

Employers support pursuit of non-business graduate degrees

Tough firms are scaling back on tuition assistance, education remains important

By SHEILA LIVADAS

When human resources professional Keith Kiss decided to pursue a graduate degree in 2007, his employer paved the way with tuition assistance. Now he is working on a second master's degree, also with help from his employer.

If Kiss's former employer, ADT Security Services, had not shouldered some of the cost for his master of science degree in human resources management from Nazareth College of Rochester, the Clinton County native doubts he would have gone back to school. Having a second master's will make him even more marketable, he says.

"I do find myself working with and consulting with managers, and I think having this (second) M.S. in management kind of lends some credibility," says Kiss, a human resources generalist for People Inc., a non-profit human services agency based in Erie County that recently opened a location in Rochester.

Despite belt-tightening across industries, some Rochester-area companies are still willing to provide financial aid so that future executives can pursue non-MBA graduate degrees, certifications and other forms of continuing education. Other firms, however, are scaling back their support.

One local employer providing tuition assistance is ESL Federal Credit Union. Currently, five employees on the path to leadership roles are pursuing master's degrees

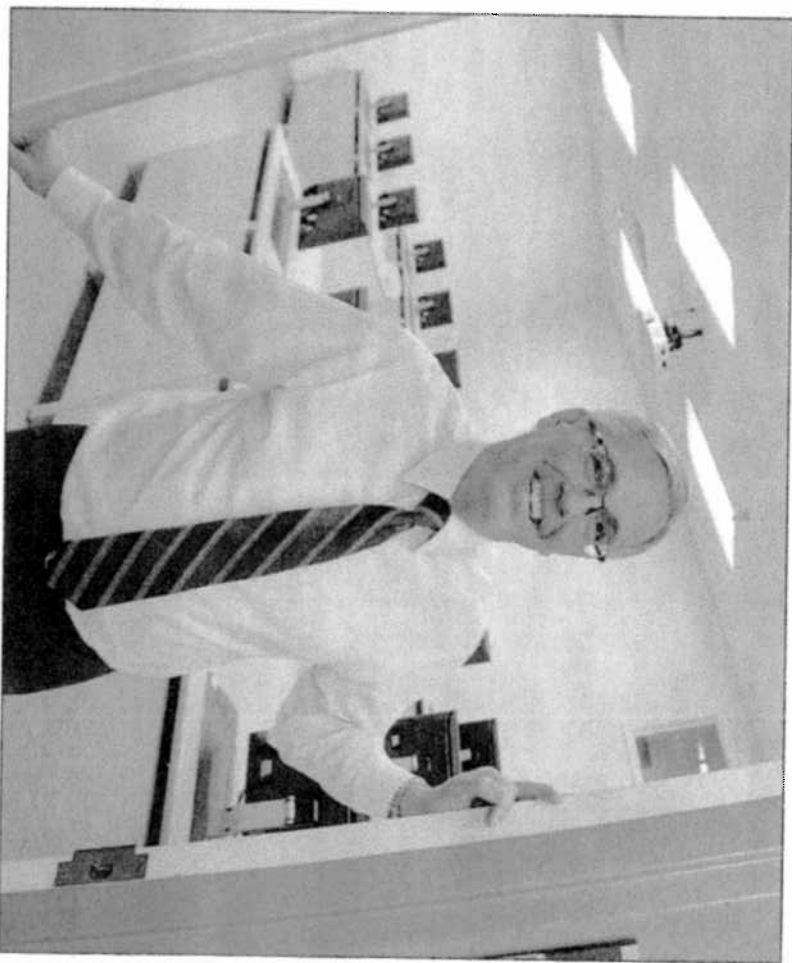


Photo by Kimberly McKinzie
The vast majority of students in Monroe Community College's Lean Six Sigma black belt program receive full tuition support from their employers, says James Gertner, product development manager at MCC Corporate College.

in education, strategic leadership, communications or human resources management with the credit union's help, says Francine Patella Ryan, public affairs manager.

ESL's tuition assistance is \$5,250 a year, the amount that is excludable from an employee's income for graduate study under Internal Revenue Service rules. The credit union extends the benefit to full-time and part-time employees and also offers finan-

cial support to employees pursuing bachelor's and associate degrees.

One local example of a non-MBA graduate program attracting students who typically receive at least some tuition assistance from their employers is Rochester Institute of Technology's master of science degree in product development. The program, offered online and on campus, attracts engineers, scientists, technical

managers and others who aspire to mid- and senior-level positions associated with product innovation.

In general, the students enrolled in the program have been "tapped by management as moving up the chain, so it sort of represents an alternative to an MBA," says Mark Smith, director of multidisciplinary programs at RIT's Kate Gleason College of Engineering.

He adds: "It's not as if these people need to have a lot of extensive business training. They're planning on staying close to the areas in which they currently participate, whether it's running a manufacturing facility or developing products and services."

Roughly 36 of the 90 students currently enrolled in the product development master's degree program have the entire cost covered by their employers, Smith says. Another 36 receive about \$5,250 a year in employer support, and the remainder receive higher amounts but not the full shot.

The undiscounted cost for the master's degree in product development is \$55,000.

Those who receive full financial support must abide by various restrictions their employers impose, Smith says. Some can take only one or two courses per term, while others must be on the payroll for at least five years before becoming eligible for the benefit.

"And it's pretty unusual for a student to be able to just take as many courses as they want in whatever time frame they're interested in," he says.

On average, students in the program have 12 years of industry experience, but "we're trying to push that down because we think that the earlier we can get students, the more likely it is that they will have a positive impact on their company," Smith says.

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