Strategic Development of Corporate E-Learning Necessary for Organizational Competitive Advantage

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ABSTRACT

Rapid globalization and increasing technology availability is transforming the work environment from an emphasis of employee transactions to a need for and valuation of knowledge workers. For organizations to compete in a work environment that is boundless regarding space and time, there is greater dependence on the individual knowledge, skills, and abilities of each employee. And there is increased need for ongoing employee training to maintain a dynamic knowledge worker and an organizational competitive advantage. The ongoing emphasis on training has pushed organizations to identify cost effective means for dynamic employee training and development. E-learning is often considered and applied with the assumption that e-learning programs are less expensive and more efficient. Is this assumption correct? To answer this question, this paper will explore current research regarding e-learning efficiency followed by author suggestions regarding corporate e-learning development strategies to maximize participant learning and organizational return on investment.

INTRODUCTION

Harvey Mackay, a business leader, author and syndicated columnist for Universal Uclick said, "Your workforce is your most valuable asset. The knowledge and skills they have represent the fuel that drives the engine of business- and you can leverage that knowledge." This quote emphasizes that an employee is an organization's greatest asset, but it is not just the person, the value comes from the employee's knowledge, abilities and skill set. Recognition of the value of employee skill set has lead organizations to pursuit "knowledge workers," workers whose main capital is their knowledge (Davenport, 2005). Human resource departments work very hard to recruit talented employees, but if the employee does not receive ongoing strategic development, their once sought after skill set will become dull. Therefore, a comprehensive recruitment plan must be followed by a strategic employee development plan.

Knowing ongoing training is needed, is one thing, but the challenge most employers face is maintaining adequately skilled workers for the business to remain competitive (Kakkar, 2008; Klimplova, 2012). With the ever-increasing premium on employee knowledge, skills and abilities, organizations are seeking formulas that equal maximum, ongoing employee learning and efficiency of training costs. Increasingly, organizations are applying e-Learning to create economic savings associated with ongoing corporate learning (Strother, 2002). e-Learning is learning that uses electronic technology to access curriculum and generally occurs outside of the traditional classroom and corporate eLearning is one of the fastest growing markets in the academic industry (Capper, 2001). Organizations have turning to the technology with the hope of reduced costs, increased accessibility, self-paced learning, and wide selection of course availability (Strother, 2002). The introduction of e-Learning has made a difference for many organizations in terms of ability to develop and deliver training (Zornada, 2005).
While, eLearning is on the rise, and initial investments can be high, it is unclear about the long-term cost savings associated with implementation (Chen, 2010). "Despite the rapid growth of e-learning in the corporate training sector, this quantitative growth has not always guaranteed an equivalent improvement in the quality of learning," (Joo, Lim, Kim, 2012). How can efficiency and effectiveness be measured to determine organizational return on investment (ROI) regarding an e-Learning program? To identify ROI, some organizations attempt to measure learners' satisfaction (Ozutran & Kutlu, 2010) and/or measure training participants' positive impact of customers’ service or productivity (Ho & Dzeng, 2010). But, do these measurements offer a clear picture of organizational investment as compared to employee gain of new knowledge and ability to apply new skills?

With an increase of corporate e-Learning application, it is important to understand how to optimize the use of e-Learning in the work environment to maintain a corporate team of knowledge workers with contemporary and innovative skills. The following will explore five global research studies regarding efficiency and effectiveness of corporate e-Learning followed by suggestions for corporate e-Learning program development, application, and measurement.

**REVIEW OF CURRENT RESEARCH**

**Analysis of Perceptions of Conventional and E-Learning Education in Corporate Training.**

In the study, "Analysis of Perceptions of Conventional and E-Learning Education in Corporate Training," by Monika Conkova, the researcher aims to analyze employees' assessment of their current systems of education and training in a Slovak consumer goods company. Data was collected in March of 2013 through electronic questionnaires. 150 questionnaires were sent via Google Form application and 119 questionnaires were completed. The questionnaires had the purpose of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of both e-Learning and classroom learning in a corporate setting. Analysis of the questionnaires found several conclusions. First, there is not a pure dominant learning preference by all learners, but "The most absolute prevalent style of learning was combined either with dominant e-learning approach or traditional features. It corresponds to increasing global occurrence and preferences of blended learning pattern utilizing various learning strategies and delivery methods mixed to optimize the learning experience" (Conkova, 2013). Based on this research, corporate instructors and instructional designers should recognize diverse learning needs and offer course content in a variety of learning outlets.

**The Effects of Learning Authenticity on the Learning Achievements in the Online Corporate Training Program.**

In the study, "The effects of learning authenticity on the learning achievements in the online corporate training program," Park, Kim, and Yu (2011) examine the effects of learning authenticity on the learning achievements in an online corporate training program. Specifically, the team examines authentic learning, learning that addresses real-world, complex problems and their solutions (Lombardi, 2007). The learner perceives authenticity when there is a structured connection between learning activities and the real world (Chen, 2006). Park, Kim, and Yu studied 37 employees at the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) program at Company L in Korea. All 37 participants had been working within the food manufacturing areas for multiple years and the job training program at the selected food company was used in the research. The training program has the purpose of teaching basic food safety management for all employees. While completing the training, participants were asked to complete 19 lessons, participation in discussions and write freely with classmates in the "Space We" section of the course learning page. One
finding of the study was that the higher the degree of authenticity of resources provided to the learners the higher the behavior/skill demonstration. Further, the researchers found that it is helpful to offer learners various kinds of media with authentic material that can be applied in their workplace immediately (Park, Kim, and Yu, 2011). The research supports that corporate instructors and instructional designers create corporate training that has a high degree of authenticity.

Impact of eLearning Perception and eLearning Advantages on eLearning for Stress Management (Mediating Role of eLearning for Corporate Training).

In the study, "Impact of eLearning Perception and eLearning Advantages on eLearning for Stress Management," by Sarwar, Ketavan and Butt, the researchers were seeking information about e-Learning perceptions as they impact training participants’ ability to learn stress management skills in an online corporate training program. The researchers sought to understand the attitude and perceptions of employees working in the corporate sector in the city of Lahore, Pakistan, and a sample size of 686 participants, 331 from manufacturing industry and 335 from service sector. The study found that overall eLearning for corporate training partially mediates the relationship between eLearning perception and eLearning for stress management (Sarwar, Ketavan and Butt, 2012) and that e-Learning is an effective corporate learning tool. Therefore, instructors and instructional designers should understand that e-Learning is a tool that is beyond just transfer of work function skills, but e-Learning can be an effective tool in facilitating knowledge of work/life balance skills like stress management.

How Adults Learn from Self-Paced, Technology-Based Corporate Training: New focus for learners, new focus for designers.

In the 2006 study, "How Adults Learn from Self-Paced, Technology-Based Corporate Training: New focus for learners, new focus for designers." Jackie Dobravolny, examined how adults learn from self-paced, technology-based corporate training. Seven individuals participated in the phenomenological study. All participants were employees at corporations that offered self-paced, technology-based training in the United States. Each participant selected and completed a self-paced training program. During training the participants maintained critical incident journals, Post-It (TM) diagrams and audio-taped interviews. The researcher found participants were applying constructivist theory and adult learning theory in the self-paced learning experiences. Constructivist theory of learning supports that learners make new information relevant and/or meaningful to themselves (Mezirow, 1997) and adult learning theory describes a learning framework supported by emphasizing social construction of meaning, prior experiences, application of reflection, and authentic experiences in the learning process (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Further, the study found that learners frequently use conversations to learn from self-paced, technology-based training learning therefore, discussions are important in the design of online learning courses. Finally, learning for adults in self-paced technology-based training starts with and is fostered by metacognition, the process of self-monitoring, that is self-assessment and self-correct (Schraw, 1998). This study suggests that instructors and instructional designers should create online learning opportunities that allow for interaction, discussion, self-assess and self-correction.

A Model for Predicting Learning Flow and Achievement in Corporate e-Learning

In the 2012 study, "A Model for Predicting Learning Flow and Achievement in Corporate e-Learning," by Young, Kyu and Su, the researchers sought to understand the determinants of learning flow and achievement in corporate online training. The study participants were selected in 2009 at a
large established company in Korea. The company has been implementing e-Learning courseware across the organization for 12 years. Two different surveys were administered, one measuring self-efficacy, intrinsic value, and test anxiety as motivational factors and the second measuring perceived usefulness and ease of use as learning environmental factors. 248 learners completed the surveys and conclusions were developed. The findings conclude that intrinsic value, test anxiety and perceived usefulness were significant predictors of achievement (Young, Kyu and Su, 2012). The results further revealed perceived usefulness and ease of use to be most influential factor for both learning flow and achievement (Young, Kyu and Su, 2012). This study suggests that instructors and instructional designers need to embed within each course strategies that increase learners’ self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation by fostering internal motivation to the learners. Courses will ideally include content that is clearly relevant and valuable to learners.

### Summary of Current Research

<table>
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<th>Authors</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
<th>Implication</th>
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<tr>
<td>Conkova</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Learners have diverse learning needs.</td>
<td>e-Learning should address and support diverse learning needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Park, Kim, and Yu</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>High content authenticity = high skill</td>
<td>e-learning should include authentic content and assignments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarwar, Ketavan and Butt</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>e-Learning can offer behavior training.</td>
<td>e-learning can be effective with broad topics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dobravolny</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Learner interactivity is important.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Young, Kyu and Su</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Learners seek usefulness course content.</td>
<td>e-Learning should offer content that has clear descriptive of ease of use for the learners.</td>
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### EFFECTIVE CORPORATE ELEARNING

Increasingly, organizations are seeking e-Learning as an effective and efficient tool for maintaining their workers’ knowledge. Perry Kendall, director of global reservations for Delta Hotels and Resorts describes why his organization implemented e-Learning. Kendall shares we wanted robust training that would enable employees to train at their own convenience (Musico, 2009). Jerome Brown, solutions marketing manager for e-learning and coaching at Verint Systems believes people are engaged with e-Learning and organizations know about it, but there is uncertainty of what to do once e-Learning is integrated into an organization (Musico, 2009). Jim Shulkin, director of marketing for Envision Telephony believes e-Learning is taken for granted and often operates "underneath the radar" (Musico, 2009). These are a few examples of why organizations are seeking e-Learning to gain efficiencies, but it is unclear how to manage e-Learning to obtain and gain a competitive advantage through ongoing employee learning.

Based on the five reviewed studies, the author will offer five suggestions for developing and sustaining e-Learning that creates efficiencies and allows for assessment of investment.

### Plan for Assessment of Training in the Development Stages.

Incorporate pre-and post-tests into all corporate e-Learning experiences. The pre-test should assess the learners content understanding before the training and the post-test should assess the learners content understanding after the training. As an example, a pre-test should be administered, that measures each employee's understanding of the training content. The training should be administered and a post-test should be administered to measure the amount of increase, decrease or constants in the participants' learning based on the training experience.
e-Learning Should Align with Corporate Culture.

"E-learning depends on building a strategy that optimizes the technology within an organizational culture that is ready and willing to use it" (Florea, 2010). With the design of each course, there should be multiple purposes addressed. One of these purposes, should be to create a corporate training that further supports organizational culture. As an example, a customer service training for an organization that values communication should emphasize the attainment and application of communication skills.

Employees Should Be Assigned e-Learning Courses Based on Relevance to The Employee's Career and to Support Each Employee in Contributing to Organizational Goals.

Each employee should have career goals outlined that describe how the employee's actions will lead to their development and how each employee's actions contribute to overall organizational goals. Employees should only be offered training when the training supports the individual employee's career goals and supports organizational goal achievement. This direct learning line should be clear to the employee, the manager, and the organization. It is important that adults understand the relevance and need for their learning experience. As an example, an employee that wants to shift from front line customer service to management, should be offered training that supports their transition into a management role.

Organizational Reward System Should Support Employee Participation and Completion of Learning.

Employees should understand the reward that is associated with participating in, completing and demonstrating skills from a corporate training experience. The reward must be meaningful and contribute to the employee's perception of organizational equity. As an example, an employee should receive immediate recognition or reward upon completing an assigned corporate training.

E-Learning Should Create Interactivity and Networking.

In an e-Learning environment, employees will be at a distance from their instructors and some or all of their classmates. Distance learners, need interaction and collaboration, just as it is needed in the traditional learning environment. The e-Learning course design must be such that interaction is supported and networking opportunities are built. As an example, all corporate trainings should have opportunities for online discussion and whenever possible, some face to face meetings.

CONCLUSIONS

e-Learning is an effective tool for maintaining employees with current knowledge, skills, and abilities. Organizations that learn to effectively offer e-Learning can support a variety of corporate trainings at a reduced cost and at the employee's convenience. But, an effective e-Learning program does not happen by chance rather through strategic development of courses and learning programs. Based on a review of five global research studies and the authors experiences, it is recommended that organizations create e-Learning programs that incorporate assessment of learning, align with corporate culture, are relevant to the employee's career, involve direct rewards to the employee and include interactivity throughout the learning experience.
REFERENCES


Strother, J.B. (2002). An Assessment of the effectiveness of e-learning in corporate training programs. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 3(1).
