

The Project Management Classroom Meets the Real World

Valense Ltd. shows how partnerships between PMI Registered Education Providers (R.E.P.s) and universities can help build strong professional networks and groom a new generation of project management leaders.

The multitude of informal ties that exist between project management practitioners and educators can be valuable for the individuals involved, but they're only the tip of the iceberg. By leveraging personal relationships into formal partnerships, PMI Registered Education Providers (R.E.P.s) and academic institutions can reap mutual rewards.

Valense Ltd. Organizational Consultants, an R.E.P. since 2004, has forged partnerships with academic institutions on three continents. The consultancy presented its first course as an R.E.P. at French university ESC Lille (now part of SKEMA Business School) in 2001. It has since collaborated with Mundiapolis University in Casablanca, Morocco and the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, among others.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

Schools teaching project management have a common mission: preparing students for the real business world. At the same time, R.E.P.s such as Valense are always seeking opportunities to bolster their credibility through associations with prestigious institutions, expand their professional networks and work with faculty on research initiatives.

By joining forces, both parties can achieve these goals. But developing and nurturing the partnerships takes significant time and effort from both

sides. For R.E.P. and universities to gain, there must be:

- Mutual alignment of goals
- Willingness to regularly update course content and direction
- Positive personal chemistry between principals in the two organizations

Valense's first foray into academia began when managing partner Michel Thiry's research for academic papers led to collaboration with business professors. He parlayed that work into leading workshops at ESC Lille, and, later, more formalized courses. The company has also made contacts at conferences, which helped lay the groundwork for Valense-led courses.

"The more you develop the personal relationship, the easier it is to establish this kind of a partnership," he says.

ESC Lille began considering an alliance with Valense just as the school was starting to boost its project management offerings, including the addition of PMI professional certification classes. To meet its goals, it needed outside expertise and a top-notch lecturer with solid project management credentials, as well as the ability to present in both French and English.

"It's not easy to find someone like that for an international program like the one we were starting," says Mehran Azaran, former director of the project management program at ESC Lille and

***TIP:** Building on existing personal relationships can give R.E.P.s a head start when they reach out to academic institutions, but they must continue to strengthen those relationships even after creating a formal partnership.*

10 QUESTIONS

R.E.P.s SHOULD ASK POTENTIAL ACADEMIC PARTNERS

1. What level of experience does the school expect students to have?
2. Is the institution committed to teaching project management over the long term?
3. Is the school prepared to limit class sizes when appropriate?
4. Is the school interested in participating with an R.E.P. in research projects?
5. What are the credentials of the school's business management faculty, and does the school have a strong reputation?
6. Is the institution on sound financial footing?
7. Can the school provide appropriate resources, such as breakout rooms, to R.E.P. instructors?
8. Will the school commit to reviewing course content at least every other year?
9. Is there resistance to this partnership among faculty?
10. What can the R.E.P. do to help assuage any opposition?

now a consultant for SKEMA Business School.

Mr. Thiry fit the bill.

And with Valense's consulting work, the alliance is also a way to bring current business issues into the classroom. "You want to have a partner who is always connected to what's happening in the real world," says Mr. Azaran.

MAKING IT WORK

When evaluating an R.E.P., Mr. Azaran looks at a number of factors, including:

- Extensive work experience
- Proper qualifications and certifications
- A background in research and academic publication
- References from another university to validate lecturing ability

References can be a deciding factor for an outside partner whose primary task is to speak before a diverse and sophisticated student body. The lecturer must be able to relate to students in language, culture and level of subject matter knowledge, Mr. Azaran says. This is an especially critical issue at SKEMA, where the

student body hails from Europe, China and the Middle East.

To get a feel for a new guest lecturer's teaching acumen, SKEMA often invites the prospective partner to a one- or two-day training seminar. "We check the capability of the teacher to establish connection with students by having him or her present material and participate in some give-and-take," Mr. Azaran says.

It's also helpful for the university representative and the R.E.P. to extensively discuss and prepare coursework together. "I worked with Mr. Thiry for about 10 weeks to develop the first course," Mr. Azaran recalls. "He also participated in the committee to develop content for the whole project management program."

When a new class begins, the university should monitor progress, Mr. Azaran points out. "Early in the teaching experience, we have contact with students to gain feedback on the lecturer," he says.

Although there may be some initial issues as the instructor becomes familiar with students, the university should expect the instructor to have a firm grasp on course content and goals.

"The right person should be able to plan everything and have all the materials ready," Mr. Azaran says.

Just as the school sizes up its potential partner, the R.E.P. also has its own vetting process. Before Valense agrees to teach at any institution, it looks at the school's reputation, culture and caliber of students, Mr. Thiry says.

"The academic institution has to first be serious about their teaching of project management," he says. "They have to have an overall high quality of teaching with a sound program where the basic courses are good."

Valense, which has two other partners that preside over university classes, wants to do more than provide lectures. It prefers to have a hands-on role in helping the academic institution develop its approach to integrating project management into the curriculum.

"If you're just there as a mercenary, giving your course then going away, then you make a bit of money, but that's about it," Mr. Thiry says. More rewarding relationships come when both the R.E.P. and the university participate in the give-and-take of debate and discussion over key educational decisions.

When a university proposes employing someone outside of academia to

WHEN DOES A PARTNERSHIP MAKE SENSE?

An R.E.P./university partnership is most advantageous for both sides when:

- There are opportunities for joint research projects, and both parties are enthusiastic about them.
- The R.E.P. provides real-world expertise that faculty members may lack.
- The academic institution has well-qualified, motivated students.
- The university is committed to making project management an integral part of its program offerings.
- The R.E.P. can accept the limitations of academic budgets and resources.
- The R.E.P. is willing to assist the university in developing or strengthening its project management program in addition to lecturing.

teach a course, it can sometimes draw resistance from faculty. This enmity may be compounded if the outside party receives greater compensation than the university's professors, as is typically the case when Valense holds courses.

"There have been one or two cases where we were the only external teacher," Mr. Thiry says. "If you're paid more than their teachers are paid, you may be perceived as a fat cat. And then when you have certain demands, sometimes people react badly. Other professors are kind of challenged. They may ask, 'Why them, and why not us?'"

The R.E.P. may have to practice the fine art of diplomacy with resistant faculty. "Try to empathize with them," Mr. Thiry says. "Try to understand what they do. Every time we've had these challenges, we've tried to show them our side of the story so that they understood us better."

There was no acrimony within the SKEMA/Valense partnership, though, Mr. Azaran says. "We've had no resistance to having a good lecturer from the outside," he says. "We are limited by the constraints of the budget to how many we can have, but the value of a good lecturer is supported." In fact, he says, the school altered its schedule by reducing the number of days per class for outside instructors from three to one to better accommodate their schedules.

R.E.P.s accustomed to well-funded projects and other enviable features that come with work in the private sector may need time to adjust to the world of academia. Both sides may simply have to make some compromises.

"The issue is, how far will you go in accepting conditions that are not ideal?" Mr. Thiry says. "Classrooms may be too small. There may be too many people per class."

TIP: Making sure the R.E.P. is the right fit for the school early on in the partnership helps head off potential conflicts later on.

TIP: R.E.P.s must be cognizant of the needs and sensitivities of their academic partners, and both sides may have to make compromises to make the relationship work.

Some situations require negotiation. For example, if a class requires a great deal of small group discussion and teamwork, and has more than 25 students, the R.E.P. may ask for an assistant to help facilitate the class, Mr. Thiry says. Usually, he adds, a compromise can be reached.

After a class is established and running smoothly, both the R.E.P. and the academic institution should still expect ongoing challenges. For instance, in a long-term arrangement, personnel on both sides inevitably come and go, requiring re-establishment of personal ties or even reassessment of goals.

“When there is a change of the dean, for example, sometimes the new dean might say, ‘Well, project management is not really part of our offerings. I don’t know why we are offering project management in the IT department or the construction department,’” Mr. Thiry says. “Then you could have a challenge of the whole program.”

From the university perspective, Mr. Azaran offers a key point of advice: Make sure the partnership extends to more than one person in the R.E.P. organization.

“You may have one good lecturer, but there might be a reason forcing that person to postpone or cancel a class on short notice,” Mr. Azaran says. If the primary person can’t make it, you may be able to have another person within the R.E.P. fill in.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Together, Valense and its partner institutions have developed courses and programs that combine academic credits and PMI professional development units (PDUs). Valense has also played a key role in advising its academic partners on

how to integrate project management instruction into curricula.

Despite the challenges inherent in starting and maintaining formal ties, R.E.P.-university partnerships are becoming increasingly valuable to both parties. “More and more of our students are asking for academic and professional certification,” Mr. Azaran says. “Academia needs professionals to help meet the demand.”

Along with all the traditional benefits of allying with universities, R.E.P.s sometimes reap unexpected rewards, too. “We’ve had a few consulting contracts that stem from students who have taken our classes,” Mr. Thiry says. “Also, a few of the people that we’ve taught have later become associates and partners at Valense.”

With the right chemistry and a firm commitment, partnerships enhance the mission of both the university and the R.E.P.—and create a student body ready to tackle real-world issues. ■

TOP 5 SIGNS AN R.E.P. IS A GOOD PARTNER FOR AN ACADEMIC INSTITUTION

1. Understands the institution’s challenges and goals
2. Will adjust course content regularly (at least every other year) to accommodate changing student needs
3. Has developed a personal relationship with at least one faculty member or administrator
4. Has a history of collaborating with universities on research projects
5. Is willing to charge less than it does to private companies