

Tailored to create a common culture

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It was just five years ago that Grant Thornton, the globally recognised accountancy firm, dipped its toes in the water of customised management education. But today David McDonnell, chief executive of Grant Thornton International, is planning a range of programmes for everyone, from top dogs down to new recruits.

The impetus for this has been a change in the business the accountancy firm is attracting, says Mr McDonnell - in particular the growing demand for work from global companies, crossing international boundaries. "In a business like ours you have a choice: you retreat into doing local business or you embrace it [globali-sation]."

Embrace it they did, and developed an executive education programme with IFL Executive Education at the Stockholm School of Economics, which specialises in such customised programmes.

Grant Thornton is not a single organisation such as Shell, BP or IBM, says Mr McDonnell, but a grouping of small, local organisations. Grant Thornton Inter-national, based in London, acts as an umbrella organisation, co-ordinating the numerous local firms that operate to local standards and comply with local legislation.

This structure was at the heart of the conundrum that Grant Thornton was facing in its attempts to benefit from globalisation, says Mr McDonnell.

"If you have an organisation like this, which represents itself to the world as one and where 99 per cent of the employees are employed by local firms, how do you create a common culture?"

This was the task IFL was called in to tackle. Paul Hansen, programme director at IFL, says the project brief was twofold. First, it was to provide some elements of know-ledge, most notably leadership but also the sort of knowledge the Grant Thornton partners, accountants by profession, would not come across in their daily lives: marketing, strategy and entrepreneurship, for example.

Second, it was to create the next generation of international leaders, well-versed in cross-cultural management. "Many of the participants have never met before, but by the end of the programme they are good friends," says Prof Hansen.

The developing relationships in the 12-day programme are essential, says Mr McDonnell.

"In an organisation like ours, to know and trust professionals in other places in the world is an extremely important by-product. We wanted them to understand the cultural differences and how they influence the way you do things."

One thing not included in the programme so far, says Mr McDonnell, is a cross-border project where participants work together between the three, four-day modules of the programme, or after it has ended, on a scheme to develop the business. He is hoping this will be included in future.

The 30 students on each programme are selected because they come from many different countries where Grant Thornton is represented and have international, rather than local, clients on their books. The prospective students are proposed by Grant Thornton's local offices and the decision as to who to select is taken centrally.

There are always more applicants than places, says Mr McDonnell. "It's an imperfect process but we do try to make sure they meet the criteria."

The programme developed by IFL is typical of many customised programmes these days. Although IFL is based in Stockholm, the three modules have run in the UK, Belgium and the

US. And although the school has hundreds of professors and lecturers, most of the teaching on the programme is done by outside contractors, selected to address specific topics

"The school has acted as a sort of link for us and pulled in people from round the world," says Mr McDonnell. "That's been very good from our point of view."

Like most successful customised programmes, Grant Thornton's is supported from the very top of the organisation, with Mr McDonnell appearing personally at all the sessions to introduce the programme.

From Grant Thornton's point of view, the programme has been a success. Mr McDonnell says the organisation has tracked the careers of participants and almost all have been retained by the organisation. But, as he concedes, "that might be because we selected the right people in the first place".

Grant Thornton has completed four programmes with IFL and 120 accountants have taken part. A fifth begins shortly.

Buoyed by success, the firm plans to expand its portfolio of customised programmes and introduce a suite of programmes at four levels within the organisation. The first two will be for newly appointed managers in their early 20s and for managers in their late 20s. There will also be a partners' programme for those in their 30s and a mid-career programme for those in their 40s.

The relationships that make the difference

For David Elzinga (pictured right), the overriding benefit of the Grant Thornton programme was the contact with other participants. "The relationships you make are the critical thing," says the partner in the specialist advisory services field at Grant Thornton in Calgary, Canada.

"Knowing that I have these contacts in the firm round the globe is the critical thing."

He also found fascinating the difference between the working and social cultures, he says.

"It was uncanny how similar we were within our working culture."

But, at a social level, the differences were eye-opening.

The participants from Germany for example, shook hands with the other participants each morning, he says, something that he, as a North American, would not have considered. How to give and receive presents in Japan was something else that intrigued him.

But the most memorable cultural experience, he says, was in the Hotel Metropole in Brussels. The tutor asked the participants to divide into same-sex pairs. Each pair had then to walk through the lobby while holding hands. That, the tutor explained, was a sign of friendship in many countries.

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