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Coursera takes aim at unemployment

After a long tenure in traditional academia, Richard Levin joined online-learning site Coursera as CEO, where he sees great potential to impact education—and unemployment—on a global scale.

As Coursera has expanded to become a leading platform for massive open online courses, so has its acceptance as a training ground for skills sought after by employers around the world. In this interview with McKinsey's Michael Chui, Coursera CEO Richard Levin, whose background includes 20 years as president of Yale University, explores the platform's potential to address unemployment concerns globally. He also notes that the virtuous cycle of Coursera users earning jobs based on their new skills has helped foster acceptance among employers. An edited transcript of Levin's comments follows.

Could online learning help lower unemployment?

Coursera or other providers are going to potentially have a major impact on resolving some of the structural unemployment concerns in our country, and abroad, by focusing on the right skills that are needed. In the United States, the remediation that's required to solve that is probably at a more fundamental level of the educational system than the courses offered by the Yales and Princetons and Penns who are our partners.

But I think there's room for teaching more basic skills through these methods. Some of our courses, which have to do with just basic reasoning—how to learn and how to think critically—we have a number of those courses, and they're very popular. That's an example of the kind of thing that could be very valuable to people who are trying to get enough traction to get a job.

Coursera's global impact

I think Coursera will play a big role in certain countries. I was just in India recently, and I think there's a tremendous demand for education there. The universities, with the exception of some of the famous IITs and IIMs,¹ are really not at a globally competitive standard.


So employers in India are actually dissatisfied with what they see coming out of most of the universities and are welcoming online education as a way to give the kind of job-specific skills that they want to provide.

Our verified certificates of completion are already being accepted by a number of employers as evidence of a kind of training. You know, maybe not the equivalent of complete programs or degrees from degree-granting institutions, but nonetheless evidence of mastery of something substantial.

And this is, I would say, particularly true in tech, where people want to know new programming languages, they want to learn some of the latest technologies. The machine learning is an incredibly popular area now, and that course—which was first taught by our cofounder Andrew Ng—has had hundreds of thousands of students taken it using the credential. So I think we'll see more and more employer acceptance. And that will be a virtuous circle because it will generate more and more people seeking those credentials.

Success stories

We see success defined almost every day by the testimonies of the people who take these courses. One of the most gratifying parts of this job, and for everybody who works at Coursera is—is learners write in and tell us how these courses have changed their lives, how they enabled them to get a job, how they enabled them to get a promotion, how they enabled them to get to college.

We had a recent story from a young woman in Mumbai, who had no access, was not going to a quality school, did not have a good educational experience. But she took about 25 or 30 courses on Coursera. And that has led her to be sought after as a potential student at about a half a dozen liberal-arts colleges in the United States. Stories such as of a young man with a college education, but kind of a humanities major, in Africa, and with very little employment possibility. He took accounting courses from Wharton on Coursera and got a job at PricewaterhouseCoopers. 

¹ Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs).

Richard Levin is the CEO of Coursera. This interview was conducted by **Michael Chui**, a partner of the McKinsey Global Institute who is based in McKinsey's San Francisco office.