where others may not think of it as being possible. Today's generation is motivated by different type of goals, from helping people within their communities, to service innovation facilitating processes and life itself; the goals should match the performance and the behavior should match the goals (Blanchard, 2003). Individuals who possess a high degree of confidence and believe in their own abilities are better equipped to overcome failure and their level of self-confidence comes from having sustainable values and knowing themselves well. Many young people nowadays choose to start their own business, hence many companies adopted jobs cutting being forced to raise up to the challenge of balancing market and moral wisdom, caused by the recent downfall of the global economy (Eamonn, 2005). How exactly do we manage to achieve this fine balance at our society level, training, educating and shaping the new generations into embracing the continuous trends of transformation and manage to stay true to the core values of the society? Research reflects that individuals who score low in *Hoffstede's uncertainty avoidance index* seem to be better equipped to handle the discontinuous changes specific to our world today. Particularly for students who have a broad mentality, change is just another word for growth and a synonym for learning to be better, which is why they are the best candidates to make a difference in their own life and that of others (O'Rourke, Haimovitz, Ballweber, Dweck, Popović, 2014). Operating in conditions of change is extremely disturbing and confusing at the same time, posing tremendous challenges to the individuals who require creative discontinuous upside-down thinking. Learning nowadays, becomes a continuous necessity throughout life, rethinking the way in which we do things and embracing experimentation under the state of uncertainty it had become essential (Handy, 1994). Nevertheless, the training component within the educational dimension of the students development, besides the transfer and the accumulation of information, it is aimed at acquiring the necessary skills and techniques that are applicable in the real life and the challenging working environment.

Graduate, professional schools, colleges and universities are increasingly introducing specialized divisions and departments to educate and train specialists and future leaders, however leadership is a more of a practical and applied topic, better learned on the job itself, especially in summer jobs, internships and exchange programs. The theoretical approach learned in school sets the base of knowledge, however valuable character traits and true professional leadership skills are gained from the real working experience, by directly interacting with colleagues, customers and mentors, celebrating little achievements and learning from making own mistakes. Teaching and educating young students and preparing them for a professional career, often involves elements of complementary disciplines such as ethics, leadership, psychology, management, economy, politics, sociology, etc., and it takes a well-educated person to understand the complex implications and real-life applicability.

All these intangible aspects of life are highly situational and contextual, better observed when exercised in real working conditions, which defines the practical dimension of the

educational process (Handy, 1994). Research showed that the students that are exposed to leadership while working, participating in seminars learning about management styles and skills, strategies and theories specific to leadership, particularly where students come in contact with the diversity and the difficulty of problem-solving, distinguishing in their own minds the advantages, as well as limitations of leadership and the special chemistry that develops between leaders and followers. The educational dimension enables students to discern and define situational variations and nature of contexts in which relationships can develop, as well as the role that mentors and supporters have in their evolution (Goleman, 2006).

Millennials as a generation, are eager to make an impact in the world and profoundly affect the society, being innovators of products, services and business models, in their pursuit for their dreams and passions, making use of their personal experience acquired in the working field and studying various academic specialties (Strauss, Howe, 2000). In the 21st century, there is a growing trend towards the transfer of knowledge aimed at enhancing the students ability to effectively acquire concrete problem-solving skills and apply ingenious teaching methods of growth mindset induction that grab the attention of students and actively involve them in the learning process (Schroder, Moran, Donnellan, Moser, 2014).

On a global level, entrepreneurial leadership training courses are increasingly designed to target the young students and aspiring future professionals, making education a competitive advantage and a real investment, that effective organizations appreciate as being an asset, especially when practical experience may be lacking.

Research questions/Aims of the research

As the society is rapidly changing and the career span is shorter on average, the need for intelligent people in organizations is increasingly growing, it is obvious that the education systems around the world need to be redesigned and aligned with the requirements of the contemporary environment, as to motivate and build up the skills, talents, self-confidence and the student's abilities to communicate and manage in the real life. Organizations, equally need to partner with the education systems and consciously help shape up the students professional profile, resulting in an ideally equipped and capable future work force. On the same note, organizations need to foster the opportunity for students to grow while they work and develop critical thinking abilities, practical and analytical intelligence. Companies could become learning grounds for groups of mixed ages and different types personality profiles working together, outgrowing the students intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities, offering them a realistic picture of the world they are preparing to enter into. On the other hand, the academic world could adapt faster to the dynamic waves of changes and introduce tasks and case studies inspired from the business environment and assign real problems to be solved by the groups of students, conferring to the study process a professional type of purpose. Summer Work and Travel is considered to be the largest U.S. public cultural exchange program, which has experienced tremendous growth in the past 20 years and the J-1 exchange visitor programs suffered transformations as the U.S. foreign policy priorities and initiatives have changed with the time.

The main objectives of the research activities were to:

- Provide a comprehensive review of the program, while understanding how the program contributes to the overall improvement of the students, determining development of their professional career and life perspectives, ultimately influencing the local Romanian environment which assimilates them as active work force.
- Understand the reasons for students participation and the impact of the program on acquiring self confidence and esteem, towards a healthy and well-balanced mentality of hard working and success – key factors in the development of the future local romanian business entities, both in terms of cultural exchange and contribution economic vitality.

- Asses the experiences of the SWT participants in terms of their own appreciation and satisfaction with the outcome, including their overall views on personal and professional gains, as a result of their active involvement within the program. Such programs encourage students to discover, produce and evaluate knowledge, seeing the real-life applicability of the theoretical concepts learned, the students level of understanding and information absorption rate increases dramatically, so is their competence, social skills and overall capability of reasoning (Betsy, 2018).

Research methods and survey findings

The overall global trend is to embrace education as being the gateway towards a better adapted society to the transformational changes, to the point where the well-developed countries are increasingly supporting entrepreneurial and leadership specialized training and funding programs. Integrated in this article, is a quantitative research evaluation of the SWT program based on a survey conducted in 2017, addressed to 437 students that have returned from their working and traveling experience in the United States. The purpose of the survey was to reflect the benefits and outcome of the program based on the students feedback that have actively participated with in the Summer Work and Travel Program and who were willing to share their impressions, followed by an analysis of the survey answers and the drawing conclusions. The online survey of Summer Work and Travel alumni was conducted on 30th of October 2018 and the survey was closed on 20th of December, 2018. The survey was addressed to a total of 2800 of SWT participants that had just returned from the SWT program in the United States and covered topics such as their overall experience in the program, the professional aspect as well as the impact of the program on participants perspective of work, traveling culture and life. Survey data was compiled and thoroughly reviewed, amounting a total 437 alumni who had completed the survey, of which 260 females and 177 males, with an average age of 22.2 years, concluding in a comprehensive assessment of the outcome of the SWT program organized for summer of 2017.

The survey findings conclude the success of the program, it's operations and reforms, participants reporting high levels of overall satisfaction of both the program 96.4% and of personal and professional gains as a result of their involved participation. For example, 94.9% of participants consider that the experience gained during the program will help their future careers, due to the cultural exchange being their primary motivation for joining the SWT program. Cultural exchange is an important characteristic of the program, directly influencing the creation of a better work environment and a friendly climate for the local employees in the Romanian labour market, in addition to providing a better service experience for customers. The cultural exchange goals are also reflected in the students reports of making lasting friendships with peers from the United States and other nations. The majority of participants have favorable views toward the SWT program stating that they learned specific work skills, 95% of students praised the gaining of experience living on their own in the U.S and earning money for traveling, and at the completion of the program highly recommending the program to their friends. Pertaining to their level of education, the most substantial category of participants recorded were alumni from college (51.3%) and university student bachelor programs (29.3%), master students (18.8%) and doctorate students only (0.7%). Data reflects that a total of (78.7%) have enrolled in SWT for the first time, and in addition to the exchange program organized in 2017, a small fraction of students have also participated in the past in several J1 exchange visitor programs (16.5% 2nd participation and 4.8% third or more times).

When participants were asked to describe their professional experience level 46.9% responded that they have under one year of work experience, 16.7% have worked one to two years, and 8.5% of students were actively involved in the labour market (two to three years) while 19.7% did not have any prior working experience. When asked whether they

participated along with one of their friends 51.5% stated that they enrolled in the SWT program together with friends, while 45.5% participated on their own and 3% with a family member. Only 10.8% of students declared that they visited the U.S. prior to the SWT program, while a vast majority (89.2%) of the participants have seen the American land for their first time. Creating a favorable climate for the students to gain valuable work experience that would benefit their career and the societal environment that would assimilate them later on in life, is among the goals of the SWT exchange program, and the survey reflects that the majority of students agreed that the program provided and taught them specific work skills. On a scale from one to five most of the participants rated their working experience an average of 3.17, where fun was corresponding to number three and very useful, corresponding to number four.

As the types of the jobs available to exchange students enrolled within the SWT program are within the tourism industry, where the required skills are specific to hospitality and customer services, it presents a high level of dependency on seasonality (State Gov. 2019). In fact, according to the U.S. employers, there is a seasonal labour shortage and the absence of the program would have a negative impact on the smooth management of the business and a big negative impact on the ability to efficiently operate providing satisfactory customer service, affecting the revenues and the economic environment (Visa State Gov. 2019).

Our survey data indicates that the majority of participants (89.4%) consider the acquired work experience to have been: excellent (29.7%), very good (31.8%) and (27.9%) good, interacting with fellow colleagues and customers, thus contributing to and benefiting from the positive culture within the workplace and the surrounding community. Along the years, the students enrolled within the SWT program gained valuable insights about the American culture, it's people and their way of life and a better understanding about providing hospitality service or doing business. When inquired about the professional skills and abilities developed along the duration of the program, 35.2% referred to it as being excellent, 29.3% as very good, 24.7% consider it to be good, while 2.7% stated it was fair.

The knowledge attained through this type of real life working experience, has a crucial importance on the individual's evolution scale, as it further develops taking shape as valuable skills and character traits that stand at the base of the students professional identity, preparing them for the future ahead and helping them to better integrate within organizations and business environments back in their countries of origin (Alliance Exchange, 2018).

The majority of students (92.5%) chose to travel at the completion of the SWT program, visiting major cities and famous touristic attractions, making use of certain skills learned during the program and interacting with people of different nationalities making lifetime memories, as reflected in the research issued in 2017 by Eureka Facts, LLC.

Table no 1. Student's top reasons for participation in SWT program

Student's Main Reasons	Percentage
Learning about the American way of doing business	5.4%
Interacting with different cultures	15.5%
Learning specific work skills	2.0%
Traveling in the U.S.	16.4%
Earning money	3.1%
Gaining work experience for degree program	3.3%
Experience living alone in a different culture	36.0%
Improving English language skills	18.2%

Source: Eureka Facts, LLC - August 22, 2017

When asked about socializing and networking with the American people and other nations, the survey statistics reflects that a staggering 94.7% of the young students rate it with maximum importance to them. Overall, the majority (84.2%) of participants reported that they enjoyed their stay in America, having a beneficial experience while in the U.S., expressing positive opinions and good overall perceptions regarding the working environment, local culture and traditions.

Most participants (94.5%) agreed that their American experience helped improve their English language and gained better understanding of the local way of life and doing business (Guidance Directive 2013).

Nearly all the participants (96.4%) were very satisfied with the SWT Program, considering it to be a successful program, suitable to be recommended to a friend or family member, and 47.1% of students stated that they will be applying again in the future, while 44.2% said that they might be enrolling again in the SWT program.

Conclusions

As the world continues to open up and globalize, so is the connectivity and educational, cultural, economic exchange, providing multiple academic and professional opportunities to young students. The interdependency of countries and the growing consumer demands has made the education system, labour market and business environment exciting and challenging at the same time. By assessing the wide spectrum of the global systems complexity, the conclusion to be drawn is that today's business organizations and enterprises need to foster a culture in which employees feel encouraged and are motivated to contribute, attracting well-qualified labor force able to generate good performance in strategy innovation, creativity of ideas, product and portfolio management. Young students ought to embrace a growth mindset, continually learning and making extensive use of the abundance of information available to them in order to analyze the society trends and determine whether a certain initiative is appropriate for their future career, and then further decide on development plans and strategy to follow. Students may take advantage of the unveiling opportunities to increase practical learning on the working ground within the dynamic business environment, in order to benefit from the perfect mix between the theoretical concepts studied in school and its applicability in real life and achieve the most efficient learning experience.

Through international exchange programs and internships young students gain a broader perspective when working closely along experienced people and managers, observing the passion and drive which fuels them to take on the operation challenges, in such a way that students may feel well inspired by their actions and apply the discipline and thinking patterns in their own way of life. Besides creativity and innovation, the success formula relies on the basic cognitive principles and learning mechanism which implies questioning, theorizing, testing or reflecting on a problem, a dilemma to be solved, or a challenge to meet. All of these are learned in school and perfected in real life practice and keeping up with the dynamic trends and thinking ahead can help to better plan goals and strategies in order to have the ability to take advantage of the best opportunities that arises. The organizations today value people who are determined and prepared to invest time and energy to keep ahead of the game by continuously learning, they are respectful and dedicated to their work. Practicing students enrolled in exchange programs, internships should take advantage of knowing this and try their best to absorb a good volume of knowledge and practical experience as to make a relevant impression through their active involvement in the assigned operational activities.

On the home front, the local authorities recognize the importance of removing barriers to employment and measures to reduce skill mismatches, especially for the young population,

and consider a new strategy of welcoming foreign workforce from certain countries (Eurostat, 2019). Meanwhile the private business sector is making efforts of successfully attract employees that possess the skill-based requirements and increase their retention level by offering them extra training to determine a growth of their abilities and knowledge - essential for applying lean principles in production or implementing optimization systems within the companies and of critical importance in today's competitive market.

Besides teaching the theoretical principles and concepts, the goals of the educational system may concentrate on increasing the practical training and students involvement in workshop activities, aiming towards shaping the workforce of tomorrow, future managers, entrepreneurs and business leaders. A balanced educational system fosters an encouraging environment and develops the students potential, so that they believe that performance records are attainable in school as in career and life, enabling them to feel motivated and concentrate all their efforts and abilities into achieving greater goals.

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