Aon Case Study: Creating a Global Leadership Culture

Aon Corporation provides risk management services, insurance and reinsurance brokerage, human capital and management consulting. Aon has approximately 500 offices worldwide, serving 120 countries with 59,000 employees. The decision in December 2009 to move away from Aon’s historically decentralized approach to running the companies that were under the Aon umbrella set the stage for Aon’s globally integrated approach to talent development.

Aon’s three strategic imperatives across the company are Distinctive Client Value, Unmatched Talent, and Operational Excellence. In 2011, Aon Talent Development collaborated with the CEO Greg Case, the Aon Executive Committee and the top 125 leaders in Aon’s extended leadership team to define the vision for Unmatched Talent, which includes three areas of focus: performance management, learning and development, and knowledge sharing.

Aon’s Talent Development organization worked with Harvard Business Publishing (HBP) to develop and support two of Aon Talent Development’s global talent development programs: Catalyst Global for emerging, high-potential leaders and the Advance Management Development Program for managers across Aon’s locations. The partnership has enabled Talent Development to integrate numerous leadership and management programs that were previously deployed by business units and/or regions to consistently develop colleagues across these units and locations.

Catalyst Global is a blended learning program focused on high potential emerging leaders. The program includes four modules over six months, executive coaching, assessment, and an Action Learning team experience. The program has created a group of leaders with a much clearer understanding of the breadth and depth of Aon’s business and the ability to lead it in the future. Advance is a program for new and existing managers. It is regionally delivered, blended (in person and virtual) in some regions, and virtual in others. The program includes four modules over six months on general management topics.

Both programs leverage the depth of HBP’s knowledge and skill in developing relevant curricula, and the two organizations work together in a partnership that takes the best that both have to offer to create stellar experiences that are lauded by participants.

The programs have enabled Talent Development to meet its goal of providing “Unmatched Talent” across the Aon organization. While these programs are relatively new, Aon expects to see continued positive feedback from participant surveys and a connection with higher engagement on annual company-wide surveys.

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<th>Challenge</th>
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<td>Solution</td>
<td>Build, with Harvard Business Publishing, two programs, Catalyst Global for emerging and high potential leaders and Advance for new managers that delivered a single view of leadership across the company.</td>
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This paper addresses Partnerships, a Dimension within the Execute Quadrant of the CorpU 12 Dimensions of Corporate Learning, and Cultural Outcomes, a Dimension within the Measurement Quadrant.
Aon Case Study: Creating a Global Leadership Culture

Aon Corporation provides risk management services, insurance and reinsurance brokerage, human capital and management consulting. Aon was created in 1982, when the Ryan Insurance Group, founded by Pat Ryan in the 1960s, merged with the Combined Insurance Company of America, founded by W. Clement Stone in 1919. In 1987, that company was renamed to Aon, a Gaelic word meaning oneness. Over time, the company acquired additional companies, most notably human capital consultancy Hewitt Associates, and their mix of services and products changed dramatically, requiring a rethinking of the critical skills needed by the company’s leaders in its 500 offices in 120 countries.

The Challenge

Aon’s three strategic imperatives, as laid out by CEO Greg Case, are Distinctive Client Value, Unmatched Talent, and Operational Excellence. In 2011, Aon Talent Development collaborated with Greg Case, the Aon Executive Committee and the top 125 leaders in Aon’s extended leadership team to define the vision for Unmatched Talent, which includes three areas of focus: performance management, learning and development, and knowledge sharing.

To deliver on the vision for Unmatched Talent, Talent Development needed to develop new programs that addressed the three areas of focus and brought the story of the company and its expectations for leadership to leaders at multiple levels and in many locations. It needed to support the Aon Leadership Model (Figure 1) and also needed to assure that the programs represented the best combination of external and internal thinking.

Figure 1. The Aon Leadership Model has Client Value and Impact as its core.

The Solution

Aon Talent Development is the learning unit at Aon. The 127 member Talent Development network is made up of 98 staff and direct reports plus 29 embedded business partners. Aon Talent Development’s structure is made up of corporate program owners, global Talent Development leaders aligned to the four business units (Aon Hewitt, Aon Benfield, Aon Risk Services, and Aon Services Corporation), and regional teams that manage local business relationships and execute program delivery.

Aon Talent Development delivers a wide range of Career Stage programs and curricula to meet the needs of
employees, managers and leaders at all levels (Figure 2). There are Signature Programs that address the needs of contributors making career transitions, Professional Skills programs that focus on core business skills, and Domain Knowledge programs that address the particular needs of each of the four major businesses at Aon.

Two of the Signature Program Curricula programs shown in Figure 2, Catalyst Global for high potential learning leaders and Advance for new and existing managers, were created in 2011 to meet the goals of the Unmatched Talent strategic priority at Aon. These two programs integrate numerous leadership and management programs that were previously deployed by business units and/or regions to consistently develop colleagues across Aon’s these units and locations. The programs improve the relationship and business skills necessary for leaders and managers to be successful in the company’s global business environment and demonstrate its commitment to investing in colleagues, which helps improve engagement.

**The Partnership with Harvard Business Publishing**

Aon wanted to partner with an external provider to bring an external point of view and leading-edge thinking to both Catalyst Global and Advance. Talent Development selected Harvard Business Publishing (HBP) after its review of leading business schools and determined it was the best partner given their content, thought leadership and willingness to work with Aon to develop blended programs with a mix of self-study, web-delivered lectures and discussions, and online discussion forums.

As the premier source for management practices, programs and content, Aon viewed HBP as the ideal partner. Thanks
to its long and successful relationships with corporate clients and government institutions and a previous relationship between HBP with Hewitt Associates, Aon felt sure that HBP could understand its learning objectives and work with Talent Development to develop and implement a customized portfolio of content and services uniquely suited to its leadership development and talent management strategies.

Harvard Business Publishing brought Aon a wide range of content from which to build Catalyst Global and Advance. Aon selected specific topics for each program’s modules that were relevant to the colleagues’ level and aligned the modules with the Aon Leadership Model (Figure 1, above). Harvard’s Leadership Direct portal was customized with an Aon specific interface for Advance and Catalyst Global participants (Figure 3). Participants use the portal to view content, participate in the discussion board, and view the directory of participants. “Activity Digest” emails send participants updates from the portal as often as they like. Participant “e-zines” keep participants up to date on the content and logistics. “E-zines” to managers of participants help managers stay up to date and work with participants to embed learning in everyday work.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 3. The Harvard Leadership Direct portal customized for Catalyst Global participants.

Aon’s alliance with Harvard Business Publishing is a partnership, as opposed to hiring a vendor for some piece of design or to deliver some set of programs. The partnership has been mutually beneficial to both organizations and has extended beyond a typical vendor relationship to demonstrate a commitment to collaboration, delivering more value to their mutual clients and as thought leaders in the industry. For example:

- Members of the Aon team have attended the annual HBP Partners’ Meeting for several years. This invitation-only meeting gathers top corporate learning clients to connect with top authors and thought leaders and network with their peers and provide input to inform development of future offerings.
• A representative from the Aon team participated on Harvard Business Publishing’s Partners’ Advisory Council in 2009-2010. Council Members inform product and service portfolio and pipeline, contribute to strategy and thought leadership, and review offerings.

• Aon has taken advantage of its global presence and hosted HBP events in its offices around the world, gathering leading learning and leadership development professionals to see new offerings, discuss challenges and share best practices.

• Based on Aon’s internal success, the two companies signed a commercial agreement that combines Harvard’s content and delivery with Aon Hewitt’s consulting services around leadership development strategy that’s been sold to several Fortune 500 companies.

The alliance is managed by dedicated Aon and HBP teams and is both strategic in the joint visioning of the program concepts and development of sessions, and tactical in that HBP manages the portal and access for Aon users, and Harvard faculty lead some of the program sessions. Aon could not have created, or as quickly delivered these programs, without the HBP alliance.

**Catalyst Global**

Catalyst Global is a blended learning program focused on high potential emerging leaders. The theme of the Catalyst Global experience is “Lead Aon: Know, Deliver, Inspire” and the goals for participants include the following:

• Raising the level of strategic thinking and subsequent opportunity for business development
• Improving level of self-awareness and confidence as a leader at Aon
• Supporting understanding of the wider Aon and the scope of working across organizational and national boundaries
• Developing teaming skills to improve performance and team building “on the job”

The program includes four modules over six months, executive coaching, assessment, and an Action Learning team experience. Two of the modules are delivered in person and led by Aon. The other two modules are delivered virtually and utilize the Harvard Direct portal and Harvard experts to lead the web-based discussions. An example of the schedule for one January to April program and its preliminary setup sessions can be seen in Figure 4.

![Figure 4. The Catalyst Global schedule.](image)

All participants take part in a 360-degree assessment and receive five hours of executive coaching though Aon’s partner, Kivler Communications. Geographically diverse, cross-business unit Action Learning teams tackle a business issue or revenue goal to research and make recommendations. Both of the projects are furthering knowledge sharing across Aon. Catalyst Global participants earn a joint Harvard-Aon certificate upon completion of the program. The first pilot included 60 participants; another 48 are in the second pilot that is underway. In 2012 two cohorts of 48 participants each will go through Catalyst Global.

**Advance**

Advance is a program for Leadership level colleagues that are new and existing managers. The program’s goals are to
“Advance” Aon’s efforts to provide high-quality products and services for clients and “Advance” management-level colleagues’ professional development and career. It is designed to build stronger all-around management capabilities to develop people, strengthen teams, deliver better business results, and increase client value. It is also designed to develop the skills and knowledge to help Aon meet its current and future business challenges. Modules feature virtual and in-person components and focus on the key dimensions of the Aon Leadership Model (Figure 5):

- Develop Unmatched Talent
- Develop Unmatched Teams
- Deliver Business Results
- Deliver Distinctive Client Value

![Advance Content — The Aon Leadership Model](image)

**Figure 5.** The Aon Leadership content in the Advance program for new and existing managers.

There are 200 participants in Advance from across the globe in each session. The program includes four modules that are delivered virtually over six months on general management topics. E-zines are sent to both participants and the managers of participants between modules to keep content front of mind and provide logistical reminders. Participants earn a joint Harvard-Aon certificate upon completion of the program.

**Results**

Two of the recommendations from Action Learning project teams in the first pilot are currently being implemented, an indication that the program is impacting Aon’s strategic goals.

Since the programs are so new, results of the employee engagement survey and other metrics are not yet available, but both Catalyst Global and Advance have been well received and are proving valuable to participants. Some comments
from Catalyst Global participants:

“The 2 most significant value driving features of this program [Catalyst Global] for me were - 1) Working with an external executive coach and 2) working with a multidimensional, multicultural and global project team. The lessons learnt from these two features were immensely valuable for me to expand my horizon, view and ability to work across global teams. I feel much more confident and ready to lead, train, coach and work with cross functional and high potential teams.”

“Catalyst Global has been an invaluable experience for a number of reasons: (1) It has provided significant insight into two of Aon’s other [business units] which, up until recently, I perceived to be non-germane to our business unit. Having had the time to speak with colleagues in Hewitt and ARS, this is certainly not the case and in fact we have already come up with a plan on how we can cross-pollinate and potentially generate new revenue. (2) The connection with Harvard Business Publishing provided a great opportunity to access relevant reading material and challenging business cases so I came away with some interesting ideas on how we might want to change our business proposition.

“The biggest learning from Catalyst Global for me has been the understanding of the scale of our organization and the reach. Its one thing to read on Knowledge Exchange (our intranet) that we are number one, but meeting people from each of the businesses and understanding the fact in action is something else. I look at my organization very differently now. The other big learning is, for any challenge that I may face, help is within our firm and a phone call/email away. Invaluable. Not many firms can boast about that! Last but not the least, the project team and the networking opportunities. I know people in every part of the organization. I should mention, that the coaching aspect is very useful too, especially if executives have not had any executive coaching before.”

The sections on innovation and unlocking client value were the two features of the program that struck a particular chord with me. Whether it is from a transactional, advisory, analytical or service point of view, we cannot afford to stand still as a company and clearly innovation is key to that point. Seeing client value in a wider context than the view I have from my team in London is something I will try hard to remember each time I interact with our clients in the future.”

Feedback from Advance participants likewise illustrates its value:

"The pace of the program was good, and the interactive modules gave us something to take back to work, implement and improve upon."

“I appreciated the dialogue that we were able to have with the other learners in the class. I felt validated to hear they were experiencing similar challenges to me and it was also interesting to learn from their experiences.”

“The program has been extremely beneficial and informative; especially the recent two day course where topics were discussed in an open forum and you could work through previous or approaching conversations/situations."

“I really enjoyed the activities/role playing in the facilitated portion of Advance. It was also very helpful to work across practices to see the viewpoint from colleagues from the Outsourcing practice [another business unit]."

The company expects to see continued positive feedback from participant surveys and expects to see a connection with higher engagement in the 2012 all employee engagement survey HBP has brought new thinking to Aon’s virtual learning approach with the use of streaming video discussions versus audio only conference calls; this is improving interaction.

Aon and Harvard Business Publishing’s innovative alliance supports two of Aon Talent Development’s global training programs and has helped Talent Development execute on the Unmatched Talent initiative with programs that will have a direct effect on the global leadership culture of the company. Both organizations look forward to a long partnership.