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Factors Affecting Employee Persistence in an Online Management Development Certificate Program

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Abstract

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MS, National – Louis University 2004

BBA, Averertt University 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

An important approach to prepare new managers for increased responsibility is participation in online management development programs; however, there is a lack of information about the factors that affect employee completion of these programs. This study addressed how chief executive officers (CEOs) can implement these programs to rapidly develop new managers who are qualified to serve in the leadership roles left behind by many retirees. This qualitative descriptive case study explored employees' perceptions about persistence in an online management development certificate program at a U.S. nonprofit organization. Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory and Rovai's composite persistence model provided the conceptual framework for the study. The research questions addressed how employees' perceptions of persistence in an online management development program affected success rates and what steps CEOs could take to incentivize employees to complete the program. A combination of 12 semi-structured interviews, program data, and member checking was used for the data collection. Data were analyzed using Yin's 6 steps and constant comparative data analysis methods. Key results indicated that student persistence in the online program was affected by purpose and meaning, coaching and support, course relevance, barriers, learning preferences, motivation and readiness; and incentivized by CEOs conveying their perceived value of the online program directly to employees. This research has implications for positive social change: CEOs can better understand the persistence factors employees need to prepare for and complete online management development certificate programs that support the transition to higher-level management positions.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family who supported me along my doctoral journey. First, to my mother, Lenora, who gave up so much of her life, and poured into me all of her support, wisdom, and unconditional love. Also, my stepfather, Ronald, who helped coach and guide me along the way. As well as my loving aunts, uncles, and cousins who have been guideposts and supporters cheering me on, from day one with whatever I chose to do. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my late grandparents, William and Velma, for always watching over and protecting me, even in heaven.

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I am also grateful to those who agreed to share their voices and provide insight from the employee's perspective about learning in an online environment. I also appreciate my few close friends who have been patient and understanding with my moods and absence, as I worked my way through the doctoral process. Finally, I thank God, for giving me the fortitude to endure and persist to the end. This journey has taught me to embrace the pain and fear of the unknown, and to push through the pain with laser focus and discipline so that I can grow and help others. Ultimately, my faith outweighs my fear. Thank you God, lesson learned.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Senior-level managers with experience in nonprofit organizations continue to retire at a rapid rate. As a result, critical positions go unfilled (Gallup Research, 2015; Hunt, 2014; Yawar & Seuring, 2017). To fill new positions, chief executive officers (CEOs) in organizations seek more information about how to support employees who participate in learning programs that use technology's efficiency and scalability to meet the critical demand of developing a pipeline of leaders (Association of Talent Development, 2014; Gallup Research, 2015). Given the rapid rate of retirement of senior-level managers, the learning style preferences of different generations, and the significance of how technology impacts learning, it is not surprising that the demand for management development training and education is on the rise (Association of Talent Development, 2014, 2016). Some researchers predicted that before 2020 more than 33 million jobs will become available because of workers who retire or permanently leave their jobs. In all, 63% of those jobs will require workers with marketable credentials, such as certifications, a college degree, or specialized training (Carnevale, Melton, Price, & Smith, 2015).

This trend in retirement of senior-level managers drives the need for new managers to have skills to manage people and maintain operations using various mediums, such as technology, to drive performance and business results (Brandon Hall Group, 2016). Consequently, managers of the future will need to develop skills in management that leverage using technology and that manage the constant changes that come with it (Spector, 2013; Yawar & Seuring, 2017). CEOs will need to favor managers

who have marketable certifications, degrees, or industry-required credentials that provide them with a grasp of management principles and processes to manage both technology and people. (Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Callanan, Perri, & Tomkowicz, 2017).

Social learning technologies, such as video, mobile, and online performance systems, are increasingly part of blended learning programs that provide greater ongoing support after the initial learning experience (Fayer, 2014). This trend in technology means that training and development are no longer one-time, face-to-face events. The face-to-face event is just the starting line on a continuum of learning. After the initial event, learners spend time adapting what they learned and use online performance tools to refresh and continue their learning experience (Agdas, Washington, Ellis, & Dickrell, 2013; Amaka, & Goeman, 2017; Mbuva, 2014).

Technological advancements in online learning management systems are continuing to improve (Yawar & Seuring, 2017). These improvements engage learners in a more interactive, dynamic, and simulated user experience. Researchers at the Association of Talent Development (2015) conducted a state-of-the-industry study to gain insight from learning management practitioners from different organizations; they discovered that most learning practitioners were using technological tools to enhance learning programs. The researchers are lacking insight into how to leverage these technological tools effectively to enhance learning and development from the end-user's perspective.

Researchers at the Brandon Hall Group (2016) reported that, of 302 organizations, more than 48% of them use various forms of technology-based mediums, including

online learning. Online learning is used as part of a learning strategy to train and develop managers. Despite its growing use, CEOs lack sufficient information to make informed decisions about investing in and supporting employees who participate in online learning programs. The lack of information about online learning is a concern because, as senior-level managers continue to retire at a fast pace, they leave positions open for new recruits. The impact on the organization results in a talent pipeline unprepared to assume the vacant management roles.

Researchers at Gallup conducted a study in 2015 and found that 56% of senior managers in organizations were considering retiring within five years (Gallup, 2015). When these senior-level managers leave, so do their years of knowledge, expertise, and organizational insight. Because many of these senior managers developed the strategies, systems, and processes, their legacy of knowledge, skills, and experience is essential to operations (Association of Talent Development, 2014, 2015, 2016; Callanan et al., 2017; Wood, 2014). As a result, CEOs in nonprofit organizations have reported the critical need to develop a new pool of managers by using the flexibility and scalability of online learning (Castillo, 2013; Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Gallup, 2015; Hunt, Langowitz, Roliaq, & Herbert-Maccaro, 2017).

Managers are invaluable to an organization because they are closest to planning, organizing, leading, and controlling the work on a daily basis (Fayol, 1949). When CEOs have an effective management development program in place, they create a pipeline of leaders prepared to assume new roles and continue operations seamlessly (Association of Talent Development, 2013, 2015, 2016; Mukherjee, 2014). This qualitative, descriptive

single case study focused on factors that affect management employees' motivation and

persistence to complete an employer-sponsored online management development

certificate program. The study is expected to provide insight for CEOs and academic

leaders about the factors that impact student persistence and motivation in online

certificate programs. This chapter includes a statement of the general problem, an

overview of the purpose of the study, the conceptual framework, the research design and

questions, and the significance of the study, and its implications for social change.

Problem Statement

The general management problem is that CEOs in nonprofit organizations are

facing a critical need to develop new managers with the skills needed to serve in

leadership roles left behind by the large number of retirees (Seiver & Troja, 2014). One

approach to help employees rapidly develop their management and leadership skills to fill

this gap is for CEOs to invest in online learning management development programs that

can be scaled across geographical boundaries effectively (Brandon Hall Group, 2016).

Since developing and administering online management development programs are

complicated (Blau & Drennan, 2017; Katane, Kristovska, & Katans, 2015), CEOs in

nonprofit organizations want to know more about implementing such programs. The

specific management problem is that CEOs' lack information about employees'

perceptions of online management development programs; CEOs need this information

to help them assess online options and make informed decisions about supporting

employees who participate in online learning programs (Sacchetti, & Tortia, 2013; Clark

& Wayment, 2017). The general population of the study included employees who worked

at GXI (pseudonym) and who participated in the GXI management development certificate program. Throughout the rest of this study, the GXI population is referred to as participants.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore employees' perceptions about the factors that impact motivation and persistence to attain an online management development certificate. Current research is lacking in qualitative case studies designed to gain insight into employees' perspectives regarding online employer-sponsored management development certificate programs. This qualitative descriptive case study provided a detailed description of management employee participants' self-described experiences in the online program. The description drew from material gathered through participant interviews, summary notes, and relevant program documentation. Study findings provided transferable insight to the CEOs at GXI who want to assess and make informed decisions about supporting and investing in employees who participate in online learning programs (Amaka & Goeman, 2017; Sacchetti, & Tortia, 2013). The study provides transferrable insight to learning management practitioners in other organizations and academic institutions offering similar employer-sponsored continuing education management programs (Association of Talent Development, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016; Gallup, 2016).

Background

The need for management and leadership development in the nonprofit sector is critical. The increased number of retiring workers, the workstyle and learning preferences

of different generations, and the significant impact of technology on learning, have created concerns among CEOs (Association of Talent Development, 2015; Brandon Hall Group, 2016). As a result, CEOs are facing a critical need to prepare new managers with relevant skills to serve in the leadership roles left behind by retirees and to adapt to managing using technology (Akkermans, & Tims, 2017; Gallup, 2015; Seiver & Troja, 2014; Yawar & Seuring, 2017).

Many managers are promoted into leadership roles based on their strong performance as project managers or technical experts in positions that did not require them to manage other people. The shift in moving from a technical to a more strategic supervisory or managerial role is difficult for some (Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Wood, 2014). Too often, CEOs do not provide effective development programs for high-potential employees and front-line supervisors. In addition, existing mid-level managers are not being prepared to assume the more senior roles needed to realize organizational goals (Amaka & Goeman, 2017; Association of Talent Development, 2014; Gallup, 2015).

According to Carnevale et al. (2015), employers want to invest time and money to develop managers to attain specific industry-based training and continuing education for immediate application at work. This investment enables them to move into more senior-level positions within organizations. Sacchetti and Tortia (2013) presented information about the need for today's managers to have skill sets that enable them to understand, communicate, and engage workers in different generations, regardless of the industry. These skill sets require specialized training and development using personal and

technological mediums aligned with different learning styles. This enables employers to help managers engage and to retain them as employees over time.

Managers add value to enhancing employee performance by knowing how to engage employees from different generations with different learning and work styles in organizational structures (Callanan et al., 2017; Gallup, 2015). Heorhiadi, La Venture, and Conbere (2014) noted that many organizations operate with flat-line, distributed structures that require learning to be effective and to have the bandwidth to scale across different geographical areas. Online learning is useful and flexible enough to reach across geographical boundaries and to minimize cost while effectively improving employee performance (Agdas et al., 2013; Amaka & Goeman, 2017; Chambers, 2013; Clotfelter, Ladd, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2013; Seiver & Troja, 2014). The study was needed to address the problem of the lack of information about assessing and supporting employees who participate in online learning management development programs.

The Learning Management Context

For the purpose of this study, I use the term *learning management* to refer to learning and development in organizations and *learning management practitioner* to refer to those who serve as designers, facilitators, and program managers within the learning management domain. These terms are used specifically to align with my degree concentration: Applied Management and Decision Sciences with a focus on learning management.

If learning management practitioners in organizations are not adaptable in providing options for learning management, then executive leaders may have to contend

with issues regarding employee development, retention, and organizational growth (Barczyk, Hixon, Buckenmeyer, & Ralston-Berg, 2017; Cecilia, Rodriguez, & Armellini, 2013; Chitkushev, Vodenska & Zlateva, 2014; Johnson, 2015). As a result, learning management practitioners are adjusting their more traditional methods of organizational learning to blend with the flexibility and accessibility that technology provides (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Spector, 2013; Tonsing-Meyer, 2013;). Katane et al. (2015) advanced the notion that learning management practitioners should leverage current design practices to blend internal training with external continuing education to equip employees with the specific information, resources, and skills required within the organization. Hunt (2014) added that the benefits of developing managers from within is that both the manager and the organization can save time and money in recruitment costs and retention. Sacchetti and Tortia (2013) concluded that, because of the rapid changes in technology, regular updates are needed for employees and managers as the technology used in organizations continues to evolve. The constant changes in technology also require managers to adjust to the technology, as necessary, without impacting employee performance in producing results (Callanan et al., 2017).

Katane et al. (2015) expressed the need for learning management practitioners to adjust their practices and solutions to stay relevant in meeting the individual learning styles and needs of their employees. Bryant and Bates (2015) added that learning management practitioners in leading organizations are creating a blended approach of educating and developing managers by increasing the use of innovative technology along with traditional methods. Social learning technologies and online performance systems

are increasingly a part of blended learning programs that appeal to different learning styles and provide ongoing support for learners after the initial learning experience (Association of Talent Development, 2014; Brandon Hall Group, 2016; Brewer, Rick, & Grondin, 2017). Online performance systems provide a medium for managers to effectively communicate anytime, anywhere, and across geographical boundaries. They allow managers the opportunity to share lessons learned and best practices as they apply their learning within the workplace. Although online performance systems provide a flexible and accessible medium to enhance communication and learning in organizations, Fayer (2014) indicated there is a gap in the literature regarding the effective use of online systems that are embedded in an organizational learning program. CEOs want to know more about supporting employees who participate in online learning programs (Sacchetti, & Tortia, 2013), in order to help drive engagement, performance, and retention (Carnevale et al., 2015).

Many full-time working adults who study online at academic institutions struggle to navigate and learn within the online environment (Butz, Stupnisky, Peterson, & Majerus, 2014). Compared to students at traditional schools, online students may have the added hurdle of dealing with feelings of loneliness stemming from a lack of connection to other humans (Atchley, Wingenbach, & Akers, 2013; Johnson, 2015; Landeta, Barrutia, Hoyos, & Araujo, 2015). Online students can also feel frustrated because of their own perceived ability to perform in an online environment. (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Wang, Shannon, & Ross, 2013). Above all, some online students may

lose their motivation to advance because they have no one immediately available to help them make sense of their work as they progress through courses.

Cho and Heron (2015) argued that it is taken for granted that managers have enough life experience to take on most challenges they meet in the workplace. The fact that some adults have expansive life experiences does not always mean they can apply their experiences to online learning. Students who are new to online learning benefit from having an effective orientation about learning within a new environment (Barczyk et al., 2017; Mensch, 2009). Students also benefit from having a personal coach to help them navigate online systems and access resources that support their learning experience (Brewer et al., 2017; Johnson, 2015). Even with student support systems in place, more information is needed about what helps motivate online students to persist from program commencement through its completion and beyond (Carnevale et al., 2015; Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016).

Since 2016, awareness and access to online education have resulted in significant growth. For example, 72% of higher education institutions offer some form of online courses and, as of 2016, an estimated 6.7 million students had enrolled in an online course. The average yearly increase in students taking an online course was 217, 275 (Allen & Seaman, 2016). This growth of online enrollment is partly a result of technology continually evolving to make online learning easier to use and more adaptable for students to learn (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Allen & Seaman, 2013; Hrastinski & Stenbom, 2013;). Although online learning shows a growth in annual enrollment at institutions and in organizations, it is a challenge to keep students motivated and engaged

in a program so they persist through graduation (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Brandon Hall

Group, 2016).

The GXI Management Development Certificate Program

The management development program referenced in this study was an online

program for front-line supervisors and managers sponsored by GXI () in collaboration

with Hamilton Community College (a pseudonym). GXI is a nonprofit organization

whose mission is to help people with disabilities and barriers to employment find jobs.

The GXI organization was chosen because the learning management practitioners

developed and administered the online management development program and it was

aligned with the focus of this research study. The program was exclusively for GXI

employees who were new to managing others, had experience in managing others, or

aspired to manage others in the future. The development program started in 2011 in

response to a GXI internal need to develop managers to assume new roles as senior

leaders in the organization. The program is a blended-model learning program that uses

face-to-face interaction and leverages technology as part of the strategy to develop front-

line supervisors and managers within the organization.

The program provided management employees with the foundational

management skills to understand and work in the GXI nonprofit environment.

Management employees who completed the certificate earned 18 transferrable college

credits to accepting institutions. In addition, certificate completion allowed participants to

meet the criteria to participate in internal scholarship programs to further their education.

The management development program used a blended approach to engage management employees in four online management development classes and two face-to-face classes as part of in-house training to earn an accredited certificate. Courses focused on principles of management, consumer management, business communications, managing and valuing workplace diversity, social entrepreneurship, and nonprofit management. Table 1 displays the course titles and credits for each course.

Table 1

Management Development Course Titles and Credits

Course Title	Credits Earned and Course Location
MGMT 275 – Business Strategies	3 credit hours – Hamilton Community College
MGMT 111 – Business and the Environment	3 credit hours – Hamilton Community College
MGMT 162 – Business Communication	3 credit hours – Hamilton Community College
MGMT 142 – Principles of Management	3 credit hours –GXI by a GXI certified management development instructor
MGMT134 – Principles of Consumer Management	3 credit hours –GXI by a GXI certified management development instructor
SEMC 231 – Social Entrepreneurship	3 credit hours – Hamilton Community College

Enrollees earned college credit as follows:

- Four different courses, worth 3 credit hours, each selected from among the Hamilton Community College online courses designed for building business acumen working at a social enterprise organization;

- one course worth 3 credit hours for the GXI principles in management course (facilitated at a GXI organization by a certified GXI trainer/adjunct instructor);

- one course worth 3 credit hours for the GXI donation course (facilitated at a GXI organization by a certified GXI trainer/adjunct instructor).

Hamilton Community College instructors taught the online courses and GXI adjunct instructors who were certified to train and facilitate the management development programs taught face-to-face courses. GXI maintained and approved all participant records, program documentation and Hamilton Community College issued the certificates. The credit earned was transferrable to institutions accepting it toward the next level of education.

The management development program commenced in the fall of 2011 with 17 participants in the cohort. Of those in this first cohort, two students (12%) completed the certificate program. In the fall of 2012, 26 participants enrolled in the program. Of those 26 participants, eight participants (27%) completed the certificate program. In the fall of 2013, 15 participants enrolled in the program. Of those 15 participants, four participants (28%) completed the program. [keep with the following paragraph]

In the fall 2014, 23 participants enrolled in the program. Of those 23 participants, four participants (17%) completed the program. In the fall of 2015, 12 participants enrolled and only 2 (17%) completed the program. Given the low completion rates, the GXI leaders decided to stop additional cohorts until they could learn more about the

reasons for the low persistence factors and completion rates. Table 2 summarizes the enrollment and completion data by cohort.

Table 2

GXI Management Development Certificate Program Enrollment and Completion Data by Cohort

Year	Term	No. of participants enrolled	No. of participants Who completed program	No. of participants in program
2011	Fall	17	2 (12%)	0
2012	Fall	26	8 (31%)	0
2013	Fall	15	4 (27%)	0
2014	Fall	23	4 (17%)	0
2015	Fall	12	2 (17%)	0

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

RQ 1: How do participants' perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online management development certificate program affect their program completion rates?

RQ 2: What steps can CEOs take towards incentivizing participants to persist in completing the program?

Researchers who conduct descriptive case studies present a rich, comprehensive description of an event, situation, or phenomenon. When researchers write accounts of an event or phenomenon, the information is detailed, specific, and includes the context of

the situation, which may shed light on why participants responded the way they did about their experience (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2014). Providing a comprehensive description allows readers to obtain a detailed description of the perceptions of management employee students' self-described experiences in the online certificate program. The descriptions drew from materials gathered through participant interviews, summary notes, and relevant program documentation.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that underpinned this descriptive single case study included Rovai's composite persistence model (CPM) for online learning and Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory. Rovai (2003) defined persistence as continuing actions toward accomplishing a goal despite the presence of obstacles. The CPM incorporates multiple factors related to persistence in online learning, and these ideas apply to what some participants may encounter as they progress through the online management development programs. The CPM was used in this study to address participant persistence in online learning and to identify factors prior to and after admission. Factors that may impact participants both internally, while matriculating through the management development program, and externally, while managing social support systems, to help them persist through the program (Rovai, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2012; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Issues prior to admission may include participant characteristics such as ethnicity, age, intellectual development, previous academic performance, and preparation. Participant skills during the program include factors such as computer literacy, information literacy, time management, reading and writing, and computer-

based interaction. Rovai (2003) suggested that because online participants work independently, it is important that they have the literacy skills to know when they need more information to support their learning and that they have the ability to locate, evaluate, and apply information appropriately. Once admitted to the program, issues may include internal factors that impact participants while they matriculate into the online learning environment. These include issues related to orientation to online learning, academic integration, coaching and support, clarity and consistency of program, course relevancy, learning community, learning and teaching styles, self-efficacy, accessibility to and use of university support services, and goal commitment. External factors include those that may impact students outside the learning environment, such as family commitments, demands from work, finances, and unexpected life events such as a job loss, death in the family, and moving.

Rovai (2012) stated that when online participants know how to function in, and manage the demands of online learning, participants can more effectively handle family and work demands, which, in turn, leads to greater persistence in the program. Ultimately, most online students make persistence decisions as they address internal factors while in the program. Rovai's model provided a flexible framework for examining multiple factors that impacted persistence as students matriculated through their online management development program. Further, the flexibility in the CPM is suitable for case study research because, according to Yin (2014), case studies use multiple sources of evidence, which allow researchers to examine a broad span of evidence to support findings and build stronger cases. Rovai's CPM is a good

complement to Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory in that the CPM model specifically addressed internal and external factors that focused on the ability to balance family, work, collegial support, and motivation.

Online learners need motivation to persist in an online learning management development program. Herzberg (1976) contributed the motivation-hygiene theory to examine the question: What do people want and need for satisfaction in their work? Although the motivation-hygiene theory is mostly used in organizational development studies (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013), the theory provided a comprehensive framework for greater understanding of how online learners start and stay motivated to persist in an online management development program. In particular, the components of this theory focused on the motivational factors (internal needs) and hygiene factors (external environment) to provide a framework for exploring what students needed to help them stay motivated to persist in online management development programs.

Herzberg (1976) explained that *motivational factors* are intrinsic to the actual work that keeps employees interested, enthused, and engaged. Some motivational factors include achievement, recognition, actual work, and the need for personal growth. Likewise, in the online learning environment, Johnson (2015) asserted that students need constantly to assess their reasons for pursuing higher education and to find elements in their course work that align with things they find useful in some aspect of their home or work life. Herzberg further emphasized that *hygiene factors* are areas extrinsic to the actual work employees perform and, instead, focus on conditions in the work environment that impact employees being motivated in their work. Some of these factors

include work conditions, salary and job status/opportunity, company policy and benefits,

and working relationships. Youngju, Jaeho, and Taehyun (2013) noted that the

independent nature of online learning may cause some participants to feel isolated and

alone. Herzberg's focus on the external need for developing working relationships

provided a framework for students and advising staff to help students identify loneliness

and isolation and provided workable solutions to help them stay motivated as they

persisted in the program (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Herzberg (1976) suggested that

individuals must have clarity on, and commitment to, the benefits of pursuing a goal.

Clarity on their purpose for pursuing an education helps motivate online students to

persist in their program. Motivation is useful when a participant aspires for, or is moving

toward, another level of personal or professional development.

The concepts and theories used in the conceptual framework for this study

provided the focus to address the research questions on the internal needs, the external

environment, and the factors needed to get students motivated to persist in the online

management development certificate program. Whereas Rovai's (2003) composite model

addressed internal and external factors related to the online learning program, Herzberg's

(1976) motivation-hygiene theory focused on the psychological needs that help motivate

a student to persist in an online learning program despite the presence of obstacles. In

Chapter 2, I discuss more detail about the conceptual framework and how it will be used

to guide this study.

Nature of the Study

Stake (2010) advanced the notion that two basic realities exist within every human activity. One is the reality of the personal experience. The other is the reality of the collective experience. What one experiences individually may be different from what another person experiences about the same event. One person's experience is his or her reality. Qualitative researchers want to gain insight from the individual experience to better understand how things work and what the experience was like (Stake, 2010). Unlike quantitative designs used to test theory and validate information with statistics, qualitative design seeks to build a detailed picture represented by multiple dimensions and perspectives of a problem or situation (Bryman, 2012; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The qualitative method seeks to provide understanding and meaning that people give to their personal experiences. Therefore, I used a qualitative descriptive case study.

Data saturation is related to the participants' depth of knowledge. I had the ability to find repetition in the data by interviewing 12 students who either completed or did not complete the online management development program. With descriptive case studies, design data saturation occurs by asking multiple participants the same questions (Yin, 2014). The sample for this study, 12 students, allowed for the greatest chance to obtain significant results from the insights of students who completed and those who did not complete the management development program. A combination of semi-structured interviews, archival data, and member checking served to establish credible interpretation of the collected data. I used Yin's data analysis methods to code the interviews, develop themes, and describe the relevant persistence factors. Qualitative research can also add

situational examples to the reader's experience (Stake, 2010). In other words, qualitative research complements the statistical results derived from quantitative studies because it provides understanding and context to statistical outcomes. Stake (2010) asserted that "Whether a statistic is valid or not, any interpretation based on statistics alone is an invalid interpretation" (p. 29).

Merriam & Tisdale (2016) and Yin (2014) indicated that qualitative case study research provides intensive, thick description and empowers individuals to share their stories. Thus, a qualitative case study was selected for the research study to answer the central question: How do employees' perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online management development certificate program affect their success rate in completing the program? Given the nature of the problem and the focus of the research questions, the case study methodology was appropriate.

Definitions

Attrition. Students that drop or leave an online course or program before completing it (Rovai, 2003).

Distance education. Education that is offered at a distance to students in different geographical regions across the globe (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Learning management practitioner. Those who serve as designers, facilitators, and program managers within the learning management domain (Association of Talent Development, 2014).

Learning management. The learning and development practices that happen in organizations (Association of Talent Development, 2014).

Learning style. The preferred way students like to process, evaluate, and interpret learning content (Association of Talent Development, 2014).

Motivation. The general desire and internal willingness for someone to take action toward a specific goal (Herzberg, 1976).

Non-traditional students. Students over the age of 24, living off campus, attending part-time, possibly working part-time or full-time, having other competing responsibilities such as children, spouse, or ailing parent (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

Online management development certificate program. An online certificate program specifically designed for employees who register as students in an online management development certificate program offered at a community college in the United States (Brandon Hall Group, 2016).

Online engagement. Students who use, share their perspectives, and collaborate with other students and instructors participating in the program management system (Association of Talent Development, 2014).

Online performance tool. The tools used for online course management such as e-mail, discussions, assignments, assessments, and grades (Spector, 2013).

Persistence. The continuing action an online student takes despite the presence of obstacles (Rovai, 2003).

Nonprofit/Social enterprise organizations. An organization that has as its purpose to make a difference in communities by offering social services (e.g. training and education; temporary shelter, job preparation) that are partially funded through profits

earned through a product the organization offers and with some government grant funds

(Doherty, Haugh, & Lyon, 2014).

Traditional students. Students between the ages of 18 and 24 who attend college

on campus on a full-time basis, usually following high school, and who live on or near

campus (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

Assumptions

Assumptions are circumstances or facts that are not verifiable or testable within

the scope of this study (Maxwell, 2013). I assumed that the participants responded in an

open and honest way to the open-ended, semi-structured interview questions. I also

assumed that the case study design was appropriate for capturing participants'

perceptions about their experience with the online program, and permitted disparate

views to be voiced, ultimately informing data analysis and the study conclusions. These

assumptions provided information to explore the participants' individual experiences

about factors affecting persistence in an online management development certificate

program.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study included GXI participants who matriculated through at

least one online course or completed the entire online management development program

between the years 2011 and 2015. This approach of specifying a recent timeframe (i.e.,

2011–2015) was to ensure that participants provided clear and accurate answers to the

research questions. The GXI organization was chosen because the learning management

practitioners developed and administered an online management development program

that aligned with the factors of motivation and persistence in this research study. The results of the study provided CEOs and academic leaders with greater insight to better understand and make informed decisions about supporting employees who participate in online learning programs (Sacchetti, & Tortia, 2013).

Delimitations are the factors that could prevent researchers from claiming that findings from a qualitative case study are true for all online learners regardless of place, space, and time (Maxwell, 2013). For this proposed case study design, I engaged available and consenting participants: those who completed the online management development certificate program and those who had not. The self-described experiences of these participants are exclusive to the GXI group. Therefore, this limits transferability. However, because of the findings included in the literature review and the proposed conceptual framework, the insight from this group of online learners could be helpful to learning management practitioners in similar organizations.

Limitations

The limitations of this study included taking into consideration all participants' viewpoints, favorable and unfavorable, about their experience with the online management development certificate program as relevant and appropriate for use in the study once the students confirmed their responses. Some of the students provided additional responses after they reviewed their interview transcripts. Another limitation of the study was the small sample size. The homogeneity of the sample posed a limitation because I do not know if students in other online programs or in other organizations may experience and report similar experiences. According to Maxwell (2013) and Merriam &

Tisdale (2016), the findings from case studies may not generalize to other populations. However, the strength in case study research findings is that it may provide a baseline for insight and understanding to inform future research, industry practices, and personal decisions (Yin, 2014).

<div align="center">

Significance of the Study

</div>

The study provided insight for future researchers to give information to CEOs in other organizations that invest in employer-sponsored online continuing education management development programs. This study was significant because it provided information that may help learning management practitioners and academic instructors create or enhance online learning programs that keep students engaged and motivated to persist until graduation. The study was also significant in helping leaders assess their current online management development program processes and procedures. This effort could result in their making adjustments to the way learning management practitioners provide guidance that support students in completing the online management development programs.

Significance to the Practice

Learning management practitioners who do not invest time and resources in evaluating and adjusting their learning management practices to accommodate different learning needs may have to work through performance issues that may hinder organizational growth (Association of Talent Development, 2014; Hunt, 2014). As a result, learning management practitioners are supplementing traditional methods of learning in favor of more effective and scalable solutions that often involve technology

such as online learning (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Allen & Seaman, 2016; Association of Talent Development, 2014; Kirmizi, 2015). The significance to the practice is that this study provided learning management practitioners with insight to help them assess and make more informed decisions about investing in and supporting employees who participate in online learning programs. In addition, the study provided academic leaders with insight from the participant's perspective about factors to improve administering online manage development continuing education to students in employer-sponsored programs.

Significance to the Theory

A review of academic literature reveals a void of research on the participant's perspective of factors that impacted their persistence in an online learning program and that used Rovai's (2003) composite persistence model and Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory as the conceptual framework. This study helped fill that void by adding credibility to the use of concepts from Rovai's CPM and Herzberg's (1966) motivation-hygiene theory to guide and inform future research studies. As technology in online learning continues to evolve, learning management practitioners may benefit from research findings that inform practice (Landeta et al., 2015). The concepts used in the conceptual framework of this study that affect student persistence in online certificate programs support learning management practitioners with designing organizational structures that aid in increased numbers of students completing their educational programs.

Significance to Social Change

Results from the study were expected to impact social change at the individual and organizational levels. Positive social change may occur at the individual level for students to assess persistence factors needed to prepare for and complete online programs. This could result in employees having a greater opportunity to gain a marketable certification and expanded skills that enable them to earn higher wages and a better standard of living. At the organizational level, positive social change may occur because the findings provided leaders with insight about assessing options to invest and support students in online learning certificate programs as a strategy for preparing a pipeline of leaders to assume new leadership roles within the organization (Trantom & Reid, 2013).

Summary and Transition

Rovai (2007) noted that, because of government regulations and oversight of retention and graduation rates in online learning programs, a growing need exists to provide more research-based evidence about learning outcomes and value in online programs. CEOs are facing a critical need to prepare and develop a pipeline of new managers. However, CEOs lack sufficient understanding about employees' perceptions of online management development programs to help them assess and make informed decisions about supporting employees who participate in such a program (Sacchetti, & Tortia, 2013; Seiver & Troja, 2014; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2017). Additionally, they want to know more about the employee's perceptions of matriculating in an online learning management development program. The central question that guided this

research was: How do employee's perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online management development certificate program affect their success rate in completing the program? The secondary question was: What steps can CEOs take towards incentivizing employees to persist in completing the program.

Learning management practitioners continually look for information to help them assess and make informed decisions about enhancing and supporting employees who participate in online learning programs. Gaining insight into the factors that affect employee persistence and motivation of matriculating in online learning management development programs provided information to help learning management practitioners make adjustments that support participants in completing programs. Through this study, I expected to add to the existing body of online learning management and decision-making research.

In Chapter 1, I presented the research problem, the need for qualitative case studies on the topic of persistence and motivation in online management development programs, the purpose of the study, and the contributions the study made to the field of management literature. Additionally, I introduced the conceptual framework of motivation and persistence outlined by Herzberg (1966) and Rovai (2003), which is integrated in the literature review presented in Chapter 2. The two-pronged conceptual framework provided the support and foundation to understand both motivation and persistence in online learning and management development programs.

Chapter 2 includes a review of current literature on the background of the research problem followed by a description of the research strategies used to search

current literature on both the general topic of motivation and persistence and the specific

factors that impact student motivation and persistence in online learning. The analysis,

assessment, and in-depth evaluation of this current relevant literature support the

conceptual framework that provided the foundation for this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The general management problem was that leaders are facing a critical need to develop new managers with the skills needed to serve in leadership roles left behind by the large number of retirees (Association of Talent Development, 2015; Gallup, 2016; Seiver & Troja, 2014). One learning platform that may help new managers develop leadership skill is online learning, a platform that is flexible and scales across geographical boundaries (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Lowenthal, Snelson, & Dunlap, 2017; Spector, 2013). The specific management problem was that despite the growing use of online learning as a strategy to develop managers, CEOs lack sufficient information about employees' perceptions of online management development programs, perceptions that would help them assess and make informed decisions about supporting employees who participate in online learning programs (Cochrane, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Landeta et al., 2015; Park & Hee Jun, 2014). The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore employees' perceptions about the factors that impact motivation and persistence to attain an online management development certificate program.

Researchers have conducted quantitative studies that predicted the probability of learners' success in online learning environments. These studies contributed to an understanding of the factors that demonstrate whether online learning is suitable for some students (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Cecilia et al., 2013; Cerino, 2014). Other researchers (Beaudoin, 2015; Butz et al., 2014; Johnson, 2015) conducted studies that focused on the effectiveness of online learning using mixed methods. These studies reported differences in program completion, attitudes towards the online experience, and the overall

comparison between motivation, persistence, and engagement in traditional and online programs.

Current research is lacking in qualitative case studies designed to gain insight into students' perspectives about employer-sponsored online management development certificate programs. As a result, researchers have called for more studies that provide information about factors that impact student motivation to persist in completing online learning certificate programs (Hart, 2014; Hrastinski & Stenbom, 2013; Johnson, 2015; Juszkiewicz, 2015; Simon, Aulls, Dedic, Hubbard, & Hall, 2015; Stewart, Doo Hun, & JoHyun, 2015; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). In this chapter, I review the background on management development and online learning and then I analyze current literature related to student persistence and motivation in online learning certificate programs, followed by a review and synthesis of studies related to qualitative research and case study method. I conclude the chapter with a summary of major themes from the literature review and describe how this study filled a gap in the literature and extended knowledge in the learning management discipline.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search strategy covered several subject areas and terms related to online learning, motivation, persistence, management development, and technology. Terms researched included various combinations of the following key terms: *technology, motivation, persistence, technology and training, distance learning, workplace learning, workplace and technology, online student retention, online student engagement, online learning success factors, online learning barriers and effective online learning practices*.

A wide range of interdisciplinary research is presented in the fields of management, education, business education, healthcare, nonprofit management, and psychology. I selected articles on research conducted over the past decade with a focus on the years 2013 to the present. The search for information involved reviewing abstracts to determine articles relevant to the factors that impact student persistence and motivation in online learning.

The process led to identifying just over 300 articles. The articles were sorted analyzed, and synthesized with relevance to my study's conceptual framework, methodology, and research questions: How do employees' perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online management development certificate program affect students' their program completion rates? And, secondarily: What steps can CEOs take towards incentivizing students to persist in completing the program?

The results were organized into the following topics related to persistence

- Purpose and meaning in online learning,

- meaning and persistence,

- learning preferences and persistence,

- online course relevance

- coaching and support systems; and

- barriers to student persistence.

The matrix headings included author, date, and title, research questions, study methodology, and gaps the study addressed. It also included a brief overview on the research theory that formed the foundation of the article, a description of the focus of the

study, and a summary of results. I used current dissertations and articles to locate additional peer-reviewed articles.

The library resources I used included the following databases: Google Scholar, Sage Premier, Academic Search Complete, Computer Database, ERIC, PsychINFO, ABI/INFORM Complete, Business Source Complete, SocINDEX, and Education Research Complete. I also used the Library of Congress.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework to guide this research study included Rovai's (2003) composite persistence model (CPM) for online learning and Herzberg's (1976) motivation-hygiene theory. In this case study, I explored internal and external factors that helped participants stay motivated to persist in an online learning management development certification program as well as barriers that may have caused them to not complete the program. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework of the proposed study.
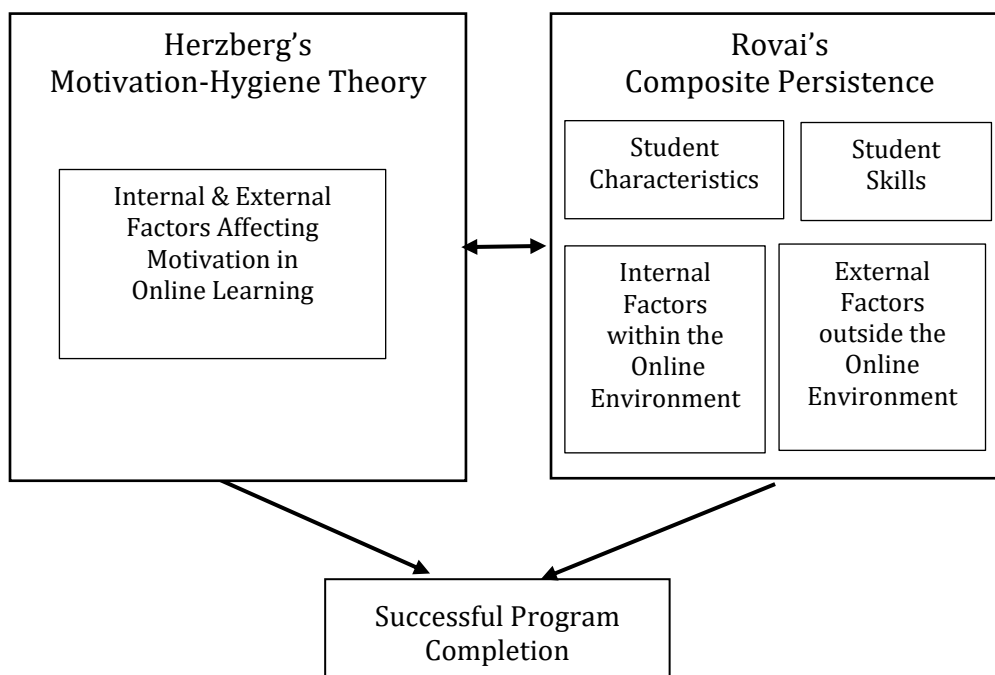
Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the proposed study.

Rovai (2003) defined persistence as having the ability to continue moving forward towards accomplishing a goal despite the presence of obstacles. Rovai (2003) built on the work of Bean and Metzner (1985) and Tinto (1975) to address factors that were empirically identified to promote persistence in a traditional classroom-based environment. Rovai's, (2003) CPM model extended the concepts established by Bean and Metzner (1985) to apply to online learning environments.

Rovai's (2003) CPM model incorporated two factors that contribute to students deciding whether to study in an online learning environment prior to participating in an online learning program. The first factor is *student characteristics* such as ethnicity, age, intellectual development, previous academic performance, and preparation. It is taken for

granted that adults have enough life experience to take on most challenges at hand

(Bratton & Gold, 2012; Fayer, 2014; The fact that some adults have expansive life

experiences does not always mean their background, characteristics, and experiences are

applicable to online learning (Costello & Welch, 2014; Fontenot, Mathisen, Carley, &

Stuart, 2015; Tina, Henri, Elina, & Raija, 2015). Certain student characteristics lead to a

higher risk of attrition (Rovai, 2003). The second factor is *student skills* such as computer

literacy, information literacy, time management, reading, writing, and student

engagement in an asynchronous environment. Petty and Thomas (2014) used factors from

the CPM model in a study that defined issues that addressed persistence in adult learning

programs. They concluded that certain student skills may lead to less risk of attrition and

potential success in an online learning setting. Stewart et al. (2015) used elements from

the CPM model in a longitudinal study to assess factors that predicted student persistence

in online learning and found that students need to better understand what matriculating in

online learning is like so that they can make a more informed decision before entering

such programs.

Once students are admitted to an online program of study, Rovai (2003) asserted

that there are certain *internal factors* within and *external factors* outside the online

learning environment that may contribute to student's motivation, engagement, and desire

to persist in an online learning program. The internal factors usually occur once students

learn what is expected and how to engage in the program. The internal factors may

include: academic integration, coaching, support, clarity and consistency of program

requirements, course relevancy, learning community, learning and teaching styles, self-

efficacy, accessibility to and use of university services, and goal commitment. The external factors usually impact the motivation and desire of students to persist in an online program. The factors may vary and are unique to each student's situation. The *external factors* may include: family commitments, demands from work, loss of a job, time it takes to find a new job, financial aid, unexpected life events (including health), and moving from one place to another.

Rovai's (2003) CPM provided a model framework for examining multiple factors that may impact students' persistence as they matriculate through the online learning management development program examined in this study. However, for students to persist in an online learning management development program, they need motivation. Motivational theories provide a system for understanding what is necessary to motivate people to act or move forward towards a goal. Rovai's (2003) CPM model complements Herzberg's (1976) motivation-hygiene theory to form the conceptual framework for this study.

Herzberg (1976) developed and applied the motivational-hygiene theory to examine questions: What intrinsic and extrinsic things do people need to be motivated in their work? How can those concepts be applied towards pursuing any goal?

The concept of intrinsic *(*internal) and extrinsic (external) motivation is still used in organizations today (Johnson, 2015). Herzberg (1976) asserted that people want engagement in meaningful work that they enjoy, and they want a workplace that will provide an element of growth and mental stimulation. Likewise, in online learning

students want to learn in programs that provide them with knowledge and useful credentials to improve their standard of living. They also want to engage in online environments that encourage participation, appreciation of their contribution and some evidence that they are growing (Bonvillian & Singer, 2013; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2017). Table 3 displays the elements of motivation-hygiene theory.

Table 3

Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Factors

Motivation Factors	Hygiene Factors
Achievement	Working conditions
Recognition	Salary and job status
Actual work	Company policy and benefits
Need for personal growth	Working relationship recognition

Herzberg (1976) explained that motivational factors are intrinsic to the actual work that keeps employees interested, enthused, and engaged. He went on to explain that hygiene factors are areas that are extrinsic to the work and involve the work environment. If the work environment is lacking, it can cause dissatisfaction on the job. Improving the environment (regarding hygiene) to make circumstances better for the employee does not necessarily lead to workers' satisfaction and motivation in the work itself. The next section describes the components of Herzberg's intrinsic factors and how the factors align with motivating students in online learning.

Internal Motivation Factors

Herzberg, (1976) described intrinsic factors that helped motivate people in their work: achievement, recognition, actual work, and responsibility, Herzberg (1976) described *achievement* as the successful completion of a job and the positive feelings that result from it. Some online students need to manage competing priorities that include handling chores at home, preparing dinner, and helping their families while still managing to get their assignments completed (Atchley et al., 2013; Blau & Drennan, 2017; Wood, 2014; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). Students may have uncertainty about how to complete their online assignments with no immediate access to university staff or fellow students for clarity (Costello & Welch, 2014; Robinson, Phillips, Sheffield, & Moore, 2015; Richardson, Yukiko, Lv, & Caskurlu, 2017). Despite the challenges, online students learn to work through the uncertainty and manage to complete assignments. While they may not know the outcome (grade), they may experience a sense of accomplishment and relief for completing the assignment on time (Robinson, Kilgore, & Warren, 2017; Uyulgan & Akkuzu, 2014;).

Herzberg (1976) described *recognition* as acknowledgement for work well done. Because recognition builds self-esteem and because it is given based on some level of achievement, it can result in higher levels of job satisfaction. Recognition can come from peers, supervisors, customers, and subordinates; it helps build community and a sense of competence among peers. Likewise, when online students receive positive responses from a discussion thread post or from another student or the instructor, it helps to keep

students engaged and motivated (Chien, Wu, & Hsu, 2014; Costello & Welch, 2014; Krause, Portolese, & Bonner, 2017; Xiao, 2010).

Herzberg (1976) described *actual work* as that which a person does that feels rewarding—with or without recognition. For some online students, simply having the opportunity to pursue education in a flexible learning environment, such as online learning, is enough to keep students engaged in the learning process. Shillingford & Karlin (2013) indicated that, if students can keep in mind the reason they chose to pursue their education, actual work will help to keep them motivated to do the school work and continue matriculating through the program with or without recognition.

Herzberg (1976) viewed motivation from the lens of hedonistic principles that suggest that people want to avoid pain and seek satisfaction. The process of seeking satisfaction through working towards a goal helps one to grow psychologically. An online student who pursues a formal education may be avoiding the pain of potentially remaining in a dead-end job for lack of marketable credentials (Fayer, 2014; Lee, 2014; Spector, 2013). Psychological growth occurs from the process of enduring the rigor, addressing the pain of the unknown, and learning how to stay focused while working full time and going to school.

Herzberg (1966) described *responsibility* as the permission to work without supervision. It includes assuming responsible for one's own work and efforts. It also involves the responsibility of working with others at all levels to reach higher goals. This description of responsibility is applicable in life, in general, as well as when pursuing education through an online program. Due to the independent nature of online learning,

students must take responsibility to find answers to questions for completion of their

assignments (Johnson, 2015; Choi, Walters, & Hoge, 2017). When online students do not

have immediate access to university staff or fellow students, they need to leverage the

university's research tools. They must also learn to use external research sources such as

academic and industry-specific websites to gain a broad perspective on their topic needed

to complete their assignments (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; Sacchetti & Tortia, 2013).

Although students may not use the non-academic websites in their assignments, they may

view these sites as a reference point for gathering information. According to Costello &

Welch (2014), it is assumed that most adults have sufficient life experience to meet the

challenges presented to them. However, they may not have enough experience to work

through the rigors and responsibility of staying engaged and motivated in an online

learning program.

External Hygiene Factors

Herzberg (1976) described the hygiene factors as the context or environment in

which one performs work. Herzberg emphasized that the term *hygiene* was used as an

analogy to the medical use of the term meaning "preventive and environment" (p. 74).

Herzberg (1976) goes on to distinguish that hygiene factors represent the environment in

which one seeking motivation will constantly need to make adjustments so that

individuals can perform at their best to achieve a goal. In the case of online learning, the

term refers to the external factors of students' work or home environments that can be

adjusted to prevent them from losing the motivation to continue studying in an online

learning program.

According to Herzberg (1976), the following hygiene factors include the environmental aspects of work that can be applied to external factors impacting student progress and motivation in online learning:

- *Working conditions* refers to the physical environments in which individuals perform their work. The environment should be a safe place to work and employees should have the tools and resources to do their jobs effectively.

- *Salary and job status* refers to the pay for performance and the title or function the employee performs.

- *Company policy and benefits* provide the work guidelines and rules that an employee must follow in the organization. The benefits are those things that add value to working at an organization. Examples include health insurance, tuition assistance, child-care assistance, transit subsidy, short and long-term disability.

- *Working relationships* provide the employee with a sense of belonging and connection to other employees and managers within the organization.

- *Recognition for work* performed on a specific task provides the employee with a sense of competence, worth, and growth in doing meaningful work.

External factors such as working conditions, which may include the stress of looking for a job or working with an unsupportive supervisor, can impact student

motivation and persistence in online learning. The power of receiving recognition and support for achievement in an online learning program is that it leads to growth in one's ability to handle multiple priorities, think more critically, and operate with a stronger awareness of self (Herzberg, 1976).

The similarities between the theories of Herzberg (1976) and Rovai (2003) provided a foundation for understanding factors that may help students stay motivated to persist in an online learning program while working full-time. Using concepts from both Herzberg (1976) and Rovai (2003) provided a foundation for CEOs to incentivize students to persist in online programs. Rovai's (2003) CPM addressed internal and external factors related to an actual online learning program. Table 4 includes a matrix that displays concepts from Rovai and their relation to the research questions used in this study.

Table 4

Alignment Matrix for Rovai's Concepts (2003) and Study Research Questions

Conceptual Framework Factor	Summary	Research Question 1	Research Question 2
Student Characteristics	Ethnicity, age, intellectual development, previous academic performance and preparation.	X	
Student Skills	Computer literacy, information literacy, time management, reading, writing, and student engagement in an online environment.	X	X
Internal Factors within the online environment	Academic Integration, coaching, support, clarity and consistency of program requirements, course relevancy, learning community, learning and teaching styles, self-efficacy, accessibility to and use of university services and goal commitment	X	X
External Factors outside the online environment	Family commitments, demands from work, loss of a job, time it takes to find a new job, financial aid, unexpected life events (including health), and moving from one place to another.	X	X

Herzberg's (1976) motivation-hygiene theory focused on the internal and external psychological needs and support that can help motivate students to persist in online learning programs despite the presence of obstacles. Table 5 displays concepts from Herzberg's theory and their relation to the research questions used in this study. Together, the internal and external concepts from Herzberg (1976) and Rovai (2003) formed the conceptual framework for this study. In this study, the frame is a foundation for understanding the various factors that address student persistence and motivation in online learning management development programs.

Table 5

Alignment Matrix for Herzberg's (1976) Concepts and Study Research Questions

Conceptual Framework Factor	Summary	Research Question 1	Research Question 2
Internal Motivation Factors (IMF)			
Achievement	The successful completion of a job and the positive feelings that result from it.	X	X
Recognition	Acknowledgement for work well done.	X	X
Actual Work	The work a person does that feels rewarding with or without recognition.	X	
Responsibility	Permission to work without supervision.	X	
External Motivation Factors (EMF)			
Work conditions	Physical environments in which individuals perform their work.		X
Salary and job status	Refers to the pay for performance and the title or function the employee performs.		X
Company policy and benefits	Work guidelines and rules that an employee must follow in the organization.		X
Working Relationships	Provide the employee with a sense of belonging and connection to other employees and manager	X	X
Recognition	Acknowledgement or reward for work performed on a specific task.	X	X

History of Management Development and Online Learning Delivery

1940s and 1950s

The need for developing programs to train managers appeared in the 1940s. At that time, experienced workers and supervisors conducted most training in organizations using a hands-on 'watch and do' approach to train employees to perform tasks on the job

(Kraiger, 2014). However, in some organizations the call for citizens to serve in World War II took away experienced workers and supervisors who held most of the institutional knowledge about the existing systems, processes, and training procedures to effectively run the operations (Kentnor, 2015; Kraiger, 2014). As a result, CEOs were left with many management positions unfilled and an unskilled workforce unprepared to step into the roles left behind by those experienced workers and managers who went to serve in the war (Kentnor, 2015; Kraiger, 2014). CEOs answered the call for management development by documenting work procedures, standard operating procedures, and systems to capture organizational knowledge; and they developed management programs that would create a pipeline of leaders to continue operations even in extenuating circumstances (Ford, 2014; Kentnor, 2015; Kraiger, 2014). Within several years of having developed new systems for training and supervising employees, learning management practitioners realized that most of the assessment and evaluation of employees' training needs were conducted using the subjective view of the experienced workers who had gone to serve in World War II. Thus, in the late 1950s, learning management practitioners worked to develop new systems to evaluate the impact of training programs and assess the return on investing in training new managers (Kirkpatrick, 1959; Kraiger, 2014).

1960s to Present

In the period from 1960 to the 1980s, management development training practices encouraged input through work teams, autonomy, and appreciation for the individual worker's input and contributions. During this time, the cognitive revolution began to take

place and computer analog models of human information processes emerged. The learning management practices used during this era reflected cognition, computer-assisted instruction, role plays, case studies, and simulated exercises (Kentnor, 2015; Kraiger, 2014; Tanyel & Griffith, 2014).

As the use of computers enhanced the efficiency of business operations in the 1990s, learning management practitioners began to use technology and computer based programs to enhance face-to-face training programs by offering access, cost effectiveness, and equity (Association of Talent Development, 2015; Kurzman, 2013). Learning management practitioners had to adjust their learning management practices to meet the needs of an evolving workforce. As time progressed, the learning process became more self-directed and learning transferred from the experienced employee, supervisors, and corporate trainers to the individual employee (Association of Talent Development, 2014, 2015, 2016; Economic Modeling Specialist International, 2014; Fayer, 2014; Kentnor, 2015; Kurzman, 2013; McClanahan, 2014; Remedios & Richardson, 2013).

Online Learning Delivery Mediums

Online education is defined as a form of distance education in which students use technological tools such as computers, tablets, cell phones, and the Internet as the delivery mechanism to learn both in real-time and at a time suitable for the learner (Allen & Seaman, 2013, 2016; Kurzman, 2013). Online learning provides a medium for learning management practitioners to create learning that is flexible, scales across geographical boundaries, and can be more cost effective than traditional face-to-face learning (Tanyel

& Griffith, 2014). Table 4 displays a comparison of different instructional delivery mediums.

Table 6

Types of Instruction by Delivery

Method	Percent of Content Delivered Online	Description
Online	80% or more	Most, if not all, of the content is delivered online.
Hybrid/blended learning	30% to 79%	Blend of online learning that is supplemented with some face-to-face or real-time virtual learning.
Web-facilitated	1% to 29%	Learning that utilizes a web-enabled medium to deliver content, assignments, and grades. Some organizations may use learning management systems as a typical medium.
Traditional/face-to-face	0%	Learning that is all face-to-face and does not use any online or web enabled technology.

Note. Adapted from "Grade Change: Tracking online education in the United States" by I. E. Allen & J. Seaman, p. 7. Copyright 2016 by Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group, LLC. Newburyport, MA: Sloan Consortium. Adapted with permission. Copyright 2016 by Babson Survey Research.

Online Management Development

Learning management practitioners began applying instructional system design concepts to develop online management development programs in the mid-2000s. Research in technology mediated management development programs prior to the year 2000 focused on mediums that used other means of distance education formats such as correspondence, radio, television, video, and some computer-based methods to help facilitate learning in the workplace and at academic institutions (Kentnor, 2015). Early evidence of online learning in management development indicated a need to better

understand how to train employees using technology and how to identify the effectiveness of the online learning medium (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Kemp, 2002).

More recent online learning research suggested that, while technological mediums are used more widely as part of blended learning solutions to develop managers, there is a lack of research focused on the value of the online management development training and its impact on the organization (Aragon & Valle, 2013; Association of Talent Development, 2015, 2016; Lee & Martin, 2017; Warring, 2013). Aragon & Valle (2013) conducted a quantitative study with 316 training managers using multiple linear regression to analyze results to find out if online management development programs were effective. The results revealed that providing training to managers had a significant impact on their innovativeness, manager effectiveness and organizational performance. Further, Aragon & Valle (2013) reported that regardless of the instructional medium used to develop managers, organizations that invest time and leadership support for management development tend to have a competitive advantage over other organizations.

In contrast, Warring (2013) conducted a case study to gain insight and better understand the drivers for successful online learning from the student's perspective. Warring found different results about the effectiveness of online management development. The research engaged individuals at a Chinese institution who participated in an online management development course for the first time. Warring concluded that some students did not achieve the necessary level of independence and understanding of the online environment to thrive in this type of learning environment. Students indicated that they spent more time trying to get comfortable with the environment and, thus, were

not able to retain or use any of the management content after they completed the class. Warring (2013) concluded that the students were not satisfied with their online learning experience because it was their first time learning in this type of environment.

Sirková, Taha, & Ferencová (2014) used descriptive and inferential statistical methods to analyze survey responses from 500 managers about factors they found effective when they participated in online training and continuing education. The results indicated that the participants found management development training useful for career development, interpersonal communication, and increased critical thinking in the workplace and at home. Additionally, the participants indicated that taking training classes via multiple mediums, such as face-to-face and online, made learning more meaningful and catered to their individual learning styles.

Researchers that studied online management development expressed the need for more research that contributed to growth and development of online learning (Chien, 2014; Fayer, 2014). Goldberg, Goldberg, & Stevens (2014) explored the changing landscape of career management and development in organizations. The researchers conducted a benchmark study by surveying 34 organizations in various industries to gain insight into trends and best practices in career management and management development. The results indicated that learning management practitioners were continuously using technology to communicate with and develop managers to supervise in organizational structures that are flat and span across the globe. The researchers also reported that managers felt they had fewer options to move up the career ladder and instead, had to seek different options to grow and develop. Some managers prepared for

the next level of responsibility by taking temporary assignments in other parts of the organization and leveraging technology such as online learning to enhance their career development path. However, the researchers reported that many managers who responded to the survey wanted more training on self-direction in using technology and online learning to develop in their career.

In most of the literature I reviewed regarding using online learning to develop managers, researchers learned that managers found online management development programs enhanced manager effectiveness, innovation, and performance (Aragon & Valle, 2013; Atchley et al., 2013; Cerino, 2014; Epp, Phirangee, & Hewitt, 2017). Researchers (Sirková et al., 2014) also agreed that online management development programs provided their students with career options and the programs improved their ability to use technology to communicate more effectively. In contrast, other researchers (Butz et al., 2014; Warring, 2013) found that using technology to develop managers was not effective because some managers found it difficult to adjust to the online learning environment. Still other researchers (Cecilia et al., 2013; Simunich, Robins, & Kelly, 2015) found that the extended time needed to learn navigation within the online environment resulted in reduced retention and use of the learning content. Researchers who conducted several mixed methods studies (Association of Talent Development, 2014, 2015, 2016; Goldberg et al., 2014; Johnson, 2015; Picciano, 2017; Sirková et al., 2014) revealed that program completion and attitudes towards online learning varied based on managers' previous experience in the online learning environment. Other researchers (Brandon Hall Group, 2016; Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014) also noted that,

as management structures in organizations were distributed to more broadly scaled operations, some managers found they had fewer options to move up the career ladder. Instead they sought different options by leveraging technology, such as online learning, to gain management skills and experience to take on new leadership positions (Goldberg et al., 2014).

Persistence and Motivation

This literature review focused on the factors that help motivate participants to persist in an online learning management development program. I used the elements in the conceptual framework to guide the literature review that yielded five major topics purpose and meaning of online learning programs, learning styles, program and course relevance, coaching support and barriers. These topics reflected how recent studies have focused on the internal and external factors that may help students stay motivated to persist in an online learning program. Table 7 includes a matrix that displays the alignment of Rovai's concepts and the five major topics that emerged from the literature review. Table 8 provides a matrix aligning Herzberg's concepts with the topics from the literature review.

Table 7

Matrix of Rovai's (2003) Conceptual Factors and Literature Review Topic Areas

Conceptual Framework Factor	Summary	Purpose/ Meaning	Learning Styles	Program/ Course Relevance	Coaching & Support	Barriers
Student Characteristics	Ethnicity, age, intellectual development, previous academic performance & preparation	X	X			
Student Skills	Computer literacy, information literacy, time management, reading, writing, and student engagement in online environment			X	X	X
Internal Factors within the online environment	Academic Integration, coaching, support, clarity/consistency of program requirements, course relevancy, learning community, learning & teaching styles, self-efficacy, accessibility to & use of university services & goal commitment	X	X	X	X	X
External Factors outside the online environment	Family commitments, demands from work, loss of a job, time to find a new job, financial aid, unexpected life events (including health), and moving from one place to another.	X	X			X

Table 8

Matrix of Herzberg's (1976) Conceptual Factors and Literature Topic Areas

Conceptual Framework Factor	Summary	Purpose/ Meaning	Learning Styles	Program/ Course Relevance	Coaching & Support	Barriers
Internal Motivation Factors (IMF)						
Achievement	The successful completion of a job and the positive feelings that result from it.	X	X		X	
Recognition	Acknowledgement for work well done.	X	X	X	X	X
Actual Work	The work a person does that feels rewarding with or without recognition.	X	X	X	X	X
Responsibility	*Permission to work without supervision.*	X	X		X	X
External Motivation Factors (EMF)						
Work conditions	Physical environments in which individuals perform their work.		X		X	X
Salary and job status	Refers to the pay for performance and the title or function the employee performs.	X	X	X		
Company policy and benefits	Work guidelines and rules that an employee must follow in the organization.	X	X		X	X
Working Relationships	Provide the employee with a sense of belonging and connection to other employees and manager	X	X		X	X

Purpose and Meaning in Online Learning

Online students want to know that their education is leading them to a better place with greater opportunities in life. Herzberg (1966) believed that "growth occurs when one is able to identify a purpose and work towards becoming more than one was before" (p. 58). Ke and Kwak (2013) indicated that students are more likely to be motivated to persist in online learning when they can see that each class has a purpose and is relevant to their work or home life. Ke and Kwak defined learner satisfaction as "the student's perception pertaining to the course or college experience and perceived value of the education received while attending an educational institution." (p. 98). According to these authors, in the student-centered online environment the responsibility is placed on the student taking an active part in making their experience relevant and useful. In their research, Ke and Kwak (2013) used structured equation modeling (SEM) to establish the variables for satisfaction in online learning environments. Five variables were identified:

- *personal relevance* and significance of the learning material,
- *active learning* beyond reading and responding to learning material,
- *authentic learning* in which the learning material is reflected upon and applied to life,
- *autonomy* in which learners take control of their learning, and
- *computer technology competency* prior to the start of a learning experience.

The authors surveyed 329 students enrolled in online courses at a major university in the United States. The students were both male and female from different ethnic backgrounds. The authors used the Distance Education Learning Environments Survey to collect their data, which were analyzed to provide insights on student perceptions and

satisfaction rates of online learning. The authors used confirmatory factor analysis to determine the fit, validity, and reliability of the model and to examine the hypotheses between the two constructs: perception and satisfaction. The results confirmed that online students' satisfaction was related to their ability to construct and control their learning as long as there was relevance, active learning, purpose for pursuing education, and a level of computer competence in the course development and implementation. The five variables identified in the SEM were those elements that helped online students retain learning content, stay motivated, and persist in their online program.

Cho (2012) found that students persist in online learning environments if they are properly oriented initially. Cho (2012) also suggested that online students who identify and record their purpose for pursuing an education tend to stay motivated and engaged to persist. Administrators at a large Midwestern university, assigned Cho to design and evaluate an online student orientation using the ADDIE (analysis, design, development, implement, and evaluate) model of design. Cho's article was useful to other researchers because it applied the ADDIE process to student preparation and persistence in online environments.

In the analysis phase, Cho interviewed university administrators and seasoned faculty on what was needed for the student orientation based on results from the university's student evaluations and outcomes. Next, the author reviewed the syllabi of various departments that offered online classes to determine online tasks students would need to master and the skills they would need to socialize in the online environment. To support internal validity, the researcher conducted a literature review to determine themes to inform the development of the online student orientation.

In the design phase, Cho (2012) used the findings from the interviews, task analysis, and literature review to determine modules that would make up the program. The four modules were: (a) the nature of online learning, (b) learning in Blackboard, (c) technological requirements, and (d) learning skills and motivation (Cho, 2012). The author used experts to review and validate content for each module. In the module on the nature of learning, he used a focus group approach to ask questions about the content and to get the experts recommendations on what they were experiencing as faculty and administrators. Cho used university IT staff who specialized in using the Blackboard platform to assist in designing and validating the content for use in the module on Blackboard. In the technological requirements module, the researcher used university staff, faculty, IT administrators, and seasoned helpdesk specialists to review and validate the content. The researcher designed a student-self assessment survey using Bandura's self-efficacy theory as a conceptual framework for the learning skills and motivation model. He used faculty members and doctoral students in instructional technology to review and validate the assessment.

In the development phase, the author produced the modules and transferred them into Blackboard using faculty, students, IT staff, and administrators to test the content in each module. The evaluation used formative assessments that included knowledge checks at various stages within each module and a summative evaluation for the entire program. To measure their preparedness for learning in the online environment, students were surveyed immediately after taking the online student orientation and again after taking their first class. Finally, Cho (2012) found that, for a successful design process, it is essential to engage the stakeholders and experts. It is also essential to use the reflections

on the experience of previous students' experience with online learning. It is equally important to review and validate online student orientation content at every stage of development (Cho, 2012).

In a different study, Essary (2014) used a qualitative, multiple-case study to identify perceived external factors impacting student perceptions about online learning at the institution. He selected a purposeful sampling with 16 knowledgeable participants and focused on the external factors of purpose and persistence in online learning. Essary discovered that academic administrators needed to understand the factors impacting the student online experience if they were to develop strategic plans to improve the systems. Essary found that students wanted to feel engaged and have a sense of belonging in the institution. Students also indicated they wanted faculty guidance regarding goal setting, career management, and establishing meaning and purpose for pursuing higher education.

Evidence from multiple researchers (Chu, Ye, & Guo, 2014; Ke & Kwak, 2013; Moyce, 2014; Yawar & Seuring, 2017) suggested students' perceptions of documenting the reason "why" in pursuing an educational goal were useful in helping them persist in online learning programs. In reviewing the existing literature, researchers concluded that students are motivated to persist if they can see that each online course has a purpose towards reaching their educational goal (Ke & Kwak, 2013; Nielsen, 2015; Petty & Thomas, 2014; Tina et al., 2015) and is relevant to their work and home life (Cho, 2012; Ke & Kwak, 2013; Nielsen, 2015; Orcutt & Dringus, 2017). Researchers further concluded that students were motivated to persist if they constructed and controlled their learning with proper guidance from administrators (Cho, 2012; Essary, 2014; Wolfson, Cavanagh, & Kraiger, 2014). Another aspect of students' establishing a purpose for

pursuing an educational goal that appeared in the literature was the importance of

learning management practitioners using various methods to develop and deliver

orientation programs for online students (Essary, 2014). Orientation programs allow

students to know what to expect and how to prepare for their online learning. One aspect

of preparing students to learn in the online environment is to help them find meaning as

they persist in their coursework (Beaudoin, 2015; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013).

Meaning and Persistence

Adult learners are motivated and engaged when they see and understand that the

time spent in pursuing their education is meaningful to their growth. Herzberg (1976)

suggested that individuals should assess their ability to think differently by merging new

knowledge with existing knowledge. In an organizational setting, the possession of

knowledge is demonstrated when an employee can apply new knowledge with existing

knowledge to improve work performance (Costello & Welch, 2014). Similarly, in the

academic setting, online students learn new bits of information with each class,

discussion forum, or contact with their instructors (Islam & Ali, 2013; Rhode, Richter,

Gowen, Miller, & Wills, 2017). Online students need to constantly weave the new bits of

information into their existing body of knowledge to make sense and meaning that may

help them persist in pursuing their goal. Rovai (2012) asserted that knowledge

construction and application occurs as students build a sense of belonging and

community in online learning.

O'Connor and Cordova (2011) discovered in a phenomenological study that

online students must see and understand how their online educational pursuit is

meaningful to their career growth and to becoming a better person. The authors used

interviews to probe into six participants who matriculated in either a master's program or an advanced certificate program in workplace learning at a university (O'Connor & Cordova, 2011). There were five research questions applied in the study:

- How did these working adults manage their day- to-day lives when they are studying?

- Were they able to adapt and adopt what they are learning?

- What impact did they see their education having on their own personal growth as well as their organization's growth?

- What academic experiences either aided or detracted from their learning?

- What did it mean to be an adult learner—with a personal life and a professional life—studying part-time for an advanced degree?

    (O'Connor & Cordova, p. 361)

The authors organized the findings around nine themes:

- why the student pursued graduate education

- the students' personal belief that they could succeed in the graduate program,

- the help and support received from family, friends, and colleagues,

- work-life balance,

- limited work and family support,

- classroom experience

- college campus engagement,

- meaning and options for the future, and

- whether the education journey was worth it. (O'Connor & Cordova, 2011)

The researchers found that, despite having financial support from their employer, some students experienced that they were unable to apply their learning back to their workplace environment. This was due, in part, to lack of support from supervisors in seeing the value of new knowledge coming from an employee having more education than others in the department (O'Connor & Cordova, 2011). The researchers also found that students would have benefitted from having dialogue before and after the course to discuss content relevance and its applicability to the work environment. Students also mentioned the importance of reflecting at various points on how the degree could lead to more opportunities as they matriculated through the program. O'Connor and Cordova (2011) also discovered that students preferred being in classes that allowed them to share their life and work experiences and to have instructors that facilitated meaningful dialogue that challenged them in all areas of their life.

Using the findings of their study, the authors developed a model based on three elements: job engagement, course content relevance, and personal relevance (O'Connor & Cordova, 2011). This model is useful in helping academic and learning management practitioners design programs that help students develop to their full potential. The conceptual framework used in my study is relevant to the findings of O'Connor and Cordova since the model addresses the internal factors of achievement, meaning, growth, and consistency in academic programming. Likewise, the model addressed the external

program factors by helping the learner identify the course work's relevance and meaning as they apply to workplace issues and opportunities.

Hrastinski and Stenbom (2013) built on these previous studies and found that having a coach, mentor, and peer support to remind students of their identified purpose for pursuing an online learning program was important to students. In their study, the authors engaged student coaches who were pursuing their master degree in mathematics, engineering, or math teaching. These masters-level students served as coaches to math students using technology, such as instant messaging boards, during set times each week over the course of one semester. The student teachers also had some training on coaching using technology. The authors recorded over 5,000 pages of transcripts and reviewed them for themes. The average talk time between the student coach and the students lasted over 45 minutes. The math students then filled out a survey with open-ended questions to get their reaction to the coaching experience (Hrastinski & Stenbom, 2013).

The authors found that initially the math students looked to the student coach as the one to provide the answers to questions or problems. The math students needed help with issues such as advice on how to go about solving a problem, a specific area of math, and how to assimilate socially in their online school environment. The researchers found that it was difficult for the student coach to know what a student's level of math proficiency was; this made it difficult, at times, for the coaches to adjust instruction accordingly and meet students at their level (Hrastinski & Stenbom, 2013). The researchers also found that some online messages or responses were misunderstood by both parties which interfered with knowing whether the student is learning. Due to the nature of the population, the only mode of communication used in the study was via

instant messenger. Follow-up interviews with student coaches indicated that, if the student-student coach concept is used in an adult learning context, it was better to use a variety of communication mediums to ensure that students are learning and able to apply meaning from their online experience. For example, phone conversations between student and coach allowed the student coach to hear, by some of the student's responses, whether a student was grasping the material; likewise, the student-coach experience was richer when a web conferencing medium was used to share information instantly on a white board space which made the overall experience more useful to all involved.

Taking yet a deeper approach to understanding meaning and persistence in online learning, Park and Hee Jun (2014) concluded that learners tended to stay engaged and motivated when they saw that a course was meaningful to them and that the knowledge was transferred at work or home. The authors specifically focused on three areas: individual characteristics (i.e., age, gender, educational background, and employment status), external factors (i.e., family and organizational support), and internal factors (i.e., motivation with a focus on relevance and satisfaction). Park and Hee Jun (2014) used the opportunity to address the gap in the literature regarding the examination of individual characteristics, external factors, and internal motivators as defined in my study.

In the study, I used a revised version of the Rovai composite persistence model as the conceptual framework. Park and Hee Jun (2014) chose to eliminate some of the variables that were originally designed to measure persistence in traditional school settings. Using the Rovai composite persistence model, the researchers sought answers to the following questions: Do the dropouts and the persistent learners of online courses show a significant difference in their individual characteristics? Also, What factors are

significant to predict learners' decision to drop out of online courses? (Park & Hee Jun, 2014). The authors used a quantitative methodology and sent surveys to 243 participants at a large Midwestern university. Of the 243 surveys sent, 147 agreed to participate and returned their surveys. The participants had to have either completed or dropped out of an online class during a two-year period. Of the 147 participants, 98 completed the online course and 49 were dropouts. The authors used a five-point Likert scale with six items to measure family and organizational support. They also used the Instructional Materials Motivation Survey (IMMS) to measure motivation and satisfaction.

The results of the study showed that the learner's individual characteristics (i.e., age, gender, rank, etc.) had no direct impact on a learner's decision to drop out of an online course. However, the analysis of external factors indicated that learners are more likely to drop out of an online course when they do not have family or organizational support to help them persist throughout their program. As for the internal factors, the results indicated that the design phase of a course should include motivation and relevance. Learners tended to stay engaged and motivated when the course was meaningful to them and was transferred to work or at home (Park & Hee Jun, 2014).

Additional themes identified in the literature that support purpose and meaning to help students persist in an online learning program were focused on: students understanding the rigor and expectations of online learning (Beaudoin, 2015; Gedera, 2014;), students learning self-direction (Cerino, 2014; Joyner, Fuller, Holzweiss, Henderson, & Young, 2014; Wandler & Imbriale, 2017), and aligning the criteria in the course syllabus to personal and professional goals (Cho, 2012; Clayton-Code, 2015; Wingo, Ivankova, & Moss, 2017). Additionally, Kaymak & Horzum (2013) and Mensch

(2009) addressed the external factors of family and organizational support as part of what is helpful to keep online learners engaged and motivated. Some authors suggested that to keep learners engaged, learning management practitioners should recognize student achievements by offering promotions or enhancing their job responsibilities, which would allow learners to apply their knowledge and appreciate the value of continuing their education (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; Cole et al., 2014; Remedios & Richardson, 2013). Finally, other authors (Fredericksen, 2017; McClanahan, 2014; Roche & Clarke, 2014) felt that relevance is achieved through offering advising support to help online learners keep their personal and professional goals and expectations in view as they persist in their program. The support network is essential to students staying engaged because online learning can make some students feel isolated and lonely.

The various studies described above on meaning and persistence identified outcomes that added to or supported existing research that focused on the importance of students establishing a purpose for pursuing an online education. All studies featured in this section are supported by Herzberg (1976) and Rovai' (2003) beliefs that if individuals keep in mind the purpose for pursuing their goal, they will persist with or without recognition. This includes assuming responsibility for one's own work and efforts (Cho, 2012; Ke & Kwak, 2013; Park & Hee Jun, 2014; Wandler & Imbriale, 2017). The researchers also suggested that online students benefit from receiving management support to help keep their professional goals and expectations in view as they persist in their program (Clayton-Code, 2015; Fredericksen, 2017; Mensch, 2009; Roche & Clarke, 2014).

Learning Preferences and Persistence

Youngju et al. (2013) conveyed that, once the purpose for pursuing an educational goal is established, students must consider the way they like to learn. This is particularly true due to the independent nature of online learning. Consideration of one's learning style is in line with Herzberg (1976) and Rovai's (2003) internal factor of looking within to determine what one needs to stay motivated and engaged in an online learning program. Youngju et al. (2013) posited that if online students knew more about how they like to learn before starting an online program, they were more likely to persist. The authors engaged a sample of 169 students enrolled in an online course as part of a bachelor's degree program offered at a university in Korea. The researchers examined the internal, external, and student skill factors that help predict student's decision to stay in or drop out of an online learning program.

Youngju et al. (2013) used the Rovai's (2003) composite persistence model as a guide to address two research questions:

- Are students who dropped out of an online course different from those who persisted in an online course as it relates to internal determination and focus, external family and colleague support? and

- Which factors most successfully predict online student success in online learning?

These questions guided the quantitative methodology used in the study. The authors used a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to predict if the two groups of students (persistent and nonpersistent students) were different on the set of variables used. They

also used descriptive discriminant function analysis to describe how the two groups differed.

The research findings indicated that students who were motivated internally focused on a task independently until it was finished. They were also able to manage their resources. Both the ability to focus independently and manage resources were significant predictors of success in online learning. Students who looked externally and were distracted easily by external situations tended to be less organized or focused on tasks until completion; they tended to drop out of online courses more than others. The implications of these findings suggest that when online students know more about their learning preferences before they enter an online program, they are more likely to persist until completion. The authors also suggested that online program administrators should put systems in place to accurately and effectively assess students' learning style preferences before entering an online learning program (Youngju et al., 2013).

To fill the gap of helping students understand their learning style readiness, Harrell and Bower (2011) used stepwise logistic regression to analyze data received from over 200 respondents at five different community colleges. They sought to learn more about how student characteristics might predict if a student would be successful in online learning. The authors defined persistence as whether students completed online courses in which they were enrolled. The research question used in the study was: Which student characteristics (learning style, locus of control, computer access and experience) can be used to predict persistence of community college students in online learning? (p. 179).

To measure these characteristics, the authors used the Barsch Learning Style Inventory to measure student's learning style. Learning style classified students into four

categories: auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, and visual. The authors chose this instrument because it is the one most administrators use for first-year students at higher education institutions. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used for each section of the survey to determine reliability; the overall reliability of the instrument was .72 and for the Locus of Control scale it was .74. The researchers examined students' learning style, locus of control, computer access, and educational experience as they relate to persistence in online learning at a community college. They learned that students scoring high on auditory learning as a preferred style tended to withdraw or dissatisfied in an online learning program. This appeared to be because they needed to hear information and have face-to-face discourse to ask questions about content areas that they do not understand. Students who scored high on visual and kinesthetic learning as a preferred learning style tended to be satisfied and to do well in an online learning program because much of the engagement is done through researching, finding, and visualizing the materials.

Similarly, Seiver and Troja (2014) examined the relationship between motivation and satisfaction in online learning and found that students who had the need to communicate often with other students and to engage in regular discourse might not thrive in an online learning environment. Because of this finding, the researchers suggested that learning management practitioners create elements in the online experience that allow students to engage by sharing their experiences and challenges in the discussion boards or by using a form of synchronous discussion (i.e., phone or web conference tools). Those who scored higher in autonomy and achievement were more likely to take another online course because of the self-regulated and autonomous nature of the online learning environment. The results also indicated that online courses that are

structured to engage students and let them have a level of autonomy might enhance student satisfaction in the learning (Seiver & Troja, 2014). Other researchers who conducted studies that examined learning style preferences to predict success in online learning indicated that whether a student likes to work independently as a learning preference is not directly correlated to student satisfaction with the online course experience (Favor & Kulp, 2015; Moore, 2014).

Unlike studies that focused on the internal factors (Harrell & Bower, 2011; Seiver & Troja, 2014; Youngju et al., 2013), Spector's (2013) study on trends in information and communication technologies revealed that students who were self-directed and had a curiosity for finding information found navigating in the online environment fun, engaging, and satisfying. Conversely, He (2014) discovered that those students who relied and thrived on having instant feedback and validation from online instructors, as a learning style preference, did not find online learning satisfying. Herzberg (1976) argued that motivation is an ongoing process that moves from one situation to the next. A student who needs instant feedback and regular face-to-face discourse might have difficulty in moving to the next phase of online course work.

Hrastinski and Stenbom (2013) found that it was difficult for an online instructor to know a student's level of proficiency in a subject. This lack of understanding resulted in making it difficult for the instructor to recognize the student's learning style preference and to adjust instruction accordingly to best meet the student's needs. O'Connor and Cordova (2011) revealed the importance of understanding the learning style preferences of online students by administering pre, mid-point, and post assessments of students in online learning programs. O'Connor's and Cordova's concept of administering learning

style assessments at various points was an original contribution to the body of knowledge because it informed learning management practitioners of the importance of discussing learning styles and the realities of online learning with aspiring online learning manage development students.

Several researchers presented characteristics of online students who are motivated to persist in online learning programs. Persistent online learners tend to adapt their learning styles to the learning environment (Harrell & Bower, 2011; Loizzo, Ertmer, Watson & Watson, 2017; Tonsing-Meyer, 2013). They are dedicated and determined to reach their goals even if learning at a distance is not their preferred way of learning (Furlonger & Gencic, 2014; He, 2014; Poll, Widen, & Weller, 2014). They are self-aware and integrate their self-identity to growing as online learners (Baxter, 2012; Carroll, Ng, & Birch, 2013). They are also able to adapt to delayed feedback in the online environment in contrast to the instant feedback in a face-to-face learning environment (Afolabi, 2017). The various studies mentioned above generated findings that supported or added to research focused on the importance of understanding the learning style preferences of students pursuing an online learning program. As an extension of the theme of learning style needs, Herzberg (1976) argued that, if the goal of management development is to improve productivity and performance, then learning management practitioners must find ways to make work life meaningful and relevant. Likewise, when online instructors adapt course work to student's learning style and students see how the content is relevant to their home or work life, they are more apt to remain motivated to persist to program completion.

Online Course Relevance

In the online environment, students learn how to merge new bits of information with existing knowledge through each class, discussion forum, and contact with their instructors (Park & Hee Jun, 2014). Online students want the course content that is useful, relevant, and applicable to their home or work life. Frey (2011) explored how social science researchers used a specially designed survey instrument to inform community college leaders, faculty, and program administrators regarding what students need at the education program and student service levels to enhance the relevancy of their college experience (Frey, 2011). The researcher identified a need to gain insight about the current state of educational programs and student services from the students and the officials at participating colleges. Their pilot-project resulted in institutional leaders implementing changes to improve programs and services to students. The researchers used two survey instruments of The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to help colleges measure effectiveness of program and student support effectiveness. The first instrument, the Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) assessment toolkit, was designed to measure educational program effectiveness for adult learners. The second instrument, the Student Support Systems (SSS), was designed to help institutions measure and subsequently enhance student support systems to help adult learners become self-directed as life-long learners.

Frey (2011) performed a pilot test with 25 two-year colleges during the 2005-2006 academic year. Officials at each school administered the ALFI assessment to students and then sent their results back to the research team at CAEL for analysis. The researchers tabulated the responses from each school and then aggregated results to

identify themes among the colleges. Each school received their results for use as strategic planning tools to enhance their academic programs. The second year, the researchers further explored the outcomes with focus groups at three of the 25 participating institutions.

The researcher identified advising, educational experience, and accessibility as the three major themes that institutions could use to enhance overall programming (Frey, 2011). Regarding advising, the results indicated that students relied on advisors to help guide their decisions in selecting courses that fit their lifestyle. Students wanted advisors to guide them in mapping out a career path so that they knew their education was leading them to more options. In the educational experience area, the results indicated that, in the actual classrooms, students wanted clear learning goals and expectations. As adult learners, they felt they already brought a wealth of experience with them and did not want to spend valuable time revisiting information they already knew. Instead, students wanted to build on what they already knew. Frey added that receiving timely and constructive feedback from the instructor was important to making their online learning experience meaningful and relevant. Regarding accessibility, the results indicated that students want options to help meet the varying lifestyle dynamics such as online courses, compressed scheduled programs, and accelerated programs. Additionally, online students indicated that they wanted the same options to access student support services for information and clarity on systems and school services (Frey, 2011).

Salas and Moller (2015) examined input from 10 online faculty members regarding their perceived usefulness of a cloud-based multimedia application. The application expedites content development, commenting, and sharing, and is also known

as a voice authoring tool (VT, Salas & Moller). According to Rovai (2003), online instructors can enhance the virtual experience for students by learning how to use technology to make the content relevant in varying ways. In this study, Salas & Moller (2015) focused their research on the disciplinary origin of online education. Their goal was to gain insight about how online faculty members feel about using VT to enhance the online classroom relevance experience for students.

Salas and Moller (2015) chose to use a pre-focus group questionnaire, a focus group, and follow-up interviews to address four research questions:

- What are the faculty's perceived usefulness of VT as an enhancement to the online classroom experience?

- What are the faculty's perceived ease of use toward voice authoring tools?

- Why would faculty plan to use VT; and

- How can VT be effectively used in classroom activities?

Salas and Moller (2015) analyzed participant responses from pre-focus group questionnaires, focus groups, and follow-up interviews. They recorded the focus group and interview sessions and transcribed them. Once they completed the transcription, they coded familiar terms. They used the same process of coding with the responses on the open-ended questionnaires sent to students. Next, they identified specific themes that addressed their four research questions. The findings indicated that those faculty members who were comfortable with using technology embraced the VT and immediately began to experiment with ways to use it in their online classes. Those faculty members who were new to the online teaching or not comfortable with using

technology in the online classroom did not find the VT useful. The authors recommended training of online faculty in the use of technology in the online and face-to-face classroom settings, to make the learning experience relevant and useful to students.

Brownson (2014) inquired into student expectations and needs to help enhance their community college experience. Students indicated that they wanted to have discussion in the online class about the relevance of the content to work and life. Further, students reported that they wanted to know how each class in an online program was leading them in an important direction.

Beck and Milligan (2014) concentrated on the importance of creating a mechanism to help students see the value and real-life transfer of their academic learning and in-house training to work and home. Herzberg (1966) asserted that individuals who manage the rigor of working full-time and going to school part-time tend to develop skills in discipline, focus, and persistence in completing a task. These same skills are transferrable and useful in situations at work and home. Xu & Smith Jaggars, (2013) added that online students want clear learning goals and expectations. As adult learners, they often bring a wealth of knowledge and experience with them; they did not want to spend valuable time revisiting information they already knew. Joyner et al. (2014) contributed to the discussion on course relevancy and asserted that online students need to see the value and real-life transfer of their learning to work and home. The benefit to employers is that they may have a more developed and engaged employee who, if given an opportunity, can contribute at improved levels (Herzberg, 1976). Curry & Cook (2014) focused on the design of the online classroom and indicated that learners tend to

stay engaged and focused when they see that the course content is meaningful and transferrable to work or home.

Seiver and Troja (2014) extended the focus on the design of the online classroom and recommended that practitioners create online learning classrooms that allow students to fully engage by allowing them to share their work and life experiences in the discussion boards. These researchers also recommended using a form of synchronous discussion, such as phone or web conference tools, to enhance the online learning experience and make it more relevant. The findings of Thompson, Miller, and Franz (2013) indicated that cognitive presence is essential to making the online course more relevant. Cognitive presence means that students can connect their learning material to some aspect of home life or work experience to enhance course relevancy. Unlike the studies of Thompson et al. (2013), Cho (2012) and Seiver and Troja (2014) that focused on the online classroom, Spector's (2013) focus on technology enhancements forecasted that, as technology continues to evolve, it will better serve the cognitive domain through interaction and simulated activities.

The studies I reviewed augmented the existing literature by either making an original contribution or supplementing previous findings. The research of Burns (2013) was related to the existing body of knowledge that examined the impact relevant online courses can have when practitioners help students find meaning and usefulness in course content. Likewise, Frey's (2011) findings supported previous research since it was already established that online students want to know what is expected and how to get appropriate feedback whenever they need additional information or clarity during a course (Kemp, 2002; O'Connor & Cordova, 2011; Rovai, 2003;). Unlike these studies

that supported earlier findings, Salas & Moller (2015) added to the literature with their focus on evolving technology and its greater capability to meet the various teaching styles of online instructors to enable them to make online courses more relevant to students. Beck and Milligan (2014) found that students need to cognitively connect learning material with familiar aspects of their lives. Xu and Smith Jaggars (2013) added that, once students connected the learning material, they wanted to share their work and life experience to make sense of the learning material. Herzberg (1976) provided insight into three areas that lead to motivated behavior in an organization:

- what individuals can do;

- what they are permitted to do, and

- what is supported and reinforced when they do something.

Likewise, when online students have a belief in what they can and are permitted to do, they are more likely to persist as long as they are appropriately supported (Clark, 2015; Drouin, Hile, Vartanian, & Webb, 2013; Markle, 2015; McClanahan, 2014; Wingo et al., 2017).

Coaching and Support Systems

An essential factor for student persistence is the availability of lerning management practitioners trained on coaching and supporting online students to maintain momentum in their studies. Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock (2013) sampled 401 participants using descriptive statistics to test whether increased levels of one semester of online college self-efficacy were associated with increased persistence in school. He tested odds of a first-semester student persisting in college online after controlling for student gender, high school GPA, incoming self-efficacy, and level of academic support

needed to persist. The data were analyzed using logistic regression models to test the hypotheses.

The researchers demonstrated that self-efficacy and peer coaching play a significant role in student motivation and persistence at all stages of matriculating in online programs. The authors suggested organizational and institutional practitioners should set up coaching and peer mentoring to help students stay motivated and engaged in the online environment. The peer mentor concept allows online students to feel comfortable being vulnerable in exposing to each other what they did not know and in asking each other for help. Regarding support, Gedera (2014) provided some insights that students wanted timely and constructive feedback from online instructors. Students also wanted access to and options for classroom schedules, programs, and student services to help them navigate the system, stay engaged, and feel connected in their online learning experience.

By using written essays for a picture of the impact that tutors have on student's learning in an online environment, Xiao (2010) sought answers to the following research questions:

- What are the students' perceptions of tutor's influence on their learning motivation?

- What are tutors' perceptions of their influence on students' learning motivation?

- How well do both cohorts' perceptions match?

The researcher engaged 60 online students and 32 tutors who had at least 10 years' experience in teaching online. The tutors were used to give their feedback on a series of essay questions tailored to address the research questions. Merriam & Tisdale, (2016) indicated that case study research allows the researcher to gain insight from as many participants as appropriate to address the research questions. The research is conducted in one session or several sessions over many months. This research study lasted for a period of four months. As part of the analysis, Xiao (2010) critically reviewed the data and identified key ideas and recurrent themes; this resulted in a thematic framework. To ensure the themes were valid, he undertook a second reading of the essays and made notes to identify any missing key ideas or themes. Then he coded the data and organized the themes into charts. The themes were cross-checked by another researcher and disagreements were resolved through further discussion.

The results indicated four themes that both the tutors and students agreed addressed the research questions: teaching competence, tutors' personal characteristics, tutors' subject matter expertise, and tutor-student relationship. *Teaching competence* covered presentation skills, student engagement, and technology use. *Personal characteristics* meant that students wanted approachable, committed, accepting, responsive, and humble tutors. The humility aspect was significant because some students came with experience that they wanted to share and contribute as part of the learning process. *Tutors' subject matter expertise* meant that students were motivated when the tutor had experience and knowledge about the material. *Tutor-student relationship* meant that students wanted the tutor to have genuine concern and responsiveness when the student needed help or support on an assignment. These themes

demonstrated that tutors have a strong impact on student learning in the online environment (Xiao, 2010). Xiao indicated that Chinese tradition regarding learning culture is for the students to have ultimate respect for the teachers regardless of their teaching style. However, in online learning, the students' expectations were different and they expected more compassion and understanding from the teacher. The results from this article were relevant to coaching and persistence in that they informed learning management practitioners of areas that are applicable to helping learners stay engaged and motivated in their online environment. Xaio also pointed out that the students wanted and valued humility from their tutors and teachers. Finally, the results of the study suggest that learning management practitioners can enhance the online learning experience by encouraging students to share their management work and life experience in the online learning process. This study provides an example of how case study research can increase the understanding of industry practice and cultures.

Sung & Choi (2014) recommended that organizational stakeholders stay informed about the progress and usefulness to the organization of the employee's online learning experience. Stevenson (2013) examined the role that institutional support factors play in the persistence of students in online programs. In an exhaustive review of case study literature, the author found numerous studies that examined learner characteristics and learning style that helped predict student success in online learning. The author also identified gaps in the literature regarding the investigation of external support factors such as academic advising, technology support, student readiness for online learning, and access to financial aid.

To address this gap, the author identified four themes from the review that were keys to increasing the engagement and persistence for students matriculating in an online program: advising, academic support, technical support, and financial aid. The author addressed the theme of advising and determined it was an essential factor for student persistence because advisors help students with pre-entry, orientation, acclimation, and coaching throughout the online program. Additionally, the author suggested that advisors receive training in coaching students, especially when a student encounters a problem or challenge that may prevent them from continuing in the program (Stevenson, 2013). Academic support was another essential factor indicating students needed additional assistance in understanding an instructor's expectations or knowing where to go to find information to complete an assignment. Stevenson's findings indicated that students needed access to academic support to alleviate the feelings of isolation and frustration that may occur from not having convenient access to academic or administrative staff. Technical support was another factor identified because having access to technical support staff was essential for students in programs administered online. Access enabled them to submit assignments, send and respond to instructor and student e-mails, make payments, and complete other needed tasks. Stevenson found that well-versed students and instructors in the learning management platform. When students encounter problems with technology, they want to talk to a live person at any time and on-demand. Financial aid was another essential external factor that helped students persist in online programs. Stevenson suggested that online learners were at a higher risk for dropping out of programs because of the necessity of students having to contribute out of their own pockets once federal grants and loans have run out. Additionally, the financial costs

increased when students who were new to the online environment took time to become proficient in the learning platform as well as to learn to communicate effectively and complete assignments that met the instructors' expectations (Stevenson, 2013).

Unlike the previous studies related to coaching and support systems discussed in this section, Brown (2011) called attention to the role multiculturalism and learning transfer plays in helping to support the learning experience for students. The author identified a gap in the literature regarding the role multiculturalism plays in a student's online experience. Based on the literature review he conducted, there were studies that examined the role multiculturalism played in the face-to-face environment but not in the online environment. Brown used the concept of multicultural dimensions as a framework and identify six areas: content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, school culture, and social structure. The author found application of these dimensions in the online environment when students were exposed to different voices coming from different backgrounds.

To measure these characteristics, the author used the eLearning Multicultural Awareness Survey and used a pre-experimental design. The independent variables were the multicultural instruction and online classroom environment and the dependent variable was the student's multicultural awareness. To enhance the validity of the pre-experimental design, the author employed a qualitative component by observing selected online classes and interviewing faculty using a multicultural approach to teaching. The study sample included 153 students who responded to an e-mail to participate in the study during one school quarter period. The study included a two-tailed test of statistical significance to determine the change in the participant's responses from the pre-survey at

the beginning of the course to the post-survey at the end of the course. Brown reported that students perceived that their online instructors promoted culturally diverse instruction and that it enhanced their learning and self -awareness of their own culture and biases. Brown also found that students generally perceived the online environment as less discriminatory than face-to-face classes. Brown (2011) recommended that learning management practitioners should consider including cultural competency when training advisors and instructors so that their work with students is more empathetic and caring. Competency areas included: diversity of thought, understanding of different cultural and demographic backgrounds, and pedagogic approaches aligned with the online student's learning preference.

Other research identified in the literature regarding coaching and support as they relate to student persistence in online learning include having experienced culturally competent peer tutors at various stages of an online learning program to share their experience and insight (Baggaley, 2014; Berry, 2017; Butz et al., 2014; ONeill, & Thomson, 2013; Simon et al., 2015). Areas of coaching consisted of obtaining support to learn how to manage time and avoid procrastination (Chitkushev et al., 2014; Fontenot et al., 2015; Kumar & Coe, 2017), and participation in synchronous group calls or web conferences to share lessons learned and best practices (Jaggars, 2014; Kilburn, Kilburn & Cates, 2014; Gomez-Rey, Barbera, & Fernandez-Navarro, 2017; Roche & Clarke, 2014). A final area related to coaching included navigating the academic and student support resources available to help students persist in online learning programs (Kim, Park, & Cozart, 2014; Knowles & Kerkman, 2014; Russo-Gleicher, 2013; Simunich et al., 2015).

All studies included in this section provided insight into what steps CEOs can take towards incentivizing employees to persist in completing online learning manage development programs. Wright et al. (2013) revealed that students who were further along in their academic program could serve as mentors. The experienced student mentor concept might help other students stay motivated and engaged as they share lessons learned and best practices. Likewise, Gedera (2014) found that in the areas of coaching and support, students want timely and constructive feedback from instructors and administrators to help make their online learning experience more satisfying. Xiao (2010) asserted that school and organizational administrators who demonstrate, in a constructive way, humility, patience, and feedback might help students maintain their self-esteem and persist through their online learning program. Sung and Choi (2014) stressed that, as online learning continues to permeate organizations as a learning strategy, leaders and managers must stay informed of employees' development as they progress through their program. Brown (2011) called attention to the role multiculturalism and learning transfer plays in helping to support the learning experience for students. Brown suggested that learning management practitioners consider including cultural competency when training student advisors and instructors so that they work with students in a more empathetic and caring way. Competency areas included: diversity of thought, understanding different cultural and demographic backgrounds, and pedagogic approaches aligned with the online student's learning preference.

Herzberg (1976) asserted that psychological growth happens when one demonstrates effectiveness in handling ambiguity and not knowing all the answers. The studies reviewed in this section focused on gaining insight about student perceptions of

persistence and motivation. It is wise to reach out to others for help and support in adjusting to handling the unknown. Similarly, in online learning, student motivation and engagement are enhanced when students receive the effective coaching and needed support to help them meet the challenges of the unknown during the learning process. However, meeting the challenge of the unknown is sometimes a barrier to persistence and motivation in online learning programs.

Barriers to Student Persistence

The motivation for persistence of adult online learners may vary at any time as they matriculate through their program (Geiger, Morris, & Subocz, 2014; Hayward & Williams, 2015). Adult students who work full-time and attend online programs part-time experience numerous barriers that may interrupt their educational program. Serido, Shim, Xiao, Tang, and Card (2014) put forth that some online learners take a leave of absence so that they can handle the life challenges that interrupt their focus on studying. Fetzner (2013) affirmed the fact that online students have competing priorities such as parenting, working in a demanding job, or taking time to find another job. These priorities can take precedence over consistently keeping up with the demands of online course work. Although attending school online is asynchronous and allows students to participate in discussions at their convenience, students reported that they could not attend to learning because they were more focused on surviving and handling life challenges. Aslanian and Clinefelter (2013) conducted research to understand the barriers and demands to student completion in online learning. The researchers discovered that there were many barriers to studying in an online environment and categorized them into internal and external factors. Internal factors included self-efficacy, self-determination, procrastination, time

management. External factors of students persisting in online programs included family, organizational support, financial issues, unforeseen health challenges, and changes in job status. These internal and external factors align with factors found in the conceptual framework of this study.

Some researchers conducted studies to determine whether the level of rigor and stress differed in the online environment vs. the traditional environment and found that there was no difference (Alexander, Lynch, Rabinovich, & Knutel, 2014; Bates, 2015; Bryant & Hart, 2014; Wolfson et al., 2014) Some students left the online learning experience for a number of reasons such as lack of social connectedness (Fonolahi, Khan, & Jokhan, 2014; Paglis, 2014; Rhode et al., 2017; Shelton Hunt, 2014), emotional support from family, friends or peers (Aaron, 2015; Jayakumar & Sulthan, 2014), and learning style incompatible with the mode of engagement of the online learning environment (Favor & Kulp, 2015; Moore, 2014). Additional barriers for students not completing an online program included lack of basic computer skills to keep up with the pace (Gopala, Paswan, & Qin, 2015; Locatis, Gaines, Liu, Gill, & Ackerman, 2015), difficultly accessing resources (Simunich et al., 2015; Wu, Guandong, & Kruck, 2014), frustration in contacting or communicating with student and academic support systems (Katane et al., 2015; Madland & Richards, 2017; Newberry & Deluca, 2014), and non-academic issues such as costs associated with having a computer, the Internet, and access to technology (Gulsen, 2014; Petty & Thomas, 2014; Serido et al., 2014; Stewart et al.; Sutton, 2014). Technology is an essential part of a student's decision to persist in an online learning program. Becker, Newton, and Sawang (2013) concluded that online learners with unresponsive instructors and administrators, lead to students finding the

lack of contact a barrier to fully engaging in the online learning experience. This review of the many barriers and their effects on student persistence demonstrates the broad scope of the issues that potentially prohibit or interfere with their learning pursuits (Fetzner, 2013; Kurmizi, 2015; Lenert & Janes, 2017; Masuda, Locke, & Williams, 2014). Insights about the persistence factors and barriers discovered in this literature review help justify the rationale for selecting the conceptual framework, research questions, and methodology for this study.

Literature Related to the Research Methodology

Qualitative researchers want to gain insight from the individual experience to better understand how things work and what their experience was (Stake, Denzin, & Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 2010). Unlike quantitative design, which is used to test theory and validate information with statistics, qualitative design seeks to build a detailed picture represented by multiple dimensions and perspectives of a problem or situation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The qualitative method seeks to provide the understanding and meaning that people give to their personal experiences.

Qualitative research can also add situational examples to the reader's experience (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). In other words, qualitative research complements the statistical results derived from quantitative studies because it provides understanding and context to statistical outcomes. Stake (2010) asserted that "whether a statistic is valid or not, any interpretation based on statistics alone is an invalid interpretation" (p. 29).

Merriam & Tisdale (2016) indicated that qualitative research is a methodology focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those studied. The researchers further asserted that the discovery and insightful approach to research

offers the best hope of contributing to the academic knowledge base and various industry

practices. This is in part due to the fact that researchers are gaining insight directly from

those who experienced the event or situation. Merriam & Tisdale (2016), Stake (2010),

and Yin (2014) identified the following baseline characteristics of qualitative research

studies:

- The goal is to gain insight, make sense from multiple perspectives, and
  identify themes that are transferrable to the knowledge base and industry
  practices.

- It states how the conceptual framework provides a baseline of assumptions
  about the way things may work in context to a particular study.

- Research is an inductive-emerging use of theory that is the framework for the
  study.

- The research design is about idea generation and it is open and emergent as
  the research unfolds.

- It uses real-world situations in natural contexts and settings.

- The researcher is the primary instrument used to interpret the data.

- The research design uses multiple methods to obtain and triangulate
  information.

- Researchers use small samples (e.g., one to 15) and they are selected
  purposefully.

As discussed earlier, quantitative studies are usually descriptive and use statistical

analysis to confirm or disconfirm predictions and conclusions about a particular

population. Qualitative studies provide more depth and reasoning for the statistical results by providing insight about what factors were involved. Qualitative researchers pose questions such as:

- What were the environmental conditions?

- What were the personal and collective experiences of those involved that led to the results?

- What was it like to experience the phenomena or situation?

- What did participants learn from the experience?

- What would the participants do differently as a result of their first experience with the phenomena?

- What can others learn from the case study example?

Several researchers have conducted quantitative studies to predict whether or not some students will succeed in an online learning environment (Association of Talent Development Research, 2014; Baldwin & Trespalacios, 2017; Ke & Kwak, 2013; Seiver & Troja, 2014; Stevenson, 2013; Youngju et al., 2013). However, these studies do not provide information necessary to interpret that data. Without accurate interpretation, it is difficult to understand why the dropout and retention rates are so high in online learning environments (Horvat, Krsmanovic, Dobrota, & Cudanov, 2013). Some students may feel that they need live interaction with people and immediate feedback. Immediate feedback is used in the traditional settings while delayed feedback occurs more often in online learning settings (Knowles & Kerkman, 2014). Without the appropriate data to fully assess the context of the situation, there is no way to tell what factor(s) influence the

rates. Qualitative research methods provide an approach to gain insight and understanding about behaviors, contexts, and interrelations (Yin, 2014). It is clear that qualitative research adds value to knowledge base and industry practice.

Two methodologies of the qualitative research paradigm are phenomenology and case study designs. These examples are described, along with their strengths and weaknesses, to show how they are applied in social science research.

Phenomenology. The research purpose of phenomenology is to capture the "lived experiences" of people who have experienced a phenomena or event for the larger purpose of helping others understand more about that event or phenomena as a result of what they experienced (Moustakas, 1994, p. 12). Van Manen (2014) explained that phenomenology is a way of describing phenomena as experienced, lived, and realized by people who have experienced it. For example, researchers may want to learn more about the traits and commonalities of those students who managed to stay motivated to persist and complete an online learning program.

Researchers may also want to gain insight about the various feelings and emotions that doctoral students experience as they matriculate through an online doctoral program. Some students may feel moments of isolation, frustration, and hopelessness. Others may feel moments of joy, relief, disbelief, and a feeling of accomplishment. In both of these examples, researchers collect data usually through interviews from individuals who were able to persist through and complete an online doctoral program (Teras & Kartoglu, 2017). The data would provide researchers with information to analyze and interpret the essence of the participant's experience. The essence is "what they experienced and how they experienced it" (Moustakas, 1994, p.125).

The two main schools of phenomenology are *descriptive* and *interpretive* (Moustakas, 1994). The focus of *descriptive* phenomenology is to capture the collective experiences and interpret the meaning of those who experienced a phenomena or event rather than capturing the individual experiences. The end goal is to establish the meaning of the phenomena and share with others what it was like for those who experienced the event (Bombala, 2014).

One challenge researchers must manage when conducting phenomenological research is suspending their own beliefs, judgments, and personal cultural experiences, known as epoche (Bombala, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). The idea is that when researchers suspend their own perceptions and judgments prior to conducting the study, it helps them to operate with a clear mind void of past experiences and influences. Operating with a clear mind enables researchers to obtain and interpret information in its purest form from the participants (Bombala, 2014; Van Manen, 2014).

In descriptive phenomenology, the goal is to describe things as they appear in consciousness. Moustakas (1994) described consciousness as the connection between people and the world. Consciousness is intentional meaning that every thought, every desire, and every judgment is an acceptance or rejection of something (Maxwell, 2013). In descriptive phenomenology, researchers try to determine the essence of the participant's conscious thoughts, desires, and judgments as it applies to a general experience.

The focus of *interpretive* phenomenology, also known as hermeneutics, is to describe, understand, and interpret participant's individual experiences of an event or phenomena (Bombala, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). The overall focus is for researchers to

provide a detailed narrative from the participant's perspective, about what they saw, what they may have heard, and what happened before, during, and after the event occurred. In both interpretive and descriptive phenomenology, researchers have to remain objective and suspend judgment, pre-conceived notions, and past perceptions. Doing so allows the participants to authentically share the reality of their experience of the event or phenomenon.

There are some researchers who believed that it is difficult for researchers to suspend all beliefs, judgments, and notions (Bombala, 2014; Van Manen, 2014). Instead, they contend that, when phenomenological researchers bring their notions and perceptions to the forefront, it may help provide a baseline of knowledge to understand the phenomena before engaging with the participants in the research study. The overall aim is for researchers to have awareness of and acknowledge their own biases and notions as they relate to interpreting the data.

Van Manen (2014) introduced the idea that there are four fundamental phenomenological themes that help guide how people experience the world. These themes are *lived space*, *lived time*, *lived body* and *lived human relations*. Lived space refers to the area, home, place, and proximity where the event happened. For example, people may remember where they were when the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 (i.e., 9/11) occurred in the United States. *Lived time* refers to a particular time in people's lives when an event happened. People may reflect and remember their feelings, emotions, and reaction at that moment in time as they related to the 9/11 attack. *Lived body* refers to our ability to share information and communicate with voice and body. For example, hand gestures and facial expressions are more animated for some people who share

experiences about their perception of the attack. Finally, *lived human relations,* refers to how people exist and relate to others about how they experience the world. When one person shares an experience about how he or she experienced events happening in the world, like the 9/11 attack, it may shed light or influence the way another person views his or her own experience.

The phenomenological research approach is appropriate for research that aims to provide the researcher an understanding and interpretation of a participant's experience of an event or phenomenon so that the meaning of the experience is determined and shared. Whether researchers decide to use a *descriptive* or *interpretative* approach to phenomenology, both methodologies have strengths and weaknesses.

One of the strengths of phenomenology research designs are that they expand general awareness about what it means to experience a phenomenon or event (Moustakas, 1994). For example, the findings from phenomenological research may expand awareness of what one will need to consider if they choose to pursue an online doctorate degree. Phenomenological research also can help expand awareness of what it is like to live with an unseen disability.

Another strength of phenomenological research is that it helps to expand awareness of the theories and concepts used to provide meaning to those who experienced a given phenomenon or event. Additionally, using phenomenological research may help researchers envision possibilities for applying theories and concepts in other types of qualitative research. (Bombala, 2014).

Yet another strength of phenomenological research is that it can reveal, through a participant's responses, hidden meanings that are not obtained through direct observation

or formal experimentation. During a phenomenological research study, researchers

employ member-checking techniques to confirm with participants that what they said is

what they actually meant. This technique can provide added credibility to the overall

interpretation of meaning in research study findings (Maxwell, 2013).

Along with the strengths of phenomenological designs, there are also weaknesses.

One major weakness is that the findings in phenomenological research are not

generalizable to other populations (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, because the sample

in a phenomenological study is generally small, readers may question whether or not the

interpretation of meaning is typical for others who might experience the same

phenomenon or event. Although the findings may not generalize to other populations,

they might provide a baseline for insight and understanding to inform research, industry

practices, and personal decisions (Maxwell, 2013).

Another weakness of this method is that depending on the research topic,

participants may have language barriers, regional accents, or embarrassment on revealing

the truth. They also may not allow the researcher to effectively interpret a participant's

responses in an interview because the participant was inarticulate. This could lead some

researchers to use their own perceptions of what participants may have meant in a

particular statement. A final weakness of phenomenological research is the difficulty in

detecting researchers' personal biases, judgments, and notions as they interpret and give

meaning to the participant's responses (Bombala, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Van Manen,

2014).

Phenomenology is an appropriate research method for researchers who want to

gain insight from the actual lived experiences of those who experienced an event or

phenomenon. The research techniques used in phenomenological research are minimal. Techniques include analyzing participant's written responses to questions or observing participant's cultural artifacts, poetry, and so on. However, most researchers use interview techniques to collect data from participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Case Study Design. Stake (2010) asserted that two realities exist simultaneously and separately within every human engagement. One is the personal and individual experience and the other is the reality of the collective experience. In case study design, the research goal is to take a particular case and investigate it, in its real-life context to gain an understanding of "how it works and why" (p. 18).

The purpose of case study design is to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation or phenomenon and its meaning for those involved. Another purpose is to add examples to the reader's experience rather than generalize information (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The interest in case studies is in process, a qualitative feature, rather than outcomes, a quantitative feature. Case studies also focus on context rather than confirmation. Insights from case studies can directly influence program planning, policy, practice, and future research (Yin, 2014).

Merriam and Tisdale (2016) explained case study research design as an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system. Bounded means the researcher can focus on the specific area of study (Yin, 2014). Miles et al. (2014) described case study research design as a circle with a heart in the middle. The heart represented the area in which the research would focus and the surrounding areas within the circle represented the space that is not examined. The actual case could include a person such as a student, a

teacher, an executive, a team of managers, an online learning management development program, a community, a specific policy and so on.

Case study researchers are interested in understanding a situation or phenomenon in a real-life context. Unlike researchers who may use quasi-experimental designs, case study researchers want to know what it means for participants in a particular setting or a participant in a particular program. They want to gain understanding from the participant's perspective, and interpret that meaning so that it may inform others (Yin, 2014). Additionally, case study researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to those experiences.

Maxwell (2013) and Yin (2014) indicated that case studies have three distinct features that distinguish them from other types of studies. First, they are *particularistic*, which means that case studies focus on a particular event, situation, operational program or phenomenon. The case itself is important because of the information it reveals about the event, program, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Two benefits to the *particularistic* nature of case study research design are:

- It allows readers to make their own determination as to what to do or not do in a similar context or situation.

- It provides a specific example to a much larger problem that needs solving.

Second, case studies are descriptive which means that the end product of a case study is a rich literal description of the event, situation, or phenomenon. When researchers write rich and descriptive accounts of the events that occur about an event or

phenomenon, their information is detailed, specific, and gives the context of the situation which may shed some light as to why participant's respond the way they do about their experience.

The benefits of the descriptive nature of case study research design include that:

- it can reveal the various perspectives, angles, and complexities of a situation to show that, rather than just one factor contributing to findings, there are many factors that contribute;

- it can bring into perspective the background of the past and lay a foundation for understanding the event or phenomenon at that point in time, which may allow the case study to reveal information relevant to the present.

The third feature of case study research design is that it is *heuristic* which means it provides a pathway to allow readers to come to their own understanding of the situation or event. Case studies can provide information that may reinforce, modify, or bring about additional questions that merge with existing experiences and knowledge about the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Stake, 2010). As with the particularistic and descriptive benefits, the heuristic feature also provides benefits to case study research design including that:

- it can provide in-depth explanations or reasons for a specific problem which provides more background of what happened and why;

- it can provide a comprehensive interpretation of context, analysis, and interpretation that helps the reader reach their own conclusion and apply findings where appropriate.

One benefit of case study research design is that it has multidisciplinary applications. For example, it is useful in law, medicine, psychology, and social work to gain insight about individual clients. It is also used in political science, business, journalism, economics, and government to influence forming policy. Finally, case study research design is used in education particularly in learning management to illuminate, adjust, or improve specific issues and problems (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). For example, if researchers wanted to gain insight into how some students persist and complete an online learning management program and why others were not able to complete it, they could use a case study design to explore the individual experiences of students who completed the online program versus those who did not. If researchers wanted to know more about how an executive's leadership style impacted an organization, they could conduct case study research on one executive in one organization or multiple executives in other organizations who may have similar or different leadership styles. Both examples highlight the versatility in using case study methodology in various disciplines.

In case study design, the researcher is the primary instrument of the data collection, analysis and interpretation who produces a narrative report that is richly descriptive in nature (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Unlike experimental and quasi-experimental research, case study design allows researchers to use multiple methods to collect data. For example, case study researchers may examine archival records, documents, and transcripts, or they may observe live settings and interview participants (Yin, 2014). These are only a few of the methods used in case studies Merriam and Tisdale (2016) and Miles et al. (2014) agree that the most common methods used in case

study methodology are observations, interviews, and document analysis. Each method

has its own usefulness to case study research design.

First, direct observation provides researchers with a real-life observation of a

situation or phenomenon. For example, researchers can observe meetings, online

classrooms, actual work sites, web sites, etc. Second, interviews, in most case study

research designs, are focused interviews, which usually include a conversational

approach and cover a short period of time. However, some case study interviews can

extend to multiple sessions over a period time. The interview questions are open-ended

and follow a certain set of questions, called a protocol. The interview protocol allows for

consistency and flexibility in the questions that the participants may answer. Depending

on the techniques used in the case study, researchers may find it hard to directly observe

and measure responses to interview questions, so implementing an open-ended approach

allows the researcher to ask questions they deem will solicit the most meaning (Yin,

2014). Third, document analysis is useful because it helps to corroborate the insight

gained from the observations and interviews. Yin (2014) suggested that the information

discovered in documents could help researchers verify the correct spellings, titles, and

names of organizations that might be mentioned in an interview. Merriam and Tisdale

(2016) further indicated that document analysis may provide more insight and further

questions about the way communication and operations happen in organizations. Using a

combination of sources such as direct observation, interviews, and document analysis

helps researchers to cross-check and validate the findings in the study. Additionally,

because case studies use multiple sources of evidence, they allow researchers to examine

a broader span of evidence to support the findings and build a stronger case (Merriam &

Tisdale, 2016; Miles, et al., 2014).

There are several strengths to case study research designs. One is that it can create

a rich, colorful example and image for the reader about the event, situation, or

phenomenon. The findings from case study research may expand awareness of what it is

like to experience being an online student. Another case study may help expand

awareness of what it is like for management administrators to support those who pursue

an online management development program.

Case studies also allow researchers to have the option to use documentation and

other non-obvious occurrences missed in experimental or quasi-experimental research

approaches. This is helpful for understanding the wide range and variety of human

experiences (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2014). Additionally,

using case study research may help future researchers envision possibilities for applying

theories and concepts in other types of qualitative research (Bombala, 2014).

Unlike options available in most quantitative research designs, case studies allow

researchers to collect and analyze data that help the reader interpret findings appropriate

to their situation (Miles et al., 2014). As with most qualitative studies, the findings are

not typically generalizable to other populations. However, they may provide a baseline

for insight and understanding to inform future research, industry practices, and personal

decisions (Yin, 2014).

Along with the strengths of case study designs are weaknesses. One weakness is

that, although researchers produce rich, detailed description of the event or phenomena,

in some situations they may not have the time or money to conduct a long-term case

study (Yin, 2014). Additionally, because the narrative report is detailed and descriptive, it is sometimes too lengthy for some policy makers and management practitioners to read and use.

Another weakness, similar to a limitation of phenomenological studies already cited, is that participants may have language barriers, regional accents, or an inability to articulate sufficiently to allow the researcher to effectively interpret what the participants said, in an interview. This could lead some researchers to use their own perceptions of what participants may have meant in a particular statement. Yet another weakness of case study research is that it is sometimes difficult to detect a researcher's personal biases, judgments, and notions as they interpret and give meaning to the participant's responses (Bombala, 2014; Van Manen, 2014).

Despite these weaknesses, case study methodology is an appropriate research method for researchers who seek an in-depth understanding about how or why something works or does not (Yin, 2014). Unlike the limited research techniques used in phenomenological research, techniques used in case studies allow researchers to utilize a variety of evidence such as documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations. Case study research is validated and confirmed when researchers employ a variety of techniques to gain an in-depth understanding of how and why some people are able to complete a goal and others are not (Stake, 2010; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Yin, 2014).

A number of researchers (Burns, 2013; Hrastinski & Stenbom, 2013; Salas & Moller, 2015; Spector, 2013; Stevenson, 2013) have set the stage for a study related to the research questions on motivation and persistence in online learning programs and have recommended future studies. Although some quantitative research studies predict

contributing factors of online student success (Thompson et al., 2013; Wood, 2014; Youngju et al., 2013), researchers are calling for more qualitative case studies that provide insight and knowledge from the students' perspective about the factors that impact their success in online learning programs (Spector, 2013; Stevenson, 2013; Wood, 2014). Additionally, researchers have called for more qualitative studies to add to the breadth of literature on using online learning to develop managers in organizations (Burns, 2013; Hrastinski & Stenbom, 2013; Salas & Moller, 2015; Spector, 2013; Stevenson, 2013). This proposed study may help fill the gap in the literature by examining factors that impact students' motivation and persistence in online learning management development programs.

Summary and Conclusion

The various research studies reviewed in this chapter lend support to my study. I explored current research surrounding the motivational theories of Herzberg (1976) and Rovai (2003) that impact change in behavior related to online learning management development programs. The literature reviewed yielded five major areas: the purpose for pursuing online learning programs, learning styles, course relevance, coaching support and barriers. These themes emerged from the synthesis of recent studies regarding how researchers focused on the internal and external motivational factors that may help students persist in online learning management development programs.

Within the context of existing knowledge about student persistence and motivation for matriculating through online management development programs, researchers called attention to actions CEOs can take to incentivize employees to persist in completing their online programs (Baggaley, 2014; Butz et al., 2014; Simon et al.,

2015). First, learning strategies need to reflect an understanding of the goals, learning preferences, and motivation of individuals who want to pursue the learning development program (Furlonger & Gencic, 2014; He, 2014; Poll et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2017). Second, learning management practitioners need to utilize various mediums of learning including face-to-face, online learning, mobile technology, web conferencing, and knowledge-sharing tools (Lowenthal et al., 2017; Nielsen, 2015; Simon et al., 2015). Third, learning management practitioners need training on how to prepare students on what to expect before pursuing an online learning development program and follow the preparation with coaching and other supports along the way (Fayer, 2014; Rhode et al., 2017; Roche & Clarke, 2014). Finally, learning management practitioners need to keep the CEOs and stakeholders informed of the progress of employees' online learning as it applies to helping the organization change and grow. This is especially true when employees pursue online learning programs (Choi et al., 2017; Clayton-Code, 2015; Epp et al., 2017; Mensch, 2009; Roche & Clarke, 2014)

The gaps that were not addressed in the existing management literature create pathways for future research. There was minimal research on demonstrating the return on investment as well as keeping management stakeholders informed about the benefits of online learning. Spector (2013) and Hrastinski and Stenbom (2013) agree that, as online learning continues to grow as a viable option for developing management skills, organizational stakeholders need to stay informed of the progress of employees to help validate the investment in employee development.

Another gap in the literature is related to study variables. More research is needed on variables such as motivation and persistence as seen from the student's perspective

(Gopala et al., 2015; Harrell & Bower, 2011; Orcutt & Dringus, 2017; Park & Hee Jun, 2014; Seiver & Troja, 2014;). Learning management practitioners can gain insight about what it takes to keep an online student motivated and engaged to persist in the program. This is particularly true if it is heard from the voice of the student. Seiver and Troja (2014) inferred that, since online learning allows students to learn when it is convenient for their lifestyle, it is essential to learn more about their stories to inform the practice.

Yet another gap in the literature is the paucity of research studies that utilized Rovai's (2003) composite persistence model as a conceptual framework. Rovai (2003) maintained that government regulations and oversight of retention and graduation rates in online learning programs exists. Hence, there is a growing need to provide more research-based evidence about learning outcomes and the value of online programs.

From a management perspective, the insight gained from this case study addresses the gap in the literature by answering the call for more qualitative research studies designed to gain insight into the employees' perspective regarding online employer-sponsored management development programs. Additionally, the study extends knowledge in learning management by providing useful information to learning management practitioners and academic administrators who design online learning management programs and provide coaching support to employees that pursue these programs (Heorhiadi, 2012; Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014).

Chapter 3 includes the design and rationale for this study that explores the factors affecting employee persistence in an online learning management development program. Topics in Chapter 3 includes a detailed explanation of the case study data analysis plan designed to yield a set of persistence factors that may inform learning management

practitioners and academic administrators. Finally, the chapter includes a discussion of

the issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and transferability

that I used to ensure this study adheres to the principles of sound case study research.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore employee's perceptions about the factors that impact motivation and persistence to attain an online management development certificate This chapter includes an overview of the specific case to provide readers with background information, an explanation of the role of the researcher, a rationale for using the qualitative tradition and case study research method, an explanation about the strategy for selecting participants and the instruments used to collect data. This chapter also includes details about the field test to assess the effectiveness of the interview protocol.

The central questions that guided this research were: How do employee's perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online management development certificate program affect their success rate in completing the program? What steps can CEOs take to incentivizing employees to persist in completing the program.

Research Design and Rationale

Merriam and Tisdale (2016) explained case study research design as an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system, that is, where a fence could be built around the area being studied (p.18). Case study inquiry allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of a situation or phenomenon and its meaning for those involved. Another benefit of case study is that it adds examples to the reader's experience rather than providing generalized information (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The interest in case studies is in process, a qualitative feature, rather than outcomes, a quantitative feature. Case studies also focus on context rather than confirmation. Insights from case studies can directly influence program planning, policy, practice, and future research (Yin,

2014). I considered, but did not select, phenomenology, a closely related qualitative

methodology. Phenomenology was not selected because it describes the essence of

individual experiences. In addition, phenomenology uses mostly interviews to collect in-

depth data about the "lived experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 25) of participants who

experienced an event or phenomena. The research techniques used in phenomenological

research are minimal. Most researchers gain insight from in-depth interviews with

participants. Other phenomenological techniques include analyzing participants' written

responses to questions or observing participants' cultural artifacts.

  I chose the case study because it built a detailed picture, represented by multiple

dimensions and perspectives, of a situation or program (Stake, 2010). Case studies

produce rich, detailed descriptions of the current situation and the context of the case. I

considered several other qualitative approaches including phenomenology, ethnography,

and grounded theory. Van Manen (2014) explained that phenomenology is a way of

describing phenomena as experienced, lived, and realized by people who have

experienced it. Most data collection techniques in phenomenology are based on

interviews to interpret a collective experience of the phenomena and thus would limit

options to gather data from other sources needed for this proposed study. Ethnography is

useful for exploring those who live within a certain culture by spending time living with

those under study. Case study research does not require researchers to spend time living

with those under study. Grounded theory requires in-depth interviews and numerous

iterations of analysis combined with fact checking (Flint & Woodruff, 2015).

  Phenomenology focuses on the common characteristics of shared lived

experiences that are recorded and interpreted from the participants' perspectives. For this

proposed study, case study research was the most appropriate research method because it allowed me to explore multiple sources of data to provide readers with a detailed, thick description of the persistence of management employee participants' self-described experiences in the online certificate program. The descriptions drew from material gathered through participant interviews, summary notes, and relevant management development (pseudonym) program documentation (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher in a case study is the primary data collector who analyzes and interprets data (Stake, 2010). In a case study, the researcher must reflect on personal biases and minimize the influences of those biases on the study (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Yin (2014) suggested that to collect qualitative data during interviews, researchers must have the skills needed to ask the appropriate questions, know when to probe to dig deeper to extract richer information from the participant. They must also have an instinct for hearing and observing when participants need more clarity, a question asked in another way, and an atmosphere that is safe and comfortable for fully sharing their story. Furthermore, Stake (2010) stressed that researchers must understand the issues related to the problem or program under study and have the conceptual cognitive ability to analyze data and interpret them as described by the participants in the study.

To conduct this study, I leveraged my 20 years of experience as a learning management practitioner and a Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF) to probe questions in an open-ended manner and encourage elaboration or additional information for participant responses that seem vague. Qualitative studies may give room for biased interpretation and external influences that may impact the results of the study (Yin,

2014). I formerly worked at GXI for three years as Training and Development Manager. I served as the nationwide program manager who worked with local education coordinators to administer the Management development program. The local education coordinators helped recruit participants, coached and guided them, and helped students maintain course enrollment. I had no personal or working relationships with anyone who participated in this study. I had no position of influence or power to guide the outcomes of this study. I informed participants that their identity will remain confidential and that I did not use their legal names in this study. As a result of my years in working as the nationwide program manager for this program, I believe I am in a good position to collect relevant data for this study.

However, I am aware that a researcher's experience with the study case may influence the credibility and confirmability of study findings (Yin, 2014). Abiding by Bombala's (2014) suggestion that qualitative researchers try to eliminate personal bias, individual feelings, experiences, ethics, and principles when conducting research, I worked to minimize any personal bias or previous experiences as the nationwide program manager so as not to affect data collection, analysis, or reporting of actual findings (Stake, 2010). In addition, I utilized member checks, which involved summarizing the data, interpreting the data, and sending it back to the participants to verify the accuracy of the information in the data analysis and reporting of findings (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). I believe that using my years of experience as a facilitation expert and following the recommendations of qualitative research experts mentioned above helped me fulfill my role of analyzing and reporting the research data in an honest and unbiased manner.

Merriam & Tisdale (2016) stated that qualitative researchers should use a research journal to capture thoughts and personal insights during data collection to help align participants' responses. I used a journal to help me reflect on personal insights and experiences that could affect research results. Using the research journal also helped me stay grounded and focused on the context of the case (Stake, 2010).

I obtained written consent from the GXI organization to interview students and to access program documents, and marketing information relevant to conducting this study. I did not have any influence on the students or education coordinators who participated in this study. Each participant was free to participate in the study or not.

Prior to collecting data, I recruited a purposive sampling of 12 participants who met the criteria to participate in the study. I gave the participants a letter of informed consent that indicated that their participation was voluntary and they can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty as required by the federal regulations regarding human subjects' protections and the Belmont Report of 1979. I also explained the risks and benefits of participating in this research study. In this case, participants may face minimal risks comparable with those of everyday work and home life.

I used an interview protocol guide (see Appendix A) during the semi-structured interviews as recommended by Yin (2014). In the interview protocol, I introduced myself, discuss the purpose and significance of participation in the study, engaged the participants in the open-ended interview questions, and concluded the session. I used my experience as a Certified Professional Facilitator to create an atmosphere that was comfortable for participants to share their experiences in an open and truthful way. I personally collected, transcribed, and analyzed data to determine the themes and report

the findings. I maintained the confidentiality of the participants by using pseudonyms in lieu of legal names and I secured the data on a password protected laptop and portable disk that will be locked in my office. I will destroy the data after five years of completing the study.

Methodology

The purpose of case study research is to gain insight and understanding about a situation or phenomenon in a real-life context. Case study inquiry encompasses identifying and recruiting participants, interviewing them to gain further insight, and then analyzing, coding, and reporting the data (Van Manen, 2014). The goal of selecting sound research methodology is to provide a framework for a study that is original, rigorous, valid, replicable, and transferrable to inform others (Bombala, 2014). This section includes the methods for conducting this study in the United States.

Participant Selection Logic

The target population for this case study consisted of participants enrolled in the Management Certificate program from 2011 to 2015 at the GXI organization. GXI is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to help people with disabilities and barriers to employment find jobs. The GXI organization was chosen because the learning management practitioners developed and administered the online management development program and it aligned with the focus of this research study. The criteria for selecting the participants was as follows: (a) full-time employees who work for the GXI organization; (b) individuals who completed and received a letter grade of C or better in at least one class; (c) persons who completed the entire certificate program; and (d) those who were 18 years and older and who consented to participate in the study. Using these

criteria to select the study participants ensured all participants had participated in the

Management Certificate program (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The GXI organization was

selected because researchers called for more qualitative case studies to gain insight about

motivation and persistence in an online learning program from the student's perspective

(Gomez-Rey et al., 2017; Johnson, 2015; Juszkiewicz, 2015). After Walden's IRB

reviewed and approved study protocols (IRB No. 09-12-17-0080902), I identified

potential participants by using management development program documents to identify

the participants who met study criteria. I recorded the name, number, and e-mail address

of participants. I sent e-mails and made phone calls to participants explaining the study

and asking them to review the inclusion criteria included in the e-mail (see Appendix B),

which I sent along with the consent form and the interview questions (see Appendix C for

interview questions). Participants were informed that all personal information will be

kept confidential and that participation is voluntary. I asked participants to sign the

consent form in the e-mail if they were willing to participate in the study. I waited for

two-weeks to receive responses. Of the students who responded to the invitation to

participate, I selected a purposive sample of 12 to interview. Of the 12 students, I selected

six students who completed the certificate program and 6 who did not complete the

program. I had a total pool of 38 participants to possibly interview if I need to achieve

data saturation.

The method of sampling is critical for validity and reliability. I duplicated the

sampling processes outlined in studies included in the literature review (Brown, 2011;

Stevenson, 2013; Xiao, 2010). According to Bombala (2014), purposeful sampling

provides the best participant pool when researchers are seeking to obtain data from

individuals who have experienced, or are familiar with, the studied phenomenon. In this

case study, the individuals had experience as students in the management certificate

program. An appropriate range of participants for a case study is between 8 to 12 (Yin,

2014) to ensure rich, thick descriptions. Also, this range is desirable because of the in-

depth nature of the information shared by participants. However, knowing when data

saturation occurs is challenging (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). I had a total pool of 38

participants to possibly interview if I need to achieve data saturation. I probed and asked

participants to elaborate their responses to questions and I reviewed program documents

and analyzed data until the data presented no new information (Yin, 2014). I also

compared data with factors found in the literature review so that I could identify whether

additional saturation occurred. Including participants who had experienced the

management development program for at least one semester to earn a letter grade was

critical to the success of the study because only those who had experienced the program

for a minimum of one semester can provide feedback on factors that impacted persistence

in an online learning management development program. I based my final selection on

the availability and consent of the students who responded on time to the e-mail

invitation, their accessibility, and their willingness to participate.

Instrumentation

The data collection for my proposed study followed Yin's (2014) three principles

for collecting case study data (a) use multiple sources of evidence, (b) establish a case

study database, and (c) maintain a chain of evidence. Yin (2014) asserted that the most

common methods used in case study methodology are interviewing and document

analysis. Each method has its own usefulness to case study research design.

Interviewing, in most case studies, is comprised of focused interviews that usually have a conversational approach and cover a short period of time. However, some case study interviews can extend to multiple sessions over an extended period time. The interview questions were open-ended and follow a specific set of questions called a protocol. The protocol allowed for consistency and flexibility in the questions that I asked the participants. Appendix C includes the interview questions, which I aligned with the research questions. Depending on the techniques used in a case study, researchers may find it difficult to observe and measure responses to interview questions directly, so implementing an open-ended approach allows the researcher to ask questions that may solicit the most meaning (Yin, 2014). Second, *document analysis* is useful because it helps to corroborate the insight gained from the observations and interviews. Yin (2014) suggested that the information discovered in documents help researchers verify the correct spellings, titles, and names of organizations that were mentioned in an interview. Merriam & Tisdale (2016) further suggested that document analysis may provide more insight and further questions about the way communication and operations happen in organizations. Using a combination of sources, such as interviewing, field notes and document analysis, helps researchers to cross-check and validate the findings in the study. In addition, because case studies use multiple sources of evidence, they allow researchers to examine a broader span of evidence to support findings and build a stronger case (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection in this qualitative descriptive study (Stake, 2010). A second data source consisted of electronic interviews recorded via telephone conference. For the purposes of triangulation, I used field notes

and management development program documentation as data. I transcribed all data collected for the proposed study so that I could organize, code, and analyze data to determine the relevant themes from the participant interviews. During the study, I kept a journal of participants' contacts, dates of contact, the methods of contact, and responses. I also included, in the journal, the schedule for interviews and any communications with the student participants.

The first data component consisted of one-on-one interviews via phone conference for ease of accessibility for the researcher and the student participants (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). I asked participants semi-structured, open-ended questions centered on the primary research questions and sub-questions that I produced based on a review of the literature (see Appendix D for alignment of questions with literature review). I scheduled each interview to last an hour. If the interview time needed to exceed one hour, I got verbal permission from the participant during the recorded interview. I conducted 12 phone conference interviews with an even mix of those participants that completed the certificate program and from those that did not. Having both perspectives helped strengthen the credibility and transferability of the findings for a broader audience.

I digitally recorded and then transcribed each telephone interview using Microsoft Word. To avoid a technological failure, I used two different recorders to capture the interview responses. Once the interviews were transcribed, I sent the transcript by e-mail to each participant, so he or she could member check the document to see if what is written is what he or she meant to say. Once each participant confirmed his or her interview transcripts, I analyzed and coded data for each interview. The use of semi-

structured open-ended interviewing was appropriate for gaining insight into the factors

that impact student success in an online learning management development certificate

program. Desper (2013) utilized sem-istructured interviews to explore leadership

characteristics in virtual teams in organizations. Hrastinski and Stenbom (2013) used

semi-structured interviews to examine the potential impact of student-to-student coaching

in an online environment. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their

personal experiences in a conversational way (Spector, 2013). Merriam & Tisdale (2016)

noted that semi-structured interviewing can create a rich, colorful example and image for

the reader about the event, situation, or phenomenon. In this case study, the process of

conducting semi-structured interviews expanded awareness of what it is like to

experience being an online student. Phone interviews allowed the participants to respond

more freely to questions in a revealing manner than during face-to-face interviews

(Desper, 2013). Phone interviews are comfortable to some participants and they save time

and travel costs compared to face-to-face interviews (Bombala, 2014).

     The second data component included summary notes that I wrote immediately

after each interview. Yin (2014) recommended that researchers take time to write down

reactions to the interview immediately after the interview to capture insights gleaned

from the interview process, in general, and from the participants in particular. These field

notes included a summary of the interview setting, voice inflection, atmosphere of the

conversation, and the interaction from the researcher's point of view. When I asked a

certain question, I then reviewed the field notes to discover any insights from

participants; For example, did their voices seem more passionate and assertive when I

mentioned one topic over another? I used my collective insights from the interviews as

data to help inform the study findings. I then imported my insights into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis and coding as part of the review of each case. Merriam & Tisdale (2016) noted that field notes provide a better understanding of how things worked and the experience of participating in the program.

The third data component included evidence gathered from documents and archival data including program brochure, course syllabi, course outlines, and advertisements as well as documents on recruitment and engagement strategies used to help students persist in the program. Yin (2014) suggested that the information discovered in documents could help researchers verify the correct spellings, titles, and names of organizations mentioned in an interview. Merriam & Tisdale (2016) indicated that document analysis may also provide greater insight and further questions about the way communication and operations happen in organizations. Using a combination of sources such as interviews, field notes, and document analysis helps researchers to cross-check and validate the findings in the study. Additionally, because case studies use multiple sources of evidence, they allow researchers to examine a broader span of evidence to support the findings and build a strong case (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Miles et al., 2014).

The GXI organization provided a letter of cooperation to interview students and review program documentation. I used the program documents to provide evidence of course and program policies, instructor expectations, assignment, and grading criteria. Documents also provided accuracy data such as correct spelling of names and job titles (Stake, 2010). The interviews, field notes, and document reviews were the mechanisms for the collection of data to answer the research questions. The documents and analyses

will remain in my possession for five years. The documents will be destroyed after five years.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I designed this qualitative descriptive case study to explore participant perceptions regarding persistence and motivation to attain an employer sponsored online management development certificate at a nonprofit organization in the United States. The target population for this case study included students who were full-time employees enrolled in a Management Certificate program between 2011 to 2015. Yin (2014) recommended that researchers should aim to recruit 8 to 12 participants and plan to have 2 or 3 more in the event one participant decides not to participate in the study. Data saturation occurred when I reached a redundancy of ideas with interviews completed. I used the semi-structured interview protocol to ask each participant the same questions.

Recruitment

After the Walden IRB approval, I used management certificate program documents to identify the students who met the study criteria as a way to identify potential participants. I recorded the name, phone number, and e-mail address of potential participants. I sent e-mails and made calls explaining the study and asked them to look over the inclusion criteria in the e-mail (Appendix B). I informed potential participants that I will keep all personal information confidential and that participation is voluntary. I asked participants to sign the consent form in the e-mail if they were willing to participate in the study. I sent the e-mail immediately after the phone contact along with the consent form and the interview questions. I waited to receive responses for a two-

week period. Of the participants who responded to the invitation to participate, I selected

a sample of 12 participants to interview.

Participation

I sent participants information detailing their responsibilities for participation

when they received the invitation e-mail that contained a description of the study and

specific inclusion criteria. The e-mail included a statement that encouraged potential

participants to ask me questions regarding the study. The consent form also contained

language that informed participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time

with no repercussions. I asked each participant to verbally agree to participate in one

phone interview that lasted no longer than 60 minutes. The verbal agreement served as a

supplement to the signed consent form to ensure that they were still willing to participate

and that they understood that I recorded the conversation for research purposes only. I

also reminded the participants that I used pseudonyms rather than their names in the

study. I used the participant responses on the phone interview to evaluate my initial

coding of the factors that impacted success in an online learning management

development program.

I also used member checking to verify my understanding of each participant's

responses to the research questions. I asked participants to respond as soon as possible to

the checking. Once the analysis was complete, participants received a copy of the final

report that included an aggregate synthesis of participant responses that involved member

checking and the incorporation of participant feedback on the accuracy of the coding.

Data Collection

I designed data collected for this study based on categories from the conceptual framework (motivation and persistence). I created the interview protocol for this study and focused on participants within the purposeful sample who completed the management certificate program and those who did not. The interview protocol had interview questions that were mapped to the central question that encouraged participants to share their full experience of the program I drafted the open-ended questions to learn more about the impact of internal, external, and learning environment factors that affect persisting in an online learning management development program. I requested basic demographic information of each group including their age range, gender, and work status (full-time or part-time) and their caregiver status. Work and caregiver status provided a measure of the external influences that, in some cases, impacted these employee management students (Herzberg, 1966; Rovai, 2003).

All participant interviews followed a prescribed protocol for consistency in the data collected. As the one who conducted the in-depth interviews, I was the primary research instrument. Twenty-four hours before each interview, I sent an e-mail reminder regarding the scheduled interview. I digitally recorded the interviews to enable transcription. Data collection proceeded until I achieved redundancy of ideas and was completed with 12 interviews. I posed questions that were informed by the literature review and that the Walden University IRB and my dissertation committee review approved (IRB Approval No. 09-12-17-0080902I). I supplemented the interview data with evidence from field notes, a program brochure, course syllabi, course outlines, advertisements, and engagement strategies used to help students persist in the program.

Data Analysis Plan

The purpose of data analysis was to enable the researcher to make sense out of the data collected by consolidating, organizing, analyzing, reducing, and interpreting what the study participants said and what the researcher heard and observed (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The data analysis was designed to address the research questions (Yin, 2014). The research questions and the semi-structured interview questions were the guiding mechanisms used in the analyses. The qualitative data analysis included developing codes and using the codes to classify data (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The codes included categories relevant to the research problem, purpose statement, research questions, and conceptual framework guiding the literature (Yin, 2014). A matrix showing how each interview question is related to the research questions is included as Appendix C.

I organized and analyzed the data for this study based on emergent views from the participants on the factors that impacted student success in the online learning management development certificate program. I followed a six-step process used in qualitative case study research (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2012). The six steps included (a) organizing the data; (b) reading all data collected; (c) coding the data into categories; (d) using coding to generate themes from the analysis; (e) describing the themes that emerged from the study and using a narrative style in reporting the findings; and (f) interpreting the findings discovered during the research experience.

As a first step, immediately following the interviews I prepared verbatim transcripts as a Microsoft Word document. Following the transcription, I checked the audio recording and transcripts for accuracy. I transcribed my summary notes after each

interview to capture any insights discovered while listening to the way participants responded to the interview questions that elicited further discussion. I reviewed the collected demographic information to ensure achievement of the goal of engaging a purposive sample, as recommended by Yin (2014). Prior to the start of the data analysis phase, I organized the field and summary notes chronologically, and I compiled the verbatim transcripts by those who completed the program and those who did not. I used codes to conceal participants' identities and maintain confidentiality throughout the study. I imported the transcribed information into NVivo software. NVivo software is a useful tool for organizing, coding, and analyzing qualitative data to see what information emerges. The software provided features for performing data analysis to ensure uniformity and validity of the process. NVivo is also useful for coding data from several sources for easy identification of commonalities. I watched for the overall big picture of the collected data and assess the code labels and field notes for duplicates and inconsistencies as suggested by Merriam & Tisdale (2016) and Yin (2014).

Following the reading, organizing, and coding phase of data analysis, I compared the codes that emerged from the interviews and summary notes to identify commonalities. The constant comparative method of data analysis helped to discover similarities and differences among the collected data (Fram, 2013). The benefit of using constant comparative data was that the process helps lead the researcher towards saturation that results in central theme emergence (Fram, 2013). To streamline the number of codes, I combined codes that were redundant to reduce the overall number of codes that did not directly address the research questions. To ensure accurate comprehension of the data, I read the transcriptions thoroughly several times on different

days to provide new opportunities to add, change, or merge codes as I gained further understanding of the collected data from the students and program documentation, as suggested by Merriam and Tisdale (2016) and Yin (2014). After the second review and analysis of the transcriptions, I kept only data that was relevant to the research questions. Through a process of refining the codes suggested by Bombala (2014) and Yin (2014), I determined major themes that address the research questions. The iterative process of observing and assessing the themes to identify how they aligned with the research questions, allowed me to review the collected data comprehensively. I then compared the emergent concepts with the existing literature using content analysis. Aligning the emergent concepts with existing literature improved the internal validity and the conceptual basis building from the case study (Stake, 2010). See (Appendix C) for a matrix displaying the interview questions aligned to the research questions.

In the data analysis process, researchers identify and analyze potential discrepant data and negative cases that do not align with the research focus (Yin, 2014). There was not any discrepant data or negative cases that emerged in this study.

Field Test of the Instrument

The purpose of conducting a field test is to provide researchers with information about the proposed protocols and procedures for the study (Yin, 2014). According to Merriam & Tisdale (2016), one of the main benefits of conducting field tests is that they give researchers useful information about whether aspects of the study, such as the interview protocols, could potentially negatively impact the credibility and validity of the study. I conducted a field test of the interview protocol using professionals with expertise in areas relevant to the study such as adult learning, online learning, etc. I used the field

test to solicit feedback and recommendations about the interview protocol to determine whether the questions were crafted to elicit relevant data that address the research questions.

After IRB approval from Walden University, I followed the steps suggested by Bombala (2014) for conducting a field test. First, I shared my interview questions with two doctoral instructors who have experience in teaching online environments. I then asked the instructors to provide feedback on the protocol to identify questions that were unclear or irrelevant to obtaining sufficient data to address the research questions. Based on the feedback, I reviewed the entire protocol and adjusted it to ensure I collected relevant and sufficient data in the main study (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility, also known as construct validity in quantitative research, is a process that demonstrates to readers that a research study has merit in sound scholarship (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). A study is deemed credible when the information is interpreted and checked with the participants and is recorded and reported in a systematic and logical way that aligns with the theories and concepts in which the study is grounded (Stake, 2010). Triangulation is a process that qualitative researchers use to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Yin, 2014). When researchers use data triangulation, they collect data at different times and with different people and then merge the data with other sources (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Methodological triangulation uses more than one method of collection. Theoretical triangulation uses more than one theory or concept to interpret data. Investigator

triangulation uses more than one investigator to gather and interpret data (Stake, 2010). In this case study, I synthesized multiple sources of data to justify emerging themes (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The use of a combination of sources, including interviewing, field notes, and document analysis, helped me cross-check and validate the study findings. In addition, because case studies used multiple sources of evidence, triangulation allowed me to examine a broader span of evidence to support the findings and build a strong case (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Data collection methods for my proposed study included phone interviews, field notes, and program documentation. In addition, I collected and analyzed data from the program brochure, course syllabi, course outlines, and advertisements, as well as from recruitment and engagement strategies used to help students persist in the program. I transcribed all data collected for the study so that I could organize, code, and analyze data to determine the appropriate themes from the interviews with the participants. During the study, I kept a journal of when the participants were contacted, the method of contact, and the responses from the participants.

Throughout the study I focused the participant's perceived experiences with persistence in the online management certificate program. I disclosed data that may represent discrepant information to add to the credibility of the study. My doctoral advising chair also conducted a debriefing process and an external audit. The advising chair supervised the entire project and provided assessment and feedback throughout the study.

Transferability

Transferability, also known as external validity in quantitative research studies, refers to study findings as transferrable to other people in a similar situation or, in this case, to online management development certificate programs sponsored by employers. The most practiced form of transferability in case study research is for readers to decide if and how the study findings apply to their situation (Stake, 2010). To provide a foundation of potential transferability for readers, I provided a detailed, rich and thick description of the context, setting, and situation. This included the overview of the online management certificate program mentioned earlier to provide the reader with a mental picture of the current reality of the environment in which the participants operated while working and managing their management development program work online. In addition, I paid careful attention to maximum variation (Yin, 2012) in selecting a diverse pool of people to interview. When the participant pool is diverse, options such as the context, participant's background, ethnicity, age bracket, or reasons for either completing or not completing the management certificate program increase. This allows readers to decide if any element of the study is applicable to their situation (Stake, 2010).

Dependability

Dependability, also known as reliability in quantitative research, ensures that the research findings are consistent and repeatable. Researchers establish dependability by carefully documenting study procedures and keeping field notes during every step of the research process (Stake, 2010). Another technique to strengthen dependability in case study is for researchers to make decisions and inferences based on multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2014). I was careful and deliberate in taking time to reflect on data

collected through interviews, field notes, program documentation, and marketing materials.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of qualitative research. Merriam & Tisdale (2016) suggested that researchers should make every step of the research process as operational as possible and imagine that an auditor is watching over the researcher every step of the way. To ensure I remained objective throughout the research process, I took time to critically reflect on how my role as the researcher, and my experience with online learning may have affected this data collection and analysis. I created a comprehensive description of the research process and kept detailed information from reflexive field notes, program documentation, and student interviews. To strengthen objectivity, I used a two-phase member check process to confirm the accuracy of responses that the student participants conveyed during the interview. Additionally, I explained my assumption biases and what impact they may have on the data collected.

To authenticate objectivity, I researched current perspectives from other researchers who provide insight to the eight major themes that emerged from the study results. Afolabi (2017) confirmed Theme 1 (purpose and meaning), concluding that online students need to have a clear understanding of their skills, abilities, and purpose for pursuing an online learning program to help them stay motivated to persist through completion. Gomez-Rey et al. (2017) presented new information that supported Theme 2 (coaching and support). Online instructor roles are expanding to include being "life skills promoters" (p. 243). In addition to receiving guidance in the online classroom, participants want instructors to assist them in applying learning content to help them

think and behave in a new way. This finding indicates that participant expectations for online learning application are moving from engaging within the online classroom to meeting deadlines and response requirements, to learning on a deeper level so that they can make a difference in society. Baldwin & Trespalacios (2017) provided insight into Theme 3 (course relevance) sharing that online participants will be more motivated to persist if the learning content is useful, relevant, and applicable to their career and life. Sorenson & Donovan (2017) asserted support for Theme 4 (perceived barriers) in that online participants have competing priorities that can take precedence over consistently keeping up with the demands of online coursework. The findings in Theme 5 (executive support) aligned with Callanan, Perri, & Tomkowicz's (2017) view of the importance of executives providing employees career opportunities to advance into a more responsible role in the organization once they complete management development programs. Choi et al. (2017) supported results in Theme 6 (learning preferences) and gave attention to self-reflection and knowing one's preferred way of learning before entering an online program as ways to enhance motivation and persistence. Loizzo et al. (2017) affirmed factors about Theme 7 (motivation) by revealing that participants in management development programs want to know what is in it for them as a means to stay motivated to persist. Finally, Teras & Kartoglu (2017) supported the open coding study results for Theme 8 (readiness), by pointing out that participants should have functional academic, technological, and self-discipline skills to persist in online management programs.

Ethical Considerations

The case study objective was to explore the success factors of management employee participants in an employer-sponsored online management development

certificate program at a nonprofit organization in the United States. Before I started data

collection, the Walden IRB staff confirmed the proposal met ethical protection

guidelines. The Walden IRB approval number is 09-12-17-0080902. I used the following

procedures to obtain the proper permissions, to treat participants with respect, and to

ensure the study was conducted according to Walden University's high standards. GXI

and Hamilton Community College have terminated the program. All student records, data

and program documentation reside within the GXI organization. I obtained organizational

consent from GXI to interview students and to access student and program

documentation in their organization. Because I am no longer an employee of GXI, there

was no conflict of interest or influence on students volunteering to participate in this

study.

Prior to the start of each participant interview, I obtained verbal consent for

participation that is included as part of the transcript. I maintained confidentiality by

restricting the number of individuals who have access to study data (i.e., the researcher,

dissertation chair and committee, and Walden IRB committee as appropriate). After

conducting the participant interviews, I coded the transcription of interviews with

pseudonyms so that the participants' identities are hidden during data analysis. I will keep

data for 5 years in a safety deposit box, accessible only to me. After the 5-year period, I

will permanently delete, shred, and discard all files. I provided assurances in the consent

form that potential participants will not be coerced into participating in the study. Further,

each participant solely and voluntarily made the decision to participate or not participate.

Additionally, I provided participants with contact information of the supervising chair of

the proposed dissertation study in the event they have questions or concerns about their participation.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented a descriptive case study designed to explore persistence of management participants in an employer-sponsored online management development certificate program at a nonprofit organization. I began with a restatement of the purpose of the study and an overview of case study methodology. I followed this with a description of the role of the researcher, interview methods and participant selection and recruitment. I also described data collection and analysis along with strategies for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter ended with a description of ethical considerations.

In this study, I interviewed a purposive sample of 12 participants who participated in the management development program. Individuals from two groups served as the unit of analysis for the proposed study: those who persisted and those who did not persist. The intent was to gather their perceptions of their experiences as they relate to factors of persisting in the online learning certificate program. I also reviewed relevant documents from the management development program and reflexive field notes as a means to triangulate the interview responses. I coded participant responses by themes emerging from the data and then analyzed them in light of the literature and the conceptual framework on motivation (Herzberg, 1966) and persistence (Rovai, 2003) in online learning.

Chapter 4 includes the results of this study. I describe the research setting and the participant demographics as well as the data collection and analysis. I also describe

strategies used to establish credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Finally, I present the results as they relate to the research questions.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore employees'

perceptions about the factors that impact motivation and persistence to attain an online

management development certificate program. The general problem addressed by the

study is that many senior-level managers with experience in nonprofit organizations are

retiring at a rapid rate, leaving positions unfilled and a talent pipeline unprepared to

assume higher-level management positions. The specific problem I addressed in this

study is that CEOs lack information regarding employees' perceptions of online

management development programs. Such information could help executives make

informed decisions about investing in and supporting employees who participate in

online learning management development programs (Blau & Drennan, 2017; Sacchetti &

Tortia, 2013). Lenert & Janes (2017) asserted that online learning management programs

could be valuable if designed with input from those who will use them and apply their

learning. Getting insight from employees who participate in online learning provides

CEOs with information about wisely investing time and money to develop managers. I

designed this study to explore the perspective of students in an online management

development certificate program on factors that impacted their persistence and

motivation.

I addressed two RQs to fill this gap in knowledge of factors of persistence and

motivation in online learning management programs. The first RQ was: How do

employees' perceptions of the persistence and motivation in an online management

development certificate program affect their program completion rates? The second RQ

was: What steps can CEOs take towards incentivizing employees to persist in completing the program?

It is important to investigate the factors of persistence and motivation required for employees in online management development programs so that CEOs can make decisions about allocating resources and funding for programs that involve using technology. Case study research methodology is a by-product of the analysis of the persistence and motivation literature (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Lenert & Janes, 2017; Lowenthal et al., 2017).

I designed this study after thorough reviews of the relevant literature related to persistence and motivation in online learning programs. In addition to case study methodology, I used literature on prior studies of motivation and persistence to inform the method, research questions, and interview instruments used in the study. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) suggested using outside industry experts to review and verify instruments to improve the credibility and rigor of the research study. I conducted a review of the literature and a field test of the interview questions with industry experts.

This chapter addresses the results of the field test, the research-setting, participant demographics, and the data collection process. I also present a description of the data analysis procedures used to determine key findings and I describe evidence of trustworthiness for this qualitative research study. Finally, I presented the results of this research as they relate to the research questions.

Field Test

I conducted a field test of the interview questions using industry professionals with expertise in relevant areas such as adult education and online learning. I used the

field test to solicit feedback about the interview protocol. I also solicited feedback on the interview questions (see Appendix C) to determine whether they were crafted to elicit relevant data that address the purpose of the study from a practitioner's perspective. The industry experts suggested that I reword some of the questions to get information that could be used in practice.

After IRB approval from Walden University 09-12-17-0080902, I conducted a second round of field testing with two doctoral instructors with experience in teaching in online environments. I asked the instructors to provide feedback on the questions to identify any that were unclear or irrelevant to obtaining sufficient data to address the research questions. The instructors offered suggestions to reword some of the interview questions to get more in-depth feedback from the study participants. Based on their feedback, I changed the wording on some of the interview questions to help obtain richer data from the participants in the main study.

Research Setting

The online management development certificate program referenced in this study was an online program for front-line supervisors and managers sponsored by GXI in collaboration with Hamilton Community College). GXI is a nonprofit organization that provides empowerment training to enhance the lives for people who have life challenges, barriers to employment, and disabilities. GXI has over 22, 000 employees worldwide from diverse backgrounds. GXI has learning programs that lead to industry certifications. The GXI organization was chosen because the learning management practitioners, with support from Hamilton Community College academic experts, developed and administered the online management development program, which was aligned with the

focus of this study. The program was exclusively for GXI employees who either were new to managing others, had experience in managing others, or aspired to manage others in the future.

Hamilton Community College is a nationally recognized, fully accredited two-year public institution in the United States. The college offers over 100 different academic programs leading to the associate degree and professional certificate credits that can transfer to accepting 4-year institutions. The online management development program started in 2011 in response to a GXI internal need to develop managers to assume new roles as senior leaders in the organization.

The online management development certificate program provided management employees with the foundational management skills to understand and work in the GXI nonprofit environment. The program included a blended approach to engage management employees in four online management development classes and two face-to-face classes as part of in-house training to earn an accredited certificate issued by Hamilton Community College. Courses focused on principles of management, consumer management, business communications, managing and valuing workplace diversity, social entrepreneurship, and nonprofit management. This study involved participants that experienced the GXI online management development certificate program.

As a former employee and national administrator of the certificate program, I was aware of initial organizational concerns about the program and it was important that I separated my awareness of the initial students' feedback of the program from the study results. To address conditions that could influence interpretation of the results, I explained at the outset of each interview that I would limit my questions to those agreed

upon. I also limited my probing questions to clarification questions to ensure accuracy in my interpretations. During the analysis phase, I used Yin's (2016) six-step and constant comparative approach to read, analyze, and code each interview and to ensure the coded data addressed the research questions. I suspended any judgments about what data should be included in the coding process. I remained objective and allowed the student responses to provide the information used in the study.

Demographics

The 12 participants in this research study held management-level positions and they managed other people at GXI. Of the 12 participants, all were 24 years of age or older, five were males, seven were females. All of the participants met the criteria for selection which were: (a) full-time employees who worked for GXI organization at the time of the study (b) individuals who completed and received a letter grade of C or better in at least one class; (c) or persons who completed the entire certificate program; and (d) were 18 years or older. Table 9 details demographic information about the student participants and their program completion status.

Table 9

Employee Participant Demographics and Course Completion Status

Participant*	Gender	Age	Course Completion Status	Title
RP03	Female	40+	Completed	Area Manager
RP08	Male	Under 40	Completed	Director
RP09	Male	Under 40	Completed	Assistant Manager
RP10	Male	40+	Completed	Director
RP11	Female	40+	Completed	Manager
RP12	Female	40+	Completed	Assistant Manager
RP01	Male	Under 40	Non-Complete	Assistant Manager
RP02	Female	40+	Non-Complete	Assistant Manager
RP04	Female	40+	Non-Complete	Manager
RP05	Male	Under 40	Non-Complete	Assistant Manager
RP06	Female	Under 40	Non-Complete	Assistant Manager
RP07	Female	Under 40	Non-Complete	Assistant Manager

*Participants are listed in the order in which they were interviewed.

Data Collection

For consistency, all interviews followed a prescribed protocol. As the one who conducted the in-depth interviews, I was the primary research instrument and the interviews with the students served as a main source of data for this descriptive case study. I invited 38 participants via e-mail to participate in the study. Of the 38 participants, 12 responded and consented to participate in this research study. I sent a letter of introduction and made a follow-up call during the week of September 17- 23, 2017, to each participant who had consented. During the call I used a script that described the study and confirmed the date and time of the interview. I conducted phone interviews

with each participant during September, October, and November 2017. I conducted the

interviews at a time that was convenient for each participant. Twenty-four hours before

each interview, I sent an e-mail reminder regarding the scheduled interview. Table 10

includes a description of each interview conducted with the 12 participants who

participated in my study.

Table 10

Phone Interview Schedule for Employee Participants

Identifier	Date	Time	Duration in Minutes
RP03	9/18/17	7:00pm	59:03
RP08	9/20/17	6:45pm	45:02
RP09	9/22/17	3:00pm	55:00
RP10	9/28/17	4:00pm	48:00
RP11	10/02/17	6:30pm	57:00
RP12	10/04/17	7:00am	50:00
RP01	10/07/17	8:00am	56:23
RP02	10/12/17	9:30am	55:45
RP04	10/18/17	6:30am	57:45
RP05	10/22/17	8:45am	58:00
RP06	11/13/17	9:00am	56:23
RP07	11/17/17	11:00am	59:04

*Listed in the order in which they were interviewed.

I audio-recorded all interviews using a smart recorder application on my cell

phone. I also used a Dictaphone recorder as a back-up in the event one device did not

record sufficiently. I transcribed each interview verbatim using my laptop and each

transcript was password protected and stored in a locked office. During each interview,

the focus was on listening to the words used to answer the questions and the emphasis in

the tone to the responses. For example, if participants increased their voice pitch or began talking really fast in response to one question, I noted it in my reflexive field notes after each interview.

I used the field-tested questions to conduct a semi-structured interview to help me keep the focus on the content of the responses rather than on my own experiences as an online learner. I followed the data collection process without deviation and collect data to answer the research questions. I did not experience any unusual circumstances in the data collection interview process; the interviews took place with minimal distractions and the participants were focused and appeared to answer each interview question to the best of their ability.

Data Analysis

I organized and analyzed the data for this study based on views from the participants on the factors that impacted student success in the online learning management development certificate program. As a first step in analyzing the data, immediately following the interviews I prepared verbatim transcripts into a Microsoft Word document. Following the transcription, I checked the audio recording and transcripts for accuracy and used codes to conceal participants' identities and maintain confidentiality throughout the study. I transcribed my summary reflexive field notes after each interview to capture any insights discovered while listening to the way participants responded to the interview questions that elicited further discussion. I reviewed the collected demographic information to ensure achievement of the goal of engaging a purposive and diverse sample to enhance transferability.

Prior to the start of the data analysis phase, I organized the field and summary notes chronologically, and I compiled the verbatim transcripts by those who completed the program and those who did not. I imported the transcribed information into NVivo software. NVivo software is a useful tool for organizing, coding, and analyzing qualitative data to reveal what information emerges. The software provided features for performing data analysis to ensure uniformity and validity of the process. NVivo is also useful for coding data from several sources for easy identification of commonalities. I watched for the overall big picture of the collected data and assessed the coded labels and field notes for duplicates and inconsistencies.

Following the reading, organizing, and coding phase of data analysis, I compared the codes that emerged from the interviews and summary notes to identify commonalities. The constant comparative method of data analysis helped me to discover similarities and differences among the collected data. To streamline the number of codes, I combined codes that were redundant. To reduce the overall number of codes, I eliminated those that did not directly address the research questions.

To ensure that I accurately comprehended the data, I read the transcriptions thoroughly several times on different days. This provided me new opportunities to add, change, or merge codes as I gained further understanding of the student responses and examined program documentation. After the second review and analysis of the transcriptions, I kept only data that was relevant to the research questions. Through a process of refining the codes, I determined major themes that addressed the research questions. The iterative process of observing and assessing the themes to identify how they aligned with the research questions allowed me to review the collected data

comprehensively. Using content analysis, I compared the emergent concepts with the existing literature. Aligning the emergent concepts with existing literature improved the credibility and the conceptual basis emerging in the case study. See Appendix D for a matrix displaying the interview questions aligned to the research questions, conceptual framework, and themes from the literature review.

The themes that emerged through multiple rounds of selective and open coding revealed eight main factors that impact student persistence in an online management development certificate program. The first was *purpose and meaningfulness*. This theme was a significant factor for persistence that indicated the students' expectations and perceived purpose and motivation for entering into the online management certificate program. Online students want to know that their education is leading them to a better place with greater opportunities in life. The second theme was *coaching and support*. This theme emerged as an essential factor for student persistence because students needed organizational and academic practitioners to be accessible to answer any questions or clarify information that would help them maintain momentum in their studies. The third theme was *course relevance*. The results from this theme indicated that students wanted course content that was useful, relevant, and applicable to their home or work life. The fourth was *perceived barriers*. This theme indicated that life happens and the motivation for persistence may vary at any time based on life situations, whether good or bad, as employees matriculate through their program. The fifth theme was *executive support*. Employees want to know that pursuing the online management program will lead to more opportunities and meaningful recognition within their organization. The sixth theme was *learning preference*. Due to the independent nature of online learning, participants must

consider and know about their preferred way of learning to persist in online learning programs. The seventh was *motivating factors*. This theme was compiled from participant perceptions about what kept them motivated while they were matriculating in the online management program. The participants' perceptions about motivation provided factors for understanding what was necessary to motivate people to act or move forward towards a goal. The last main theme was *readiness*. The participants revealed their perceptions about what would have made them more prepared and ready to enter into an online management certificate program.

I gave each participant a coded summary of factors affecting student persistence in the online management certificate program revealed in his or her interview, and none of the participants sent back any changes to my summary. During the initial data analysis phase, there were specific themes that emerged and quotes that emphasize their importance. See Table 11 for the major themes identified through the coding and sample quotes reflecting each theme.

Table 11

Initial Coding Report Through Data Analysis

Major themes	Quotes that suggested a theme
Purpose and Meaningfulness	(a) "I really wanted to earn an associate and then my bachelor degree." (b) (c) "I expected I would learn how to learn and gain more confidence in my skills." (d) "I was doing it for me and my family, so that we could live better." (e) "I wanted to improve my skills and have a certificate that would help me go elsewhere in the market."
Coaching and Support	(a) "I was missing a human being or some type of coach I could call when I needed." (b) "I felt like I had to learn things on my own, which was a little frustrating, especially starting out in an online program." (c) "I would recommend a simple phone contact from a coach to check-in, support and encourage students especially since online learning is so lonely." (d) "I really got frustrated with everything; it is a skill-set to go to school and work full-time."
Course Relevance	(a) "I found the course content to be extremely relevant because I used the information immediately in my job." (b) "The writing aspect of the program was good. I am much more confident in my writing." (c) "I learned that people write the way they talk; I now take time to read and edit what I write before I send it." (d) "I feel that the program benefitted me on a personal and professional level. I learned on a deeper level and have permanent skills; I feel I am ready for more responsibility at work."
Perceived Barriers	(a) "There was no real incentive other than the fact that I was going to get a certificate – so what!" (b) "I was a caregiver for my parents and they fell more ill, so keeping up with work, life, and school responsibilities became too difficult for me." (c) "Lack of money to finish." (d) "I got frustrated with the delay in responses from instructors and people at the school." "
Executive Support	(a) "Leaders should recognize the certificate program to serve as a bridge to a promotion or some other internal program." (b) "The certification should mean something inside the organization. Those who are certified should have a badge of distinction so others identify and recognize it as meaningful." (c) "I would have liked time on the job to complete the program." (d) "Leaders should have told us what to expect and what we could gain from the program, if we enrolled; paint a picture of hope, growth, and opportunity."
Learning Preferences	(a) "I did not know what to do or how to manage myself and my time." (b) "I am a visual learner and it would have helped me to know how to navigate the resources available to me; show videos or have a live webinar

Major themes	Quotes that suggested a theme
	where we could ask questions." (c) "Over time, I learned to rely on and have more confidence in my own work from the online learning environment. I feel I can learn more about most any topic on my own, without help from an instructor."
Motivators	(a) "It was an opportunity to take advantage of an employer benefit that would allow me to learn and grow." (b) "I wanted to start my own nonprofit for those re-entering the workforce from prison, so the management principles taught me how to think and write more critically." (c) "My mom was terminally ill and wanted to see me finish the program; I finished the program and she passed away two weeks later."
Readiness	(a) "I think some type of assessment should be given to students ahead of time so that they know whether online learning is for them or not." (b) "The orientation provided by the GXI staff and the school staff did not prepare me for what was really going to happen in online learning; I was not ready to learn independently." (c) "I was brought to my knees in humility. Online learning was a lot harder than my traditional college course experience."

The theme, *purpose and meaningfulness,* addressed RQ1 and RQ2, *coaching and support* addressed RQ1 and RQ2, *course relevance* addressed from RQ1 and RQ2, *perceived barriers* addressed RQ1 and RQ2, *executive support* addressed RQ2, *learning preferences* emerged from RQ1, *Motivators* addressed RQ1and RQ 2, and *readiness* addressed from RQ1.

The themes were based on keywords. Confidence, skills, and grow were keywords that emerged from the *purpose and meaningfulness* theme 42 times during data analysis. Frustration, contact, coach, and family were keywords that emerged from the *coaching and support theme* 52 times during data analysis. Relevant, writing, management, and improved were keywords that emerged from the course relevant theme 34 times during data analysis. Responsibilities, technical, delay and instructors were keywords that emerged from the *perceived barriers* theme 45 times during data analysis.

Recognition, financial assistance, promotion and pay increase were keywords that emerged from the *executive support* theme 48 times during data analysis. Time management, online learning environment, visual learner and confidence were keywords that emerged from the *learning preferences* theme 48 times during data analysis. Opportunity, expand, money, learning complete and improvement were keywords that emerged from the *motivators* theme 50 times during data analysis. Time, orientation, independent, reading expectations and writing were keywords that emerged from the *readiness* theme 44 times during data analysis. Outliers or discrepant cases did not exist and, therefore, were not factored into the analysis.

To explore all potential factors affecting employee persistence and motivation, I systematically reviewed each interview by keyword and reread all transcripts to guarantee I had identified and assigned the themes correctly. The review procedure resulted in a modification of the initial round of coding and unveiled the subcategories that offered additional detail and insight to the main themes. In Table 12, I list the final coding outcome, arranged by main themes, subcategories aligned with the two research questions examined in this study.

Table 12

Alignment of Themes and Sub-categories with Research Questions

Main Theme	Sub-category	Research Question
Purpose and Meaningfulness	Educational advancement Improved marketability Organizational progression	RQ1 and RQ2
Coaching and Support	Need for additional coaching Work-life balance	RQ1 and RQ2
Course Relevance	Job related Personal relevance	RQ1 and RQ2

Perceived Barriers	Learning curve Low incentive Time management	RQ1 and RQ2
Executive support	Incentive Logistical support Value perception	RQ2
Learning Preference	Confidence Deeper learning Resourcefulness	RQ1
Motivators	Career development Financial development Sense of progress Skill development	RQ1 and RQ2
Readiness	Academic skills Computer skills Self-discipline	RQ1

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility, also known as construct validity in quantitative research, is a process that demonstrates to readers that a research study has merit in sound scholarship (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). A study is deemed credible when the data are interpreted and checked with the participants and reported in a systematic and logical way that aligns with the theories and concepts in which the study is grounded (Stake, 2010). To ensure the credibility of this study, I triangulated the synthesized reflexive field notes and program documents with the themes that emerged from the participant interviews. During the interview phase, I focused on the participant's perceived experiences with motivation and persistence in the online management certificate program. I used a two-phase member checking process that allowed each participant to review the transcript of their interview, to see if I accurately transcribed their responses. Based on their responses, I adjusted their responses as appropriate. I sent the corrected transcript back to the

participants for a second-round member checking to ensure that what I transcribed, accurately represented what they meant to say in their responses. In both phases of the transcript member checking process, all of the student participants confirmed that their responses accurately depicted their perceptions. After transcribing and member checking the participant responses, I reviewed the management development program documents to get more insight about marketing strategies and the student orientation process. Additionally, I examined program documentation about completion and non-completion status of participants as they matriculated through the program.

To further strengthen the credibility, I authenticated and aligned the results with the conceptual framework and the literature on motivation and persistence in online learning programs. My doctoral chair provided ongoing supervision of my work and the committee assessed it at every step of the process to ensure this study met the scholarly standards of dissertation protocols at Walden University.

Transferability

Transferability, also known as external validity in quantitative research studies, refers to study findings as transferrable to other people in a similar situation, which in this case, is to employer-sponsored online management development certificate programs. The most practiced form of transferability in case study research is for readers to decide if and how the study findings apply to their situation (Yin, 2014). To provide a foundation of potential transferability for readers, I provided a detailed, rich, and thick description of the context, setting, and situation. This included the overview of the research setting mentioned earlier to provide the reader with a mental picture of the current reality of the environment in which the student participants operated while

employed and managing their online program work. In addition, I paid careful attention

to the goal of maximum variation (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016) by selecting a diverse pool

of people to interview. When the participant study elements (i.e., the context,

participant's background, ethnicity, age bracket, or reasons for completing or not

completing the online certificate program) are diverse, readers can decide which, if any,

of the elements of the study are applicable to their situation (Stake, 2010).

Dependability

Dependability, also known as reliability in quantitative research, ensures that the

research findings are consistent and repeatable. Yin (2014) asserted that, in qualitative

studies, researchers make inferences about situations or circumstances that cannot be

observed but can be inferred by examining other sources such as interviews,

documentation, and field notes. I established dependability by carefully documenting

study procedures step by step. I kept reflexive field notes throughout the data collection

and analysis. Additionally, to strengthen dependability of this study, I made reflective

decisions and inferences based on multiple sources of evidence. I was careful and

deliberate in taking time to document the process and reflect on data collected through

member-checked interviews, field notes, program documentation, and marketing

materials. Finally, I used the strategy of peer examination by expert panel with doctoral

expertise, to review this research and to determine if the results were supported by the

data collected and analyzed.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of qualitative research. Merriam & Tisdale

(2016) suggested that researchers should make every step of the research process as

operational as possible and imagine that an auditor is watching over the researcher every step of the way. To ensure I remained objective throughout the research process, I took time to critically reflect on how my role as the researcher, and my experience with online learning may have affected this data collection and analysis. I created a comprehensive description of the research process and kept detailed information from reflexive field notes, program documentation, and student interviews. To strengthen objectivity, I used a two-phase member check process to confirm the accuracy of responses that the student participants conveyed during the interview. Additionally, I explained my assumption biases and what impact they may have on the data collected.

To authenticate objectivity, I researched current perspectives from other researchers who provide insight to the eight major themes that emerged from the study results. Afolabi (2017) confirmed Theme 1 (purpose and meaning), concluding that online students need to have a clear understanding of their skills, abilities, and purpose for pursuing an online learning program to help them stay motivated to persist through completion. Gomez-Rey et al. (2017) presented new information that supported Theme 2 (coaching and support). Online instructor roles are expanding to include being "life skills promoters" (p. 243). In addition to receiving guidance in the online classroom, participants want instructors to assist them in applying learning content to help them think and behave in a new way. This finding indicates that participant expectations for online learning application are moving from engaging within the online classroom to meeting deadlines and response requirements, to learning on a deeper level so that they can make a difference in society. Baldwin & Trespalacios (2017) provided insight into Theme 3 (course relevance) sharing that online participants will be more motivated to

persist if the learning content is useful, relevant, and applicable to their career and life. Sorenson & Donovan (2017) asserted support for Theme 4 (perceived barriers) in that online participants have competing priorities that can take precedence over consistently keeping up with the demands of online coursework. The findings in Theme 5 (executive support) aligned with Callanan, Perri, & Tomkowicz's (2017) view of the importance of executives providing employees career opportunities to advance into a more responsible role in the organization once they complete management development programs. Choi et al. (2017) supported results in Theme 6 (learning preferences) and gave attention to self-reflection and knowing one's preferred way of learning before entering an online program as ways to enhance motivation and persistence. Loizzo et al. (2017) affirmed factors about Theme 7 (motivation) by revealing that participants in management development programs want to know what is in it for them as a means to stay motivated to persist. Finally, Teras & Kartoglu (2017) supported the open coding study results for Theme 8 (readiness), by pointing out that participants should have functional academic, technological, and self-discipline skills to persist in online management programs.

Study Results

The two research questions that guided this study were as follows:

RQ1: How do employees' perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online management development certificate program affect their program completion rate?

RQ2: What steps can executive leaders take to incentivize employees to persist in completing the program?

The interview questions were aligned with the conceptual framework and designed to collect participants' perceptions. The analysis of the interview data resulted in the emergence of five themes: purpose and meaning, coaching and support, course relevance, perceived barriers, and learning preferences. In addition to several subthemes identified for each of these themes, the open coding process uncovered some additional themes: executive support, motivation and readiness. Figure 2 displays the number of references coded for each of the identified main themes in the 12 transcripts. The main themes and subthemes developed through multiple rounds of selective and open coding are discussed in the following section.
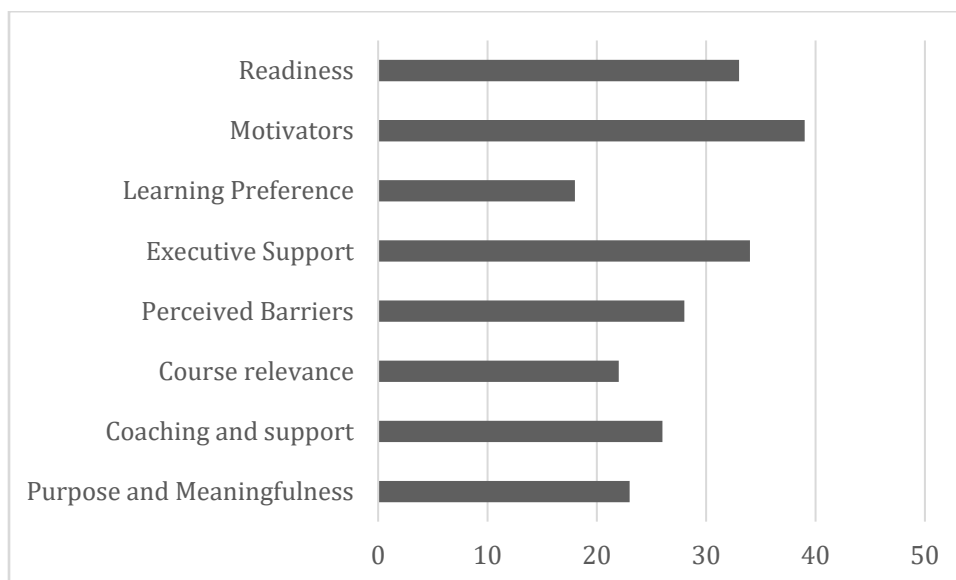
*Figure 2.* Main themes and number of occurrences coded.

Purpose and Meaning

This theme identified employee perceptions about the expectations and perceived purpose of the program they held prior to registering for the program. Three subthemes

emerged: educational advancement, improved marketability, and organizational progression. Figure 3 displays the frequency of occurrence of the subthemes in the 12 transcripts. A brief discussion of each of the subthemes follows.
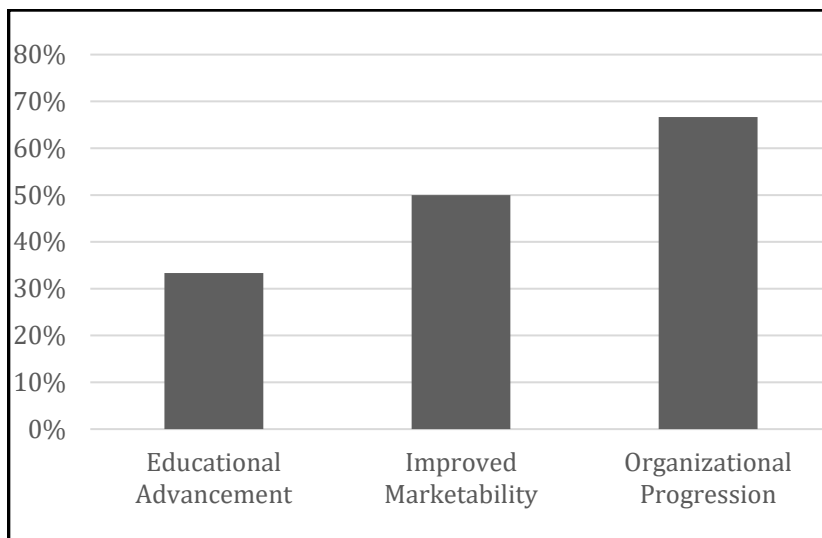
Figure 3. Plot for purpose and meaning subthemes. Percent of transcripts with occurrences of subthemes.

Subtheme 1: Educational advancement. Educational advancement is a collection of participant perspectives tied with the reflection of a desire to continue education. 33% of the participants indicated that they perceived the program offering as a springboard opportunity to go back to school. There were various contexts associated with concept of going back to school. Some participants viewed this opportunity as a chance to test that they were still fit enough to go back to school, while others perceived the opportunity as the first step towards their next level of education.

RP05: My expectations were high for the program. I expected I would learn how to learn; how to grow and gain some confidence in my skills and ability to accomplish an educational goal beyond high school.

RP01: I wanted to utilize the transfer credits from completing the program towards completing my bachelor degree program. The transferrable credits were a strong incentive that peaked my interest and motivation to enroll in the program.

RP09: My expectation was that I could first develop the confidence that I could perform well in school. After having been out of school for a while, like 15 years since high school.

Subtheme 2: Improved marketability. Improved marketability is a collection of perspectives tied with the reflection of a desire to acquire new and updated skills that could help improve the options of seeking a better position in the job market. 50% of the participants indicated that they perceived the certificate program as an opportunity to improve their job options. All responses in this category were tied to the context of professional growth for seeking better opportunities. At least one of the participants perceived that the program could provide sufficient information to help him start his own nonprofit venture.

RP09: I wanted to expand my opportunities and I thought this management development certificate program was a good start. I wanted to have more education on my resume that I could leverage to get a better job.

RP10: I wanted to learn more about online learning and nonprofit management in general. I was close to retiring and was considering opening a nonprofit of my own once I retired, so this sounded like a good fit. Plus, I wanted to add a virtual component to our

Training program options at work, so I thought that by participating in this online certificate program, I would be getting an understanding of what it is like to learn online.

RP07: This program gave me a credential that I used on my resume' to get a job at another organization. I shared that I took classes online and learned as much about myself as I did about management in general.

Subtheme 3: Organizational progression. The most popular perception within the theme is a collection of perspectives tied with the motivation of making vertical progression within the organization. 67% of the participants indicated that they perceived the management certificate program as an opportunity to improve their chances to climb ranks within the organization. All responses in this category carried similar context.

RP03: I don't have a two-year or four-year degree, and I've been fortunate enough to move forward in my career without them. However, in the GXI world, this certificate program would demonstrate to my leadership that I took the time to understand the things that are necessary to perform at higher levels in management, because the certificate program was customized in the GXI nonprofit environment and the leaders valued the program.

RP04: I was looking to be promoted into a management position and learn more about managing other people. This program was marketed well because I saw an article called "How It Paid Off" that highlighted one of my colleagues who completed the certificate program and was promoted in a higher role afterward. I said to myself if he can do it, so can I.

RP07: The program gave me an opportunity to grow and move to another position in the organization. Although I kept the same title, I earned more money.

Coaching and Support

This theme was identified to collect the employees' perceptions about their experience of coaching and support system experienced during the program. All participants perceived coaching and support as essential to motivation and persistence in online learning programs. Two subthemes were identified in this category. Figure 4 displays the percent of the 12 transcripts in which the subthemes occurred. A brief discussion of each of the subtheme follows:
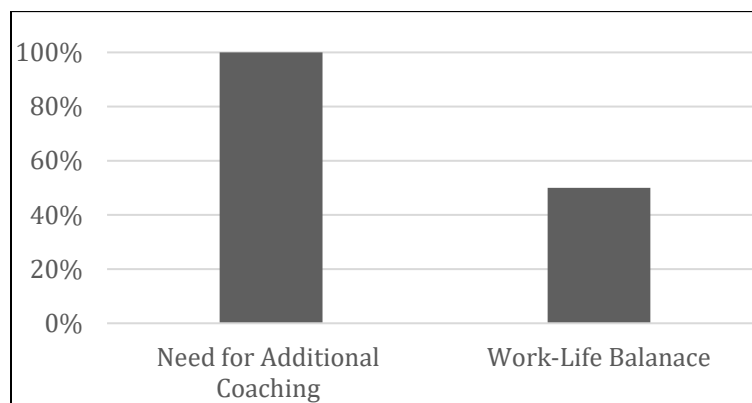
Figure 4. Plot for coaching and support subthemes. Percent of transcripts with occurrences of subthemes.

Subtheme 1: Need for additional coaching. The need for additional coaching is a collection of perspectives tied to having the availability of organizational and academic practitioners who know how to coach and support online students to maintain momentum in their studies.

RP02: As I worked my way through the program, there was no one congratulating me saying "good job" so I had to coach and motivate myself with every completed assignment and each class. There should be a good blend of immediate access to humans at all times to help us keep going.

RP03: I had a lot of questions when I started the program and there wasn't anyone to talk to immediately and answer my questions and it left me feeling a little skeptical about whether or not I made the right decision to be in the program. I would recommend a support coach be assigned to our cohort to help us learn the online system and processes.

RP05: I think it is important to have personal contact to orient and coach students before they start the program. I had a lot of apprehension about going to school online and needed some reassurance.

Subtheme 2: Work-life balance. Fifty percent of the participants shared their perspective about the importance of managing their work-life balance to participate in this management certificate program. Some of their responses indicate the need for online participants to ensure their family, friends, and supervisors are aware and supportive of their educational pursuit.

RP08: I had to make sure my family and friends were aware that I was participating in this certificate program and that I would not be as available to hang out at times. Once they understood the value of what I was doing, they understood and were more patient with me.

RP09: Once my family understood what I was doing and why, I was able to balance my family obligations and my school work, much better. I had to carve out time, usually at night to do school work. The balancing act was tough but it taught me how to manage multiple projects while keeping a level head. I find myself being more calm and strategic at work, because of balancing so much at one time during the program.

RP05: Most of the people dropped out of the program because it interfered with our home and work demands. It appeared to be more of an obligation than an opportunity for a better future.

Course Relevance

This theme was identified to collect employee perceptions about how relevant they felt the program was to their jobs. Although all the employees indicated that the program was helpful, their responses could clearly be categorized under two distinct subthemes. Figure 5 displays the percent of the 12 transcripts in which the two subthemes occurred. A brief discussion of each of the subthemes follows.
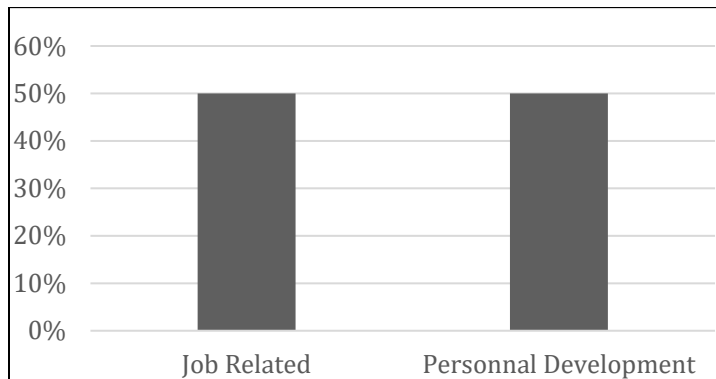
Figure 5. Frequency plot for course relevance. Percent of transcripts with occurrences of subthemes.

Subtheme 1: Job related. Exactly 50% of the students made a direct reference to how the online program related to their job and helped improve the quality of their work. Responses from these participants clearly indicated job relevance. The participants were also able to give examples of areas of improvement.

RP05: At the time I found the content to be extremely relevant because I was managing a program that crossed over into workforce development. I learned new ways of communicating and working with my team.

RP11: The program was beneficial to me and my employer because I am thinking and operating on a more focused and broader level. I now seek ways of improving our work processes in a more cost-effective and efficient way.

RP04: The writing and communications aspects of the program was very relevant to my job. I now know how to communicate using email as opposed to picking up the phone.

Subtheme 2: Personal improvement. The remaining 50% of students showed excitement about learning from the program, but their responses reflected that they perceived the program to be more relevant for their personal development, rather than their current day job. At a minimum, a direct reference to their day job was not made in these responses.

RP12: I learned so much from it and it gave me the drive to want to continue with my education and put me on the right path to achieve my goal of using my earned credits to start my bachelor degree program.

RP9: I found the coursework very relevant to my work and home life. I learned a lot about management, business writing, and how to build a concept for my nonprofit idea.

RP11: I gained a ton of information from the program in particular, how to discipline myself and be more accountable with my work and in my personal life.

Perceived Barriers

This theme was identified to collect the employees' perceived obstacles that hindered their online learning experience. Three subthemes were identified related to this theme. Figure 6 displays the percent of the 12 transcripts in which each of the subthemes occurred. A brief discussion of each of the subthemes follows.
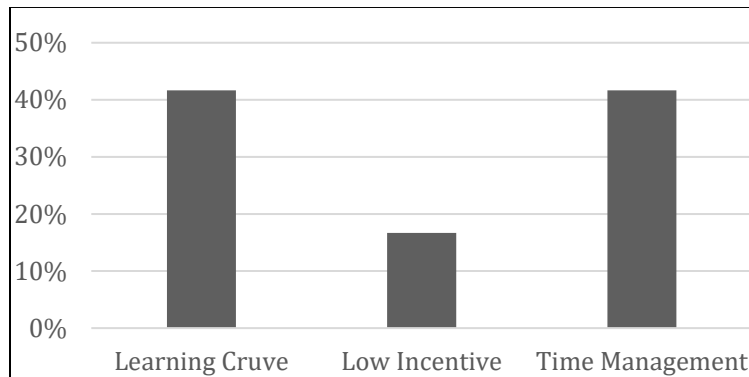
Figure 6. Frequency plot for perceived barriers subthemes. Percent of transcripts with occurrences of subthemes.

*Subt***heme 1: Learning curve.** At least 42% of the participants indicated that they felt somewhat demotivated during the program due to what they felt was a steep learning curve related to the technology in use.

RP04: I think I was trying to order some books that we needed for one class. The book that I ordered was an e-book and I could not use it. It frustrated me, and I was already bogged down with my regular work so I just gave up.

RP08: I had technical issues in trying to get signed into the classroom and some extended delay in responses from some instructors.

RP07: I had problems understanding who to call when I had technical issues. At times, there was no one to talk to in person and I ended up being late in turning in some of my work.

Subtheme 2: Low incentive. At least 17% of the participants indicated that they felt somewhat demotivated because they did not feel they had sufficient incentives to complete the program.

RP01: I did not have the opportunity or mind power to keep moving forward. There was no real incentive other than the fact that I was going to get certified.

RP06: Lack of money to finish. If my personal finances had been better, I would have completed it for sure. Additionally, my leaders at GXI location did not support us financially, so it resulted in me quitting. If I had to do it over again, I'd make sure that I had my finances in order and had some resources to finish it.

RP05: The executives did not tell us how the program would benefit us, so I went into the program blind; not knowing about its value. What is the point of this program? How am I going to apply the information learned? I did not see any long-term value in it, other than doing busy work to meet deadlines only to earn a piece of paper.

Subtheme 3: Time management. Forty percent of the participants indicated that the biggest obstacle for them was the ability to manage their time and carve out sufficient time that they felt was required to complete the requirements of the course.

RP01: My job responsibilities. I couldn't juggle the heavy demands of my job and learning how to navigate in the online environment. It was just too much to handle both and I had to give up one.

RP05: Unexpected life circumstances. I was a caregiver for my parents and they fell more ill, so keeping up with work responsibilities and work made it almost impossible, so I could not finish.

RP03: I did have two major life events that forced me to learn how to manage my time differently. Although it wasn't a pleasant time in my life, going through it while going to school helped me learn how to manage my time at work and in life.

Executive Support

This theme was identified to explore employee perceptions regarding the executive support they received towards participating in the online program. Three subthemes were identified in this category. Figure 7 displays the percent of the 12 transcripts in which the subthemes occurred. A brief discussion of each of the subthemes follows.
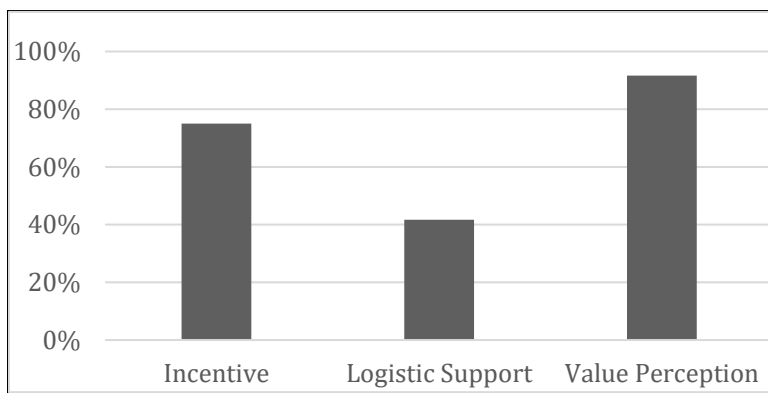
Figure 7. Frequency plot for perceived executive support subthemes. Percent of transcripts with occurrences of subthemes.

Subtheme 1: Incentive. Seventy-five percent of the participants indicated that they felt the executives could have given more realistic incentives for completing the

program. All references pertaining to incentives were made in the context of relating the management certificate program with better job opportunity within the organization.

RP04: It would have been great to have the management certificate program serve as a bridge to another leadership development program or make it lead towards me being eligible to be considered for a promotion or pay increase.

RP09: Give some type of work promotion or financial incentive to those who finish the program.

RP11: It would have helped to have the certificate mean something. Perhaps allowing us to use it as a credential on our electronic email signatures, like some people do when they earn a masters or doctorate degree.

Subtheme 2: Logistic support. Forty-two percent of the participants indicated that they felt the executives could have given more logistic support towards completing the online certificate program. The context of logistic support was noted to be referring to time, finances, and additional training. Some participants thought that there should have been preparatory courses offered to help employees make the best use of the online program.

RP10: Leaders can allow time and space for employees to complete some of the assignments, at work. Even if its an hour or two in a dedicated space.

RP04: I think leaders could have provided some help with technology and some computers for those of us who do not have the resource to buy our own.

RP06: The leaders would ask me how it was going but they didn't provide additional finances to help me get through it. Additionally, they allowed me time to do some of my course work, at work.

Subtheme 3: Value perception. Value perception was the most critical of the subthemes, identified through the process of open coding, that pertained to CEO support. This subtheme reflects a perception shared by 92% of the participants, which indicates the importance of clarity, shared by CEOs, about why the program was being offered and how they support those who decide to enroll. The references in this subtheme show how the value perception created by CEO's impact the participants' approach towards enrolling and completing the program.

RP01: I did not have the opportunity or mind power to keep moving forward. There was no real incentive other than the fact that I was going to get certified. I did not see the real value of the certificate and didn't know how to share that value with my family or future employer.

RP03: It helped to have my leaders support for the program. They valued it and discussed how helpful it would be improving my management skill sets. I wanted to put my own interests into something the leaders valued.

RP06: The executives have to believe in the program and share it with us. I need to hear it from my CEO not my team leader.

Learning Preference

I asked interview questions about learning preferences to reveal participants' perceptions about their online learning experience. The responses in this theme partially overlapped with the thoughts shared about learning difficulties and were captured under the perceived barrier theme. The remaining concepts could be divided into three distinct subthemes. Figure 8 displays the percent of the 12 transcripts in which each of the subthemes occurred. A brief discussion of each of the subthemes follows.
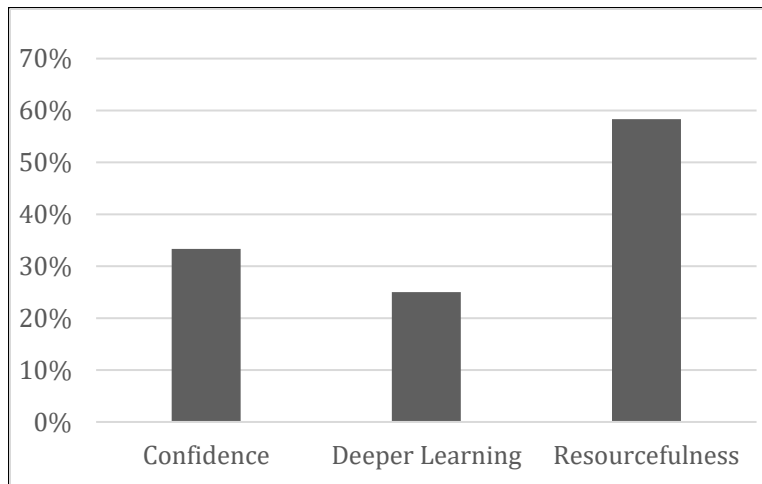
Figure 8. Frequency plot for perceived learning preference
subthemes. Percent of transcripts with occurrences of subthemes.

Subtheme 1: Confidence. Thirty-three percent of the participants felt that

confidence was the key required element in completing an online program. Responses in

this category reflected that success or failure to complete the program related, in part, to

how confident the employees felt in their ability to complete the program.

RP01: That feeling of accomplishment and knowing that you can do it on your

own, gave me a sense of knowing I can do it. There was no one congratulating me saying

"Good Job." So I told myself "You got this," and motivated myself with every

assignment and each class.

RP11: I learned to rely on and have more confidence in my own work. I did not

need to have the instructor validate my work with words or a grade to feel good about

what I wrote or produced. I learned more about what I needed to do to push myself

through the pain of getting through the assignments.

RP04: I did not know what to do or how to manage myself. I did not have any control and lost. I was thinking that online was not for me and that I needed to get in the classroom.

Subtheme 2: Deeper learning. At least 25% of the participants indicated that they found an online learning environment facilitated a much deeper learning as opposed to the traditional classroom environment.

RP11: I was used to the teacher telling me what was wrong with my work and what I needed to do to fix it. In online learning, that is not the case. I found myself almost teaching myself the material. I learned to look at instructors as guides to support my learning. They made sure I was moving in the right direction with when I turned in my work for feedback.

RP01: In the online classroom, your feedback is not immediate and you are required to learn things on your own or research on a deeper level. That let me know that I have the skills to learn things on my own and the independent nature of online learning made me determined to learn it. I learned to go deep within myself to learn.

RP03: Having the constructive feedback from the instructors, gave me a glimpse of what my employees may feel like when they receive feedback from me, so I learned to step back and reflect on how I may come across as a manager.

Subtheme 3: Resourcefulness. Fifty-eight percent of the participants indicated that they learned to utilize the wisdom of others in their cohort to get more clarity about some of their assignments. The students also reported that they learned to utilize other resources to learn about a topic. This process of utilizing and leveraging resources to

complete their school work resulted in students being more adept at finding and

leveraging resources in life.

RP06: I enjoy learning new things and I ask questions until I get answers. I am

also a self-directed learner. I like teaching myself new things. The program taught me

how to structure a process to learn something new. I make outline of what I want to learn,

and I start searching reputable websites, books, and watch videos from experts who can

speak about that topic. I stay with the learning process until I get it. I tick off each line

item on my outline. I do the same thing in life.

RP10: I learned to commit time and energy and do the work early in the course

period. Some weekly lessons take some research and prep. Be aware of personal life

situations (vacations, business trips) and professional demands and factor those times in.

The program taught me how to plan ahead and prepare for what is coming down the road.

RP01: I learned to utilize the wisdom of others in my cohort. If I did not know the

answer to a question or needed more clarity, I reached out to the rest of the group. This

process also taught me how to utilize my resources in life.

Motivators

This theme included all of the participants' perspectives that either identified a

motivating factor or mentioned what could have been a motivating factor for them.

Although the motivators are categorized in four subthemes, they share the common

context of "what's in it for me." Figure 9 displays the percent of the 12 transcripts in

which each of the subthemes occurred. A brief discussion of each of the subthemes

follows.
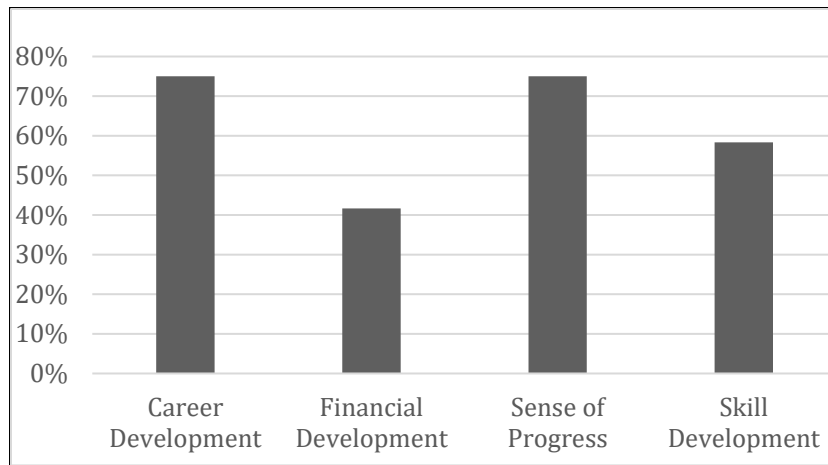
Figure 9. Frequency plot for perceived motivators subthemes. Percent of transcripts with occurrences of subthemes.

Subtheme 1: Career development. At least 75% of the participants indicated that their key motivator was, or would have been, an understanding that the management certificate program was associated with career development.

RP02: By that, I mean I would have been more motivated to complete the program if I knew that at the end, I would be a part of a pool of high potential employees who would be considered for higher level roles in the organization.

RP03: I was also eligible to be promoted after I finished the program.

RP05: Having opportunities to improve my lifestyle with a credential. I wanted to do more with my life and career.

Subtheme 2: Financial development. Forty-five percent of the participants indicated financial motivation to be their key motivator to complete the online training program.

RP01: Money. That's it. It's all about the money. It may sound a little harsh but it's true. Before I enrolled in the program, I was asking what's in it for me? What am I going to get by participating in this program?

RP04: To have a certificate serve as a bridge to another leadership development program or make it valuable in the organization. If I complete the program, will it help increase my chances to be considered for a promotion or pay increase? If so, it would motivate me to take advantage of the opportunity, otherwise it's just a certificate.

Subtheme 3: Sense of progress. For 75% of the participants the key motivating factor was found in a sense of progress. The context of this perception was detached from the organization. These participants seemed to have enjoyed the experience of learning new material by using a new mode of instruction.

RP12: The thought of receiving an A at the end of the class is what motivated me. It made me feel good once I completed the class and received my grade.

RP2: Every class I completed seemed to spur me on to the next class.

RP06: I wanted to have an additional certificate under my belt that I could put on my resume. If I ever decided to leave GXI, it helped to know that I would be able to apply the learning elsewhere.

Subtheme 4: Skill development. At least 58% of the participants found their motivation in an opportunity to develop their professional skills. The type of skills they perceived being developed varied from communication skills, to writing, and reading skills.

RP07: I wanted to learn in this program the art of management.

RP04: The desire to improve myself and learn the management and leadership skills.

RP01: There was another thing I took away from that program and it was how to communicate well with others.

Readiness

Readiness, the last theme, was also found through open coding and captures all instances related to the participants' perceptions about what would have made them more prepared to excel in the online program. The concepts shared led to three3 subthemes. Figure 10 displays the percent of the 12 transcripts in which each of the three subthemes occurred. A brief discussion of each of the subthemes follows.
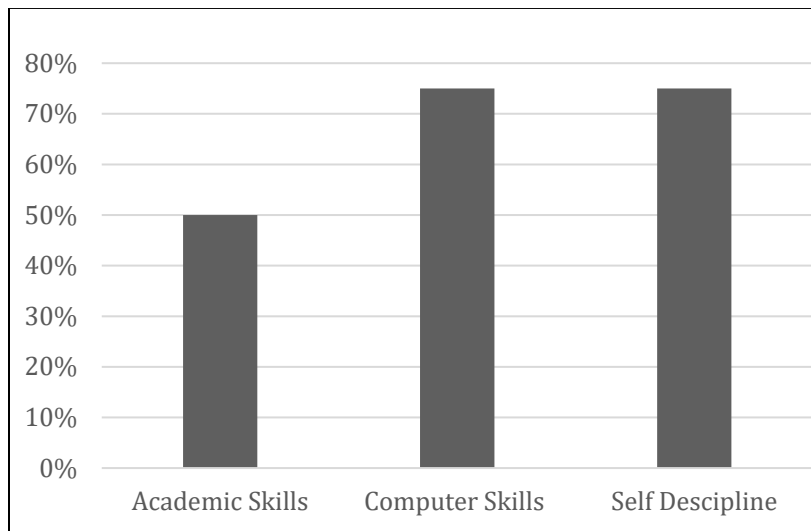
Figure 10. Frequency plot for perceived readiness subthemes. Percent of transcripts with occurrences of subthemes.

Subtheme 1: Academic skills. Academic skills such as reading and writing were emphasized by 50% of the participants as critical for success in this management certificate program.

RP06: You have to be comfortable with reading because most everything is embedded in reading. You also have to be comfortable in writing in complete and clear sentences so that you represent yourself in the best way possible and so that people understand your intentions.

RP08: There was a lot of reading comprehension and writing skills. The writing was tough and more challenging than I originally thought.

RP02: You have to know how you like to learn and know what your academic strengths are before you start the program. Math and numbers are not my strong point.

Subtheme 2: Computer skills. Seventy-five percent of the participants indicated the need to have good computer skills as part of being successful in completing this online management certificate program.

RP04: I think the first thing is to have some awareness of how to operate using technology. By that I mean, how to search various sites, access information using web browsers and the like.

RP09: You need to know how to communicate through writing and via the phone. You need to know how to navigate the internet and find information on your own, when you're not satisfied with the information provided by your instructor.

RP05: I was not up to speed on using technology. I am glad I had my son to help me navigate and coach me on how to navigate through the online classroom.

Subtheme 3: Self-discipline. At least 75% participants found self-discipline to be critical for success in an online program. The context of self-discipline varied between time management, specifically, and in the ability to carry out the plan, in general.

RP01: Self-discipline. It is 100% self-discipline and that's just on a broad level with online learning in general. You also have to know more about yourself enough to answer the question "Am I going to have enough discipline and focus to do the work in this program?"

RP10: Additionally, I think time management, organizational skills, reading comprehension, information literacy and searching skills and finally, writing skills. Knowing how to ask questions and to whom.

RP06: I learned to establish weekly goals, set my priorities, and balance my work and home life. My discipline while in the program has transferred to having more discipline in my life.

All the themes that emerged from this investigation are included in this study. No discrepant cases or unconfirmed data existed.

Summary

This chapter included the results of this case study. CEOs in nonprofit organizations lack the information regarding employees' perceptions of online management development programs to help them make informed decisions about supporting employees who participate in online learning programs. I interviewed 12 management employee participants at one nonprofit organization. The themes that emerged as factors that affect employee persistence in online management development programs were: purpose and meaning, coaching and support, course relevance, perceived barriers, learning preferences, executive support, motivation and readiness.

The results of this study revealed answers to the research questions that may help CEOs make decisions about investing in online learning programs. Additionally, the

results provided insight for learning management practitioners to administer online programs that may keep employees engaged and motivated to persist. RQ1: How do employees' perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online management development certificate program affect their program completion rates? First, the participants indicated that learning strategies should reflect an understanding of the goals, learning preferences, and motivation of individuals who want to pursue a learning development program. Second, learning management practitioners will need to provide learning options that utilize various media of learning to continue the learning process including face-to-face, online learning, mobile technology, web conferencing, and knowledge-sharing tools. Third, the study participants indicated that learning management practitioners should be trained on how to provide feedback to online learning participants on what to expect before pursuing an online learning development program followed by coaching them and providing support along the way. Finally, the participants indicated that to stay motivated to persist, learning management practitioners will need to keep the CEOs and other organizational stakeholders informed of the online learning progress of employees as it applies to helping the organization change and grow.

RQ2: What steps can CEOs take towards incentivizing employees to persist in completing the online learning program? First, the results indicated that it is important for online participants to have external support from CEOs and family and friends to help confirm their decision to participate in the online program. The external support will be instrumental in providing the participants with the motivation necessary to persist in the program. Second, the results indicated that CEOs should communicate the value for employees to participate in online learning programs. The study participants indicated

they wanted to know "what's in it for me" to participate? Third, the results indicated that the participants would like time on the job, when appropriate to work on the program content to allow them to apply their learning on the job immediately. Finally, the results revealed that CEOs should have motivational incentives such as job stretch assignments, promotions or a financial increase in place so that employees will have something to look forward to once they complete the online program.

In Chapter 5, I expand on the results and address the implications of the findings, the limitations of the study, opportunities for further research, and the contribution to social change.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to explore employees' perceptions about the factors that impact motivation and persistence to attain an online, employer-sponsored management development certificate. The study was also conducted to provide CEOs with information on employees' perception of online management development programs. Such perceptions could help CEOs make informed decisions about investing in and supporting employees who participate in online learning management programs. The lack of information on employee perceptions of online learning led to the research questions that guided this study.

RQ 1: How do employees' perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online management development certificate program affect their program completion rates?

RQ 2: What steps can CEOs take towards incentivizing employees to persist in completing the program?

Eight key themes related to the research questions emerged from the analysis of the interview data: purpose and meaning, coaching and support, course relevance, perceived barriers, learning preferences, executive support, motivation, and readiness.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings that emerged from the analysis of the interview data were organized into intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influenced motivation and persistence as employees progressed through the management development certificate program. The word cloud in Figure 11 illustrates the top 50 descriptors that emerged and were used to identify the themes in this study. The size of the descriptors in the figure is proportional

to the frequency of the descriptor as they appeared during data coding. Eight major

themes and 23 subthemes were identified.

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Figure 11. Word cloud showing top 50 descriptors.

I grouped the themes on motivation and persistence into three categories: CEO

support, employee, and social support. The themes were then grouped into either

extrinsic support (external to the employee) or intrinsic (internal to the employee). *CEO*

support is the external communication and support that executives provide to employees

and *social support*s are the external supports that employees receive from their family

and friends. These were external factors that impacted the participants' persistence and

motivation in the online management program. The internal factors that affected

employee persistence were divided into two categories: *perceptual* and *skill preparation.*

The perceptual factor, what employees think about online learning, includes motivators,

course relevance, and perceived barriers. The other internal factor, skill preparation, is

defined as what employees need for online learning. Skill preparation includes readiness,

learning preference, and purpose and meaningfulness. Table 13 displays the major

themes and subthemes grouped into intrinsic and extrinsic categories.

Table 13

Major and Minor Themes Grouped into Intrinsic and Extrinsic Categories

Extrinsic: CEO Support	Intrinsic: Employees		Extrinsic: Social Support
Executive Support	**Motivators**	**Readiness**	**Coaching & Support**
Incentive	Career Development	Academic Skills	Need for Coaching
Logistic Support	Financial Development	Computer Skills	Work-Life Balance
Value Perception	Sense of Progress	Self-Discipline	
	Skill Development		
	Course Relevance	**Purpose & Meaningfulness**	
	Job Related	Educational Advancement	
	Personal Development	Improved Marketability	
		Organizational Progression	
	Perceived Barriers	**Learning Preference**	
	Learning Curve	Confidence	
	Low Incentive	Deeper Learning	
	Time Management	Resourcefulness	

Note. Major themes are in bold font.

The resulting themes in this research study concur with the literature I reviewed

regarding using online learning as a strategy to develop managers. In essence researchers

reported that, with executive support, employees found that online management

development programs enhanced managers' effectiveness, innovation, and performance

(Aragon & Valle, 2013; Atchley et al., 2013; Cerino, 2014; Epp et al., 2017). Researchers

(Sirková et al., 2014) also agreed that online management development programs

provided employees with career options and that the relevance of program content improved the ability to use technology to communicate and manage people more effectively.

In contrast, other researchers (Butz et al., 2014; Warring, 2013) found that using technology to develop managers was not effective because some employees found it difficult to adjust to the online learning environment and the technology impaired their ability to find meaning and to persist in online learning programs. The findings in this study aligned with those of other researchers (Cecilia et al., 2013; Simunich et al., 2015) in that skill preparation impacted both the time participants needed to learn within the online environment and their application of the learning content. Similar to research on attitudes and perceptions about online learning (Association of Talent Development, 2014, 2015, 2016; Goldberg et al., 2014; Johnson, 2015; Picciano, 2017; Sirková et al., 2014), I found that program completion and attitudes towards online learning varied based on the communication about the perceived value of the program within the organization.

Regarding RQ1, the study participants felt strongly that, before entering the online program, they should have perceived the value and meaningfulness of the program. They wanted to know that pursuing the program would lead to a better way of life and improve their chances of moving up in the organization. This expectation sheds light on the importance of CEOs having incentives in place that help employees stay motivated to pursue more developmental programs offered in the organization. Additionally, the participants indicated that having instructors who were accessible and responded within a day, is an essential factor impacting motivation and persistence.

Participants also revealed that program content that was useful, relevant, and applicable

to their home or work life was important and they needed to persist in learning it. RP06

responded, "It was refreshing to learn information that would last beyond the 12-week

class. I realized I was learning on a deeper level and it motivated me to keep going." Due

to the independent nature of online learning, participants indicated that it was helpful for

online students to know how they liked to learn before they started an online program.

RP07 said, "Online learning can be lonely and you need patience because some of the

response times from instructors are delayed, which can be frustrating and demotivating."

Regarding motivation, some student participants had both organizational support from

supervisors and external support from family kept them motivated to persist. Other

participants indicated that their motivation to persist was negatively impacted by their

supervisor's perception of the program as not being valuable; this caused them to quit.

RP05 said, "My supervisor thought that the program was a waste of time and that my

focus and excitement about school impacted my production at work." The participant's

indicated factors of organizational progress, skill development, deeper learning,

incentives, learning preferences, organizational support and the need for coaching support

had a strong influence on their perceptions about their needs to get motivated and persist

in the program.

Regarding RQ2, the employee's perceived value of the online management

development program in this study is associated with the employee's position within the

GXI organization. One observation in reviewing the demographic information presented

in Table 9, in Chapter 4 (p.133), is that the employee's rank or title in the organization

seemed to be a trend that corresponded with program completion. Among the study

participants, only two of the seven assistant managers completed the program, while all

but one of the participants with the title of manager, area manager, or director completed

the program. The two assistant managers (RP09 and RP12) who completed the program,

shared perspectives about communication and motivation that helped them persist in the

online management program. Participant RP09 shared how hearing about the value of the

program directly from the CEO helped motivate him to persist in the program.

> RP09: The CEO told us about how the program could enhance our ability to learn
>
> more and possibly get a promotion if we completed it. I didn't see the CEO that
>
> often and hearing from him, motivated me. It was a tough program but I hung in
>
> there and finished it. I ended up getting a raise and a promotion afterwards.

One explanation for this participant's perspective could be that this participant was

motivated externally, by hearing about the perceived value of the management program

directly from the CEO. This could have helped motivate the participant to persist by

holding on to the possibility that she could be promoted or receive a raise.

In the other example, participant RP12 shared how both external support from her

parents and a defined purpose helped motivate her to complete the program.

> RP12: I wanted to get a credential I could use to help me learn how to manage
>
> myself and my people. At the time I was caring for an elderly parent, who was a
>
> retired school teacher and she encouraged me to keep going.

One explanation for this participant's motivation to persist could be that her

parents understood the perceived value of the management program and communicated

their support that, in turn, helped motivate her to persist. This observation gives the nod

to the finding of Robinson et al. (2017) that online participants need to convey how they

perceive the benefits of pursuing online programs to family members, so that family members can support them as they matriculate through the program.

Another observation in reviewing the demographic profiles presented in Table 9 (p. 133) is that all of the employees who had the title of assistant manager, did not complete the program with one exception, RP04, a manager. Unlike all of the employees with the title of manager and higher who completed the online program, this manager did not complete the program. This participant shared how her reduced internal self-confidence and skill preparation was a barrier to her persisting in the online program.

> R04: As an older adult, I felt like I was not smart enough to keep up with technology and had a lot to learn. I discovered that I was not aware of the expectations nor prepared to learn in the online environment. I just got frustrated with everything and told others about my experience.

One explanation for this observation could be that this participant's internal self-perception and skill readiness may have impeded her motivation to persist and complete the program. Although there were other participants over 40 years of age in the program, this participant communicated to others her perceived value that the program was not worth her effort to complete it. This observation supports Afolabi's (2017) view that online students need to have a clear understanding of their skills, abilities, and purpose for pursuing an online learning program to help them stay motivated to persist through completion.

Based on these observations and support from literature, I argue that external communication from CEOs and social support from family and friends seem to be an important factor in confirming employee's perceived value about pursuing and persisting

in this online management development program. In this case, communication and social support for employees to stay motivated in the program were confirmed by the quality of what they heard about the management development program and from whom. I also argue that the closer the employees were in rank to the CEO, the greater the chances of completing the program. This may have been because those employees higher in rank (director, manager, and area manager) had more access to hear about the perceived value of the management development program directly from the CEO. However, some of the assistant managers may have heard about the perceived value of the management development program from someone other than the CEO, which also could have impacted their overall perception. The following participants provide support for the significance of hearing about the value of the online program directly from the CEO.

> RP07: Leaders should have told us what to expect and what we could gain from the program, if we enrolled - paint a picture of hope, growth, and opportunity.

> RP08: I needed to hear from the CEO, about the value of the management development program. I wanted to ask the leaders questions. I heard about program from a co-worker, who heard about it in passing from her team leader.

The observations and interpretations presented confirm that communication from CEOs and social support from family and friends were important factors to help confirm the employee's perceived value about enrolling in and staying motivated to persist in this management development program. Based on results of this study, the closer in rank the employees were to the CEO, the more likely they were to hear about the perceived value of the program directly from the CEO. The further away in rank employees were from the CEO, the less impact the CEO's perceived value appeared to have on the employee's

motivation. It appeared the CEO's intended message of value decreased depending on from whom the employees received the message.

Regarding the effects of social support, employees will either be motivated with encouragement and support, or not, depending on how their friends and family perceive the value conveyed to them. With the conveyed support from family, employees have social support that confirms the value of pursuing the online management development program. The confirmed value could help employees stay motivated to persist and complete the program.

Employees' completion of the online program serves as a physical demonstration to the CEO that employees valued the program enough to stay with it. When the CEO sees results in the employee's improved behavior and contribution to the organization, the value in investing in the online management certificate program is confirmed. In this case, when the CEO conveyed the value of the online management certificate program, the employees were motivated to persist in completing the program. Figure 12 illustrates the flow of communication that affected employees' perceived value and motivation to persist in this online management development certificate program.
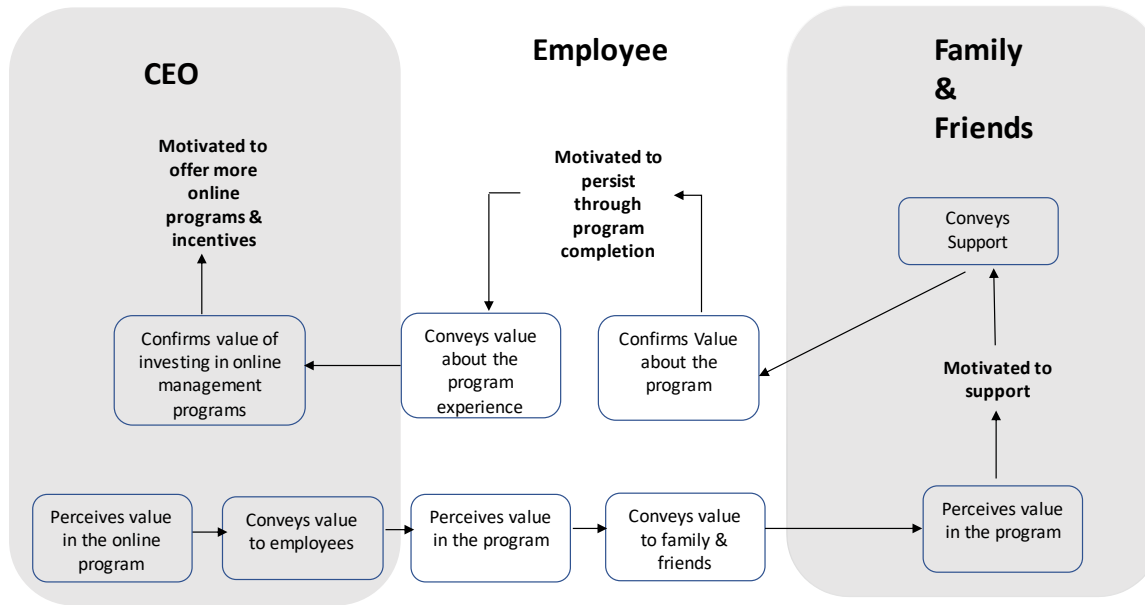
Figure 12. Flow of communication conveying value of the online program. CEOs who value the online program and convey their perceptions to employees spur motivation and persistence. Similarly, family and friends who hear of the value from the employee and, in turn, communicate perceived value of the program back to the employee, also spur motivation and persistence.

Limitation of Findings

One limitation of the study is the small sample size. The homogeneity of the sample drawn from only one online certificate program poses a limitation because students in other online programs or in other organizations may not experience or report similar experiences. However, the strength of case study research findings is that they may provide a baseline for insight and understanding that can be used to inform future research, industry practices, and personal decisions (Yin, 2014).

Another limitation to this study was the one-time data collection event. There could have been events or situations happening within the organization at any time after data collection that could have impacted the way employees responded to the interview

questions. One final limitation is that the study was conducted at one nonprofit organization where the CEOs' opinion was highly valued. One must take into consideration that the cultural norms and approach to management development may be different in other organizations. As a result, readers should not generalize the findings but instead, be informed of the findings in relation to others similar to this study.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Future Research

Additional research focusing on employee motivation and persistence in an employer-sponsored online management development program could create knowledge for researchers, CEOs, and learning management practitioners. Findings could provide the support and incentives employees need to thrive in an online program. Additional qualitative studies with employees pursuing an employer-sponsored online management development certificate program in for-profit or government organizations could help expand the transferability of findings in similar organizations. Of particular value would be investigations of other organizational incentives that could help employees enter and stay motivated to persist in online learning programs.

Researchers could also conduct phenomenological studies to gain insight about the lived experiences of employees who participated in online management development programs and are thriving as a result. This type of study could add to the limited research that shows the effect and ongoing promise of online learning in academia and in organizations.

More research on the preferred learning styles of students in online learning is also a need. To answer that call, I recommend future researchers conduct studies using

the Myers-Briggs Personality type indicator. This instrument could be used to help participants learn more about their preferred learning style and whether online learning is suited for them. Finally, I recommend researchers consider conducting longitudinal case studies to examine the strategies that students use to overcome the barriers and stressful times while in online programs. This could add to the body of knowledge on lessons learned and best practices for students when they encounter situations that prevent them from persisting in online programs.

Recommendations for Practice

There remains much to be learned about motivation and persistence in online learning management development programs. A number of best practices can be recommended based on the findings regarding the participants' shared perceptions. The participants indicated that before entering the online program, they wanted to know about the perceived value of participating in the program. They also indicated that they wanted to know that pursuing the program would lead to more opportunities. CEOs and other organizational leaders should ensure that incentives for employees to participate in an online management development program are appealing and illustrate the "what's in it for me?" for the employees before marketing the program.

Due to the independent nature of online learning, participants in this study indicated that it is helpful for online students to know how they prefer to learn before they start an online learning program. Learning management practitioners may utilize a learning style assessment to gauge employee's preferred way of learning before the employee starts an online learning program. In practice, this could give online students insight about their learning style preferences. It also could give learning management

practitioners information about participants to ensure they have the tools and resources to perform well in online programs.

To help employees stay motivated to persist, their immediate supervisor should be briefed about the purpose of the program, the expected time employees may be away from work, and how they can support employees as they continue through the online management program. Some of the participants in this study indicated that having the support of their immediate supervisors helped take away some of the stress and anxiety of thinking about completing school work while maintaining productivity on the job.

Implications

Significance to Social Change

Results from this study can impact social change at the individual and organizational levels. The results could help effect positive social change at the individual level for employees by providing them with results regarding the persistence factors needed to prepare for and complete online programs. This may result in employees having a greater opportunity to gain a marketable certification and expanded skills that enable them to earn higher wages and a better standard of living. At the organizational level, this study provides leaders with insight into identifying and making informed decisions about supporting employees who participate in online learning management development certificate programs which, in time, could prepare a pipeline of managers to assume new leadership roles within organizations.

Weidlich and Bastiaens (2017) presented information concerning the need for today's managers to have online social presence and skill sets that enable them to

understand, communicate, and engage workers in different generations regardless of the industry. These skill sets require specialized training and development using personal and technological mediums aligned with different learning styles. The results in this case study, provide insight that may help CEOs, academic administrators, and learning management practitioners make informed decisions about implementing employer-sponsored online learning management programs.

Significance to Theory

A review of academic literature reveals a void of research that explored employees' perspectives on factors that impact participant persistence in online learning programs. In addition, there is little research that uses Rovai's (2003) composite persistence model (CPM) and Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory together as the conceptual framework. This study helped fill that void by adding credibility to the use of concepts from both Rovai's CPM (2003) and Herzberg's (1966) motivation-hygiene theory to guide and inform future research studies. As technology in online learning continues to evolve, future researchers may benefit from research studies that use theories and concepts related to management and technology. The conceptual framework used in this study served as an example.

Significance to Practice

Learning management practitioners who do not invest time and resources in evaluating and adjusting their learning management practices to accommodate different learning needs may end up with performance issues that hinder organizational growth (Amaka & Goeman, 2017; Association of Talent Development, 2016; Hunt, 2014). As a result, learning management practitioners are supplementing traditional methods of

learning with more effective and scalable solutions that involve technology such as online learning (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Allen & Seaman, 2016; Association of Talent Development, 2014; Kirmizi, 2015).

The significance of this study to the learning management practice is that it provides CEOs and learning management practitioners with insight to help them make more informed decisions about investing in and supporting employees to participate in online learning programs. If employees have a sufficient amount of coaching and support to persist and complete online learning management development programs, it could provide them with the self-awareness, discipline, motivation, and competencies critical to serve as manager/leaders in organizations. It is likely that such employees will strive to promote positive social change at their workplace.

Conclusions

The need for management development in the nonprofit sector is critical. The increased number of retiring workers, the workstyle and learning preferences of different generations, and the significant impact of technology on learning has created concerns among CEOs. As a result, CEOs are facing a critical need to prepare new managers with relevant skills to serve in the leadership roles left behind by retirees and adapt to managing using technology.

The findings in this study identified factors that affected employee persistence in an online management development certificate program. One prominent study finding was the significance of external communication from CEOs and social support from families in confirming employee's perceived value about enrolling in and staying motivated to persist in the online program.

CEOs also need to make sure that their perception of value about online management development programs is conveyed and understood throughout all levels of their organizations. The participants in this study indicated that if CEOs want improved behavior and results to be realized organization-wide, then the CEOs need to reach out throughout their organization. CEOs cannot leave it to their direct reports to convey a message of importance and expect it to be fully realized by everyone at every level in the organization.

Finally, in order for CEOs to incentivize employees to persist in online management development programs, they need a strategic system of recognition and advancement in place to provide professional growth opportunities for employees after they complete the management development program. Over time, this strategy could help retain employees and, ultimately, help address the need to fill the leadership pipeline with new managers prepared to assume higher-level management positions.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview: The goal is to explore the persistence and motivation of management development students in an employer sponsored online learning continuing education program. The following procedures will be used during each interview.

1. The interview session will commence with relationship building, salutations, introducing myself to the research participant, after which I will introduce the research topic.

2. I will thank the participant for taking the time to respond to the invitation to participate.

3. I will request the participant to read the consent form, ask any questions before proceeding to sign the consent form.

4. The participant will be given a copy of the consent form for their records.

5. The audio recording device will be turned on, and I will note the date, time and location of the phone interview.

6. The coded sequential interpretation of the participants' name 'respondent Q1...' will be indicated on the audio recording device, documented on my copy of the consent form and the interview will begin.

7. The interview will span approximately 45 – 60 minutes for responses to the 2 research questions, including any additional follow-up questions.

8. I will remind participants of the purpose of the study. The purpose of the case study is to explore perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online management development certificate program.

9. Then, I will inform the participant regarding the review of the interview report that I will make available after transcription.

Appendix B: E-mail Invitation to Study Candidates

Dear Sir/Madam,

As part of my doctoral study research at Walden University, I would like to invite you to participate in a research study I am conducting to explore the factors that affect persistence and motivation in online learning management development programs. The intent of this study is to gain insight from the student's perspective to provide insight to CEOs about factors that may help improve administering online management development continuing education to students in employer-sponsored programs.

I contacted you to participate because you participated in the Management Development Certificate program. Participation in the research study is voluntary, and will be confidential. Please read the attached consent form carefully. If you have any questions before acting on the invitation to participate, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you meet the criteria below, I would greatly appreciate your input to the study. The criteria is (a) Current or former GXI employee 24 years of age or older; and (b) either completed or did not complete the program. If you satisfy this criteria and have agreed to participate in the study, please notify me via the contact information. I will contact you again to deliver the consent form, and to set up the phone interview of no more than 1 hour.

The interview will be audio recorded and you will have the opportunity to review the transcribed interview interpretations for accuracy prior to inclusion in the study. I sincerely appreciate your valuable time, and thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Todd D. Chester

Appendix C: Alignment of Interview Questions with Research Questions

Research Questions	
RQ1:	How do employees' perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online ma nagement development certificate program affect their program completion rates?
RQ2:	What steps can CEOs take to incentivize employees to persist in completing the program?

Interview Questions for All Participants	
Interview Question	Research Question
1. Why did you pursue the management development certificate program?	RQ1
2. What were your expectations of the program?	RQ1
3. What was your orientation experience like in online certificate program?	RQ1
4. How could the orientation program been improved to help you prepare for the online program?	RQ1
5. How was your experience with your GXI Education coordinator?	RQ1
6. What kind of readiness or skills do you think are required by a person to engage and learn in an online learning environment?	RQ1
7. What would you have like to have known before you began your online program?	RQ1&2
8. What was the experience like managing online program studies with work and responsibilities?	RQ1&2
9. What incentives can leaders provide to help learners stay engaged and persist in an online learning program?	RQ2
10. What was it like to be self-directed and independent in taking responsibility for learning online?	RQ1
11. What steps did you take to catch up on assignments if you knew you were falling behind?	RQ1
12. What was your experience like communicating in the online environment?	RQ1
13. Is there anything you would recommend to improve the communication between students and instructors?	RQ1
14. What was the average time per week, you spent on coursework and engaging in discussion questions?	RQ1

15. What topics would you like addressed that were not taught that would have made the program more relevant?	RQ1
16. Was the technical support sufficient for the program? If not, why? (please explain)	RQ1
17. How did the program meet your expectations?	RQ1&2
18. How did it fail to meet your expectations?	RQ1&2
Interview Questions for Program Completers	
1. What would you describe as your most important motivators as you persisted through the program?	RQ1&2
2. What resources did you use to help you stay engaged to persist until you found some relevance in each course?	RQ1
3. What specifically about these resources helped you persist through the program?	RQ1
4. What would you have like to have known before you began your online program?	RQ1&2
5. How relevant was the subject matter or course content to your job?	RQ1&2
6. How did completing the management certificate program benefit your management knowledge and career development?	RQ1&2
Interview Questions for Program Non-completers	
1. What would you describe as the obstacles that prevented you from completing the program**?**	RQ1&2
2. If you had to start the program over again, what would you do differently?	RQ1
3. To what extent did the company work conditions and supervisor support impact your motivation in the management development program?	RQ1&2
4. To what extent did family support, life situations like death, loss of a job or some other event impact you continuing the program?	RQ1&2
5. What was the defining moment when you made the decision to leave the program?	RQ1
6. What would you have like to have known before you began your online program?	RQ1&2
7. What incentives can executive leaders provide to help students stay engaged and motivated in the program?	RQ2

Appendix D: Alignment of Interview Questions, Conceptual Framework, and Literature Review

Research Questions		
RQ 1: How do students' perceptions of persistence and motivation in an online management development certificate program affect their program completion rates?		
RQ 2: What steps can CEOs take to incentivize students to persist in completing the program?		
***I*nterview Questions for All Participants**		
Interview Question	Conceptual Framework Factors	Literature Review Topic
1. Why did you pursue the management development certificate program?	Achievement Job status Intellectual development	Purpose & Meaning
2. What were your expectations of the program?	Actual Work Academic integrity Clarity & consistency of the program	Purpose & Meaning
3. What was your orientation experience like in online certificate program?	Time Management Student engagement Computer literacy Information literacy	Purpose & Alignment
4. How could the orientation program been improved to help you prepare for the online program?	Time Management Student engagement Computer literacy Information literacy	Purpose & Alignment
5. How was your experience with your GXI Education coordinator?	Learning Community Time management Intelligent development	Purpose & Meaning
6. What kind of readiness or skills do you think are required by a person to engage and learn in an online learning environment?	Student skills Computer literacy Information literacy Reading & writing	Coaching & Support
7. What would you have like to have known before you began your online program?	Computer literacy Information literacy Academic performance & preparation	Learning preference
8. What was the experience like managing online program studies with work and responsibilities?	External Factors Family commitment Demands from work Unexpected life events	Coaching & support systems
9. What incentives can leaders provide to help learners stay engaged and persist in	Recognition Achievement	Learning preferences &

an online learning program?	Coaching & support	persistence
10. What was it like to be self-directed and independent in taking responsibility for learning online?	Self-efficacy Information literacy Student engagement in online learning	Learning Preference & Persistence
11. What steps did you take to catch up on assignments if you knew you were falling behind?	Information literacy Time management Student engagement in online learning	Learning preference & persistence Barriers
12. What was your experience like communicating in the online environment?	Computer literacy Information literacy Student engagement	Learning preference
13. Is there anything you would recommend to improve the communication between students and instructors?	Using university services Learning style Student engagement	Learning preference
14. What was the average time per week, you spent on coursework and engaging in discussion questions?	Time management Academic integration Student engagement	Course relevance Meaning & persistence
15. What topics would you like addressed that were not taught that would have made the program more relevant?		Course relevance
16. Was the technical support sufficient for the program? If not, why? (please explain)		Coaching & support
17. How did the program meet your expectations?	Clarity & consistency of program Computer literacy Information literacy	Meaning & persistence
18. How did it fail to meet your expectations?	Clarity & consistency of program Computer literacy Information literacy	Barriers
Interview Questions for Program Completers		
1. What would you describe as your most important motivators as you persisted through the program?	Achievement Family & coaching support Salary & job status	Meaning & persistence
2. What resources did you use to help you stay engaged to persist until you found some relevance in each course?	Information literacy Reading and writing	Course relevance
3. What specifically about these resources	Information literacy, coaching & support,	Coaching & support

#	Question		
	helped you persist through the program?	actual work, achievement	
4.	What would you have like to have known before you began your online program?	Consistency of program requirements, academic integration	Learning preference Course relevance
5.	How relevant was the subject matter or course content to your job?	Actual work Clarity of program	Course Relevance Purpose
6.	How did completing the management certificate program benefit your management knowledge and career development?	Salary & job status Recognition Working relationships	Purpose & meaning
	Interview Questions for Program Non-completers		
1.	What would you describe as the obstacles that prevented you from completing the program?	Family commitments Unexpected life events Online academic integration	Barriers
2.	If you had to start the program over again, what would you do differently?	Information literacy Clarity & consistency of program Learning styles	Barriers
3.	To what extent did the company work conditions and supervisor support impact your motivation in the management development program?	Working relationships Company policy & benefits Working conditions	Barriers
4.	To what extent did family support, life situations like death, loss of a job or some other event impact you continuing the program?	Family commitments Unexpected life events	Barriers
5.	What was the defining moment when you made the decision to leave the program?	Program relevance Student engagement Clarity of program	Barrier
6.	What would you have like to have known before you began your online program?	Intellectual development Previous academic performance & preparation.	Learning preference
7.	What incentives can executive leaders provide to help students stay engaged and motivated in the program?	Company policy and benefits Recognition Achievement Working relationships	Meaning & persistence