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## *The Brightest and Best Ideas in Education*

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*An Overview of How Universities Are Leading the Way in Logistics and Business*

# The Confessions of A Logistics Man

What kind of accelerated payoff does logistics training and executive development offer companies? And how do some companies and their teams benefit from the education journey while others fail to?

By Jim Davidson

Our industry has seen dramatic changes over the last 40 years. In fact, it could be argued that even though transportation and distribution were critical and growing elements of the emerging global economy, our field of business lacked the discipline prior to 1960 to even be called an “industry”. Today, however, you can find respected universities all across North America that offer doctoral programs in logistics. At the same time, professional institutes are making a tremendous contribution to deepening and broadening the dialogue and understanding of our industry. Aside from providing a forum for research and debate, they offer practical programs for logistics practitioners to gain entry-level training as well as professional development throughout one’s career.

As the significance of logistics and supply chain management grows and moves up within the management hierarchy, it’s important to fuel that growth with better, brighter people. Education is absolutely an essential key to continuous improvement in supply chain management. However, having said that, I believe it is equally important to manage what education can and cannot do for our industry and for the people who work in it. I must admit, that I entered this business before formal logistic education and discipline crystallized. Many of the lessons I learned under pressure on the job through trial and error, are now taught as part of a curriculum that fast tracks a student’s library of knowledge before entering the industry. However, I have gone back and personally filled in my career path with formal education and training. I had a ton of experience that taught me how to get my job done. I also found out that earning a PLog can teach you how to do some of those things better or get at a solution in a whole different way. No one is so smart that they can’t learn to be better.

To an employer within the supply chain industry, education has meant a big economic advantage. There is a stream of people now available that are pre-equipped with a cache of start-up knowledge. People that know the industry jargon, the basics of transportation, distribution and warehousing, the documents used in the industry and probably most important know how to gain access to the information that drives our business through the computer. Good people that

can be integrated into a company’s culture quicker. But in reality, they do not come with guarantees. In fact the fundamental difference between the educational environment and the working environment is how people are evaluated. In the academic environment graduates usually must pass some kind of adjudicated test. If you don’t pass the test ... you fail. In the logistics environment, I’ve learned my most valuable lessons from failures, providing the culture allowed me to fail “safely”. In other words, making a mistake wasn’t the sin ... not learning from it was. That’s what gives you the courage to stretch and take reasonable risks.

Education is a platform on which to grow. The work environment is a stage on which to perform. In general terms, great companies succeed on team performance. The culture is critical. Individuals who succeed within that context are often simply average people who consistently perform above average. In fact, take the idea a step further and think about how difficult it is to pick out the great people among the good ones in a successful company. Conversely, the under performers are a little easier to spot. Education can take a bright student and help that individual pack a pretty powerful tool kit. How well that trained logistician performs is highly dependant on the culture and environment where those tools get put to the test.

I want to shift gears for a minute and look at education and training from the logistics practitioner’s point of view. The first and most obvious impact is on the resume. Formal training of any kind is usually an entry-level qualification, the ante to entering the game. During a career, education can be a significant addition to experience for anyone looking for that next step. But remember, training can teach you to skate or even to skate better. But that alone doesn’t make you a money player. It’s the guts to go in the corner or to dig a bit deeper during overtime that makes the difference. The reality of business is simple. We don’t get paid for what we know ... we get paid for what we do. Next time you hear someone lamenting about how they are not getting paid what they are worth, help them out. Help them understand what they are being paid, is exactly what they are worth.

There is also another aspect of logistics I would like to link to this discussion. Business needs the institutions to satisfy its growing need for intellectual and human resources. The institutions need the financial resources of industry. Society needs the answers this synergy can create. Traffic in urban areas, environmental issues created by the volume of highway traffic, the aging highway and rail infrastructure to name a few ... have monumental impact on a world dependant on global economics. North America needs new, safer, more economical, cleaner ways to move people commodities and goods. Universities and institutes provide the forum of research and discovery. Quid pro quo.

Beyond the relationship between institutions, industry and the North American community ... there is also the opportunity on a global basis. China needs to train roughly 100,000 people to manage the logistics for the 2010 Olympic games. The challenge is almost overwhelming and China is looking to the Logistics Institute to meet the challenge. After years of expanding its research, development and education capabilities, the Institute has the strength and credentials to meet the task. Here is a whole nation that that mirrors the attitude of our own students ... no biases, no prejudices, no competitive predeterminations ... just a hunger to learn and the enthusiasm to succeed.

It has been exciting to see the prominence of our industry spike over these last few years. It is hard to imagine how we managed before JIT, GPS or Internet portals. None of it would have happened without this three-way partnership between the industry, the institutions and the logistics professionals all looking for ways to make it all faster, better and cheaper. However, buckle-up ... we are just on the threshold. New challenges push us to find new solutions. New technology will give us new tools to think outside the box. Continuous education will lead us to continuous improvements. And all of that creates a stage for great companies and great individuals to perform. But the bottom line is performance. And here is a final thought.

There is a buzzword that circulates in our industry... empowerment. Institutions can teach the skills and processes. Motivated people can embrace those skills and focus on performance. The industry can provide the tools and create an environment for people to perform. So who holds the key to "empowerment"? My thought is that no one can empower another. We can only empower ourselves. And that's the challenge for logisticians. As managers, we need to create environments where people can live and learn and perform ... as average practitioners we have to display the competence and courage to consistently perform above average. That's what creates success. And that's what makes logistics a career and not just a job.

My dad always used the phrase, "...you live and learn." It always seemed too simple to spend much time thinking about. It just took me 35 years in this business to figure out what he meant.



**17 of 20 top scorers  
last season had  
something in common**

***They never  
scored a  
touchdown.***

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