

Bootstrapped and profitable, GreatLearning aims to bridge the widening skill gap in India

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Skill gaps are among the biggest challenges organisations face today. Allen Blue, Co-founder LinkedIn, says, “In many cases, when you learn something in college, by the time you finish your course, the skills aren’t useful for job training. **The educational institutes aren’t hard-wired into what’s necessary.**” It was looking at this gap that Mohan Lakhamraju started GreatLearning in Gurugaon.

Great Learning is an online learning platform that helps working professionals develop new competencies to achieve career transitions and growth. It recognizes that professionals need to upgrade their competencies at regular intervals to stay relevant and keep pace with the fast-changing business environment, and has made it its mission to serve them as their life-long learning partner.

The Genesis

Mohan was a part of a 2012 Global Higher Education conference conducted at Stanford Business School by Goldman Sachs, where online learning was the major theme. One of the talks was by Andrew Ng, co-founder of Coursera and Mohan’s classmate from graduate school at University of California, Berkeley.

Andrew’s talk and Mohan’s subsequent discussion with him threw light on the hunger for learning among people outside of traditional higher education, specifically working professionals.

Further, India already had the third-largest customer base among Coursera users after the US and China. This was Mohan's 'eureka' moment, which led to the decision to start Great Learning in 2013. At the time, Mohan was already a part of the Great Lakes Institute of Management with Hari Nair, his co-Founder.

Roping in the team

The duo had worked for three years together, and were joined by Arjun Nair, who joined in after a stint at Zipdial, a Bengaluru-based tech startup that was acquired by Twitter, and Vinod Venkataraman, who had worked at Flipkart and Stratify, a Silicon Valley-based company, acquired by HP, where Mohan was a founding member.



GreatLearning Team

The technology team is comprised of other ex-Stratify and ex-Flipkart engineers. "Other key members of the team came on board from various leading consumer

technology and services companies. Everyone in the team cares deeply about our mission of empowering young professionals through transformational learning experiences,” says 39-year-old Mohan.

Great Learning, he adds, leverages technology and innovations around curriculum design, delivery, and learner engagement to achieve high-quality learning outcomes in a cost-effective and scalable manner.

Workings of the programme

The different programmes offered by GreatLearning include:

(a) A year -long blended learning programme that is comprehensive and provides an alternative to full-time programmes for professionals who cannot afford time away from work and

(b) online mentored learning programmes that are focused on specific competencies for professionals who learn better with regular learning support.

Mohan says that the programmes are offered in academic collaboration with Great Lakes Institute of Management, and are also recognised and jointly certified by IIT Chicago (Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago).

One of the main challenges the team faced was that of scaling learning online. Mohan says this kind of learning normally happens in small groups in classrooms driven by brilliant faculty and motivated peers. Online learning, in its early days, ended up being more of a content delivery mechanism than one that engendered true learning.

In order to scale high-quality learning experiences with the use of technology, the team identified the key attributes that contribute meaningful learning outcomes. They

also studied learning research done over the past decade on the essential elements of a great learning experience.

For instance, among the most important attributes of high-quality classroom learning are conceptual learning immediately followed by practical application of the concepts, quick clarification of doubts, and social proofing and peer pressure from classmates.

Traditionally, great professors teaching in classrooms ensure that the shared classroom experience with classmates ensures. Most online platforms miss out on these key aspects leading to poor-quality learning outcomes and low completion rates. Great Learning has developed its model of “assisted” or “mentored” learning and has adopted it from the very beginning,” says Mohan.

In this model, learners are provided mentorship and guidance by a combination of academic faculty and industry mentors, in addition to self-learning through high-quality digital content. The team has found that timely mentorship and guidance results in much deeper learning outcomes and completion rates of 85 to 90 percent in their programmes.

Further, the learning experience includes several hands-on practice assignments and exercises that cement learning, help develop familiarity and confidence in solving similar problems on the job, and enables the participants to create a portfolio of their work to showcase.

Finding the differentiator

Participants are also provided industry practitioners as mentors to help clear their doubts, answer their questions, guide them in their projects and achieve their overall learning objectives. These mentors also evaluate the learners' assignments and give them feedback.

A LinkedIn research paper in fact suggests that 80 percent of engineering graduates are not only unemployed, but are unemployable according to corporates as they do not have the right skillset. Looking at this skill gap, there are several platforms like Coursera, edX, and Udacity in the space of online learning.

There is also **WAGmob, which focuses on sales force training; it was recently acquired by EduCast. Ronnie Screvvala and Mayank Kumar have started UpGrad,** which focuses on skills training and follows a similar industry mentorship model. **There also is Simplilearn.**

Great Learning was launched in mid-2013 and the first six months were spent on developing its technology platform and its first product – a post graduate blended learning programme in Business Analytics.

It started its commercial operations in December 2013 starting with a small set of 30 enrolled learners.

Mohan adds that the other courses do not have the same completion rate as GreatLearning. He says that recognition of the fact that people need learning support beyond content is what sets GreatLearning apart. “We refer to this assisted learning as “empowered learning” and this is the core aspect that sets us apart,” says Mohan.

What do the numbers say

The programmes charge between Rs 50,000 to Rs 6,00,000 based on the format, duration, and complexity of the programme. Mohan claims that over two-thirds of the learners who successfully complete the programmes achieve career progression or transitions within six months.

Bootstrapped and growing, GreatLearning claims to have seen a 100x growth in the number of registered learners in three years, and 20x revenue growth from the first to third year. The team claims to have turned profitable in the second year of operations and continues to do so; however, they refused to give specific numbers. The team has grown from five to 45 and now has offices in Bengaluru and Gurugaon.

After the initial investment by the founders, all of the revenues generated have been reinvested in growing the business.

Great Learning aspires to become India's largest, and one of the world's largest, online higher education companies using its model of "Empowered Learning". It has several growth engines that are fuelling its growth including, expanding to newer geographies, growing the existing programmes, and launching new post graduate programmes across its entire network of existing and new locations.

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