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# Distance learning – efficient and effective but no panacea

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## The author

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## Abstract

Distance learning is examined and suggestions are made as to how organisations can obtain the most from their investment in this form of study. The importance of identifying clearly the context in which learning will take place is highlighted. Examples are given, as well as comments from participants.

## Forget the hype

It must be a little odd reading ramblings from a principal of a distance teaching college who seems to argue that distance learning is not all it is cracked up to be. Heretical perhaps, but I do believe that the current hype of open and distance learning is misguided.

At its crudest, the hype tells us that purchase of purpose-designed packages on which one's staff can work unaided (in their own time, of course) will both save employers money and produce competence in the workplace. Nothing could be further from the truth and I well understand the reluctance of responsible officers in training or personnel departments to welcome open and distance learning. "Don't call us; we'll call you" is a sensible response! The trouble is that the rejection of the hype often includes a reinforcement of the view that the only real training takes place face to face in a classroom. This too is nonsense.

The truth is that it is the trainees who do the learning, that they are learning all the time, and that every aspect of their work environment contributes to that learning. If, for example, the formal training provision gives a different message from that practised in the workplace and if there is no way to examine the mixed message, training will not have beneficial effects, however well packaged. To be effective and efficient the formal training provision has to take account of these rather uncomfortable truths. Training can no longer work in isolation from the rest of the business to which it is applied, if indeed it ever could.

This article examines distance learning and investigates how, with effort and a little common sense, companies can benefit from its use.

## What is distance learning?

In a "pure" distance learning system those learning are remote or at least seldom, ever, see those doing the teaching. They normally do their study at times and in places which suit them and these times are quite independent of times and places which suit the teachers or trainers. Nonetheless it is possible for those learning in a distance learning

system to get help and advice. Among the methods available for delivery of the training to the learner are:

- (1) Correspondence tuition.
- (2) Computer-based training (CBT).
- (3) Interactive video (IV).

These methods, and particularly correspondence tuition, are well tried and established. However, they do require substantial motivation from the learner who tends to be isolated from others following the same learning programme. To compensate for this isolation, the providers put huge effort into making the learning material attractive and encouraging. In recent years there have been great advances in presentational method which has had consequent positive effects on the motivation of learners. Nonetheless, it is now very well established that, however good the presentation, if it ignores the context in which the learning will be applied it is much less effective than when context is recognised.

This means that in order to get the best from investment in distance learning it is most important to think clearly about the way in which the learning will be supported and applied. The choice of method is vast but the following examples illustrate some possibilities.

### Use of distance teaching to provide training “round the clock”

One company using the Oxford Open Certificate in Management Studies (OCMS), provided by Wolsey Hall Oxford and Oxford Polytechnic, has a 24-hour operation with staff working in three shifts. The trainee managers not only are on shift work but operate multi-site. It is therefore extremely difficult to get trainee managers together for any substantial or regular time. In fact, they seldom meet their training manager. Nonetheless, the company cannot afford to have its managers unaware of finance, marketing, personnel and other aspects of management skill and knowledge.

OCMS helps the company overcome this complex problem by providing a balanced programme of study including:

- (1) text and audio learning material for self-study;
- (2) tuition at a distance to comment on assignments related to company objectives;
- (3) a company-related project;

- (4) an induction day, a two-day workshop on interpersonal skills and a project-planning workshop. These take place on company premises;
- (5) a personal development journal supported by line managers and company trainers;
- (6) recognition of previous in-company training and adaptation of the course to meet specific company objectives.

There is a mix of distance teaching, face-to-face teaching and in-company support, a very successful company and provider partnership in training.

### Training large numbers quickly

A major financial institution needed to train more than 300 new YTS recruits in the basics of its business and set them on the road to full professional qualification. The basis of the training was a very carefully worked out company strategy for training which involved all regional training officers in the company and provided support from line managers in the workplace.

Wolsey Hall Oxford provided the correspondence courses and tuition. The company was provided with reports on progress so that individuals needing extra help could receive it. Regional weekend seminars also organised by Wolsey Hall were provided to help trainees prepare for their examinations.

The results were excellent, a vindication of the training manager’s courage in choosing this approach. They demonstrated the importance of thinking about the context in which learning will take place and in which its results will be applied before embarking on a training programme.

It is perhaps worth noting that a conventional face-to-face solution to this problem would almost certainly have been impossible to co-ordinate and would have cost considerably more. It also demonstrated that distance learning is as applicable to young learners as to old.

### Other examples

There are many other cases which could be cited: training high flyers wanting an MBA but too busy to take time away from work; training people who want to change career towards a new specialism in management or law but who cannot afford to give up work;

helping women to realise their potential as managers; and many more cases outside Wolsey Hall's direct experience.

### **Context is the key to success**

In all cases the success of the distance learning scheme depends on identifying clearly the context in which learning will take place and in which it will be applied. In most cases this means companies making intelligent use of the following in conjunction with their distance teaching:

- (1) occasional seminars to give opportunities for trainees to share experiences and discuss what they are learning;
- (2) in-company mentors to provide trainees with day-to-day contact – not a specialist but someone who takes an interest;
- (3) involvement of the course provider in discussion of the company training objectives so that the scheme provided can match needs;
- (4) exploration of ways to link “on-the-job” training activity with the distance learning provision;
- (5) providing opportunities to practise what is learned through projects and other assignments of real value to the company.

As mentioned earlier, a little work and common sense (not so common it often seems) will help achieve real benefits. With planning, companies can expect to be able to

train all their staff effectively and efficiently at reasonable cost.

Not all will see this, of course. One company had 1,500 untrained managers whose lack of developed skill was recognised. Nonetheless, the company decided to train 45 a year by face-to-face methods. However, this will not even keep up with normal wastage and new recruitment. It is hoped, for the sake of Britain's future, that such cases are rare.

### **A final word**

Distance learning, properly thought through and planned, is in many cases the best option available for management and professional training. Two quotations from former students who took the University of Warwick/Wolsey Hall distance learning MBA conclude:

The theory complements the practice – I can apply what I learn to my day-to-day work. I think the programme has given me a better understanding the business environment, and how all the different parts of a large organisation fit together. The programme's flexibility is its greatest advantage for me as I can adapt my studies to fit in with domestic routines and other commitments.

The distance learning MBA is a worthwhile and challenging experience for both individuals and organisations they work in. It helps to broaden all aspects of business awareness. You need both stamina and commitment to undertake the programme alongside full-time employment. I have enjoyed this aspect thoroughly.