

Adopting an e-learning strategy

The practical considerations of delivering a successful e-learning program

Introduction

In today's competitive marketplace it is increasingly important for organizations to stay ahead of their rivals. One way of ensuring competitive advantage is to develop a highly skilled workforce, equipped with the knowledge and expertise required to stay ahead in the marketplace.

However, it can often be extremely difficult to balance the demands on employees' time to ensure the smooth running and efficiency of their organization, with the demands of education and learning.

To overcome the difficulties posed by more traditional and conventional learning methods, more and more organizations are turning to e-learning to offer their employees an effective means of increasing their knowledge and understanding.

Learning can be undertaken to suit the particular individual demands of both employers and employees. Rather than limiting participants to rigid times and locations, the flexibility of e-learning offers organizations the ability to deliver education independent of time and place. More and more employees are no longer tied to a single work place, but can work from home or in geographically dispersed teams across the country. E-learning offers great advantages to such teams. It also enables learning to be offered easily to those beyond the formal boundaries of the organization at relatively low cost – including customers, suppliers and contractors.

Putting e-learning into practice

There is no doubt that if e-learning continues to grow, and become a reliable, effective source of learning, it will have a major impact on employee capability and therefore economic performance.

To both demonstrate the effectiveness of e-learning, and to highlight any practical considerations which need to be taken into account by organizations adopting this modern mode of education, research was undertaken focusing on three different companies:

1. *Company A* – one of the big five high-street banks in the UK.
2. *Company B* – an international engineering and manufacturing concern in the aerospace industry.
3. *Company C* – a major provider of telecommunications architecture.

The research data were gathered from senior corporate and e-learning development staff, through seminars involving academics and practitioners, and through practical reviews of the e-learning material available.

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Factors influencing the adoption of e-learning

The initial factors leading to the take-up of e-learning across the three organizations were substantially different.

The most significant driving force in company A was cost – both in terms of the reduced headcount within the training function and in the unit cost of delivery.

Meanwhile companies B and C were driven by a strategic review of the training and development function.

Delivering learning

While the major emphasis was on e-learning, this modern method was not the only means of delivering learning and training. Indeed company A still delivers face-to-face training, while company B offers traditional training, placements and a mentoring scheme; and company C offers face-to-face training through its own college which provides technical training to both its own employees and associated partners.

The delivery of the individual e-learning programs was demonstrated to differ across the three organizations.

Company A offers e-learning through multimedia suites consisting of stand-alone PCs offering CD-ROMs. An intranet site, offering 25,000 pages of reference material, is also available to 55,000 of the 78,000 employees.

Web designers are employed to create customized training as this has been identified as the most cost-effective way of producing the material.

Within Company A, barriers to the continued development of the e-learning program have been identified as technological limitations such as bandwidth and the need for an effective and compatible online mentoring system. A further barrier is the company culture, which is yet to accept e-learning fully.

Company B has also used the intranet to develop learning. The intranet serves 80 percent of a workforce of 130,000 based in over 45 countries worldwide.

As with company A, technology is hindering the development of the e-learning strategy. There are bandwidth, hardware and processing capability issues that limit the use of the latest packages and the level of interactivity and impact of the material. Further barriers were identified as the difficulty of integrated tracking across online and offline learning needs and activities; together with overcoming motivation difficulties.

At the other end of the scale, company C has a very different approach to delivery. Instead of relying on internal resources, the organization outsources its learning provision to a third party.

As would be expected from a company in a high-technology communications business, technological capability was not seen as a barrier. There were other barriers to contend with however. Culturally, training had been viewed as a “reward” with a few days away from the job. The move towards distance learning and then e-learning was therefore considered to be a cheap option and lacked support.



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Learning,
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Computer based learning

Lessons learned

The first clear message to come out of the research is that, while technology is the enabler of e-learning, it can also be a barrier. Issues of bandwidth and technological capability need to be clearly addressed before organizations can embark on a successful e-learning strategy.

The second lesson is that organizations need to be culturally ready to adopt e-learning. All three companies studied demonstrated resistance to the introduction of learning programs, and a negative attitude to learning and training in general.

Conclusion

There is absolutely no doubt that e-learning has the potential to play a major role in the continued development of corporate learning and education.

However, organizations wanting to embrace a successful e-learning strategy must ensure they are fully prepared both culturally and technologically. If they fail to put the necessary foundations in place – instilling a corporate ethos promoting e-learning across all levels of an organization, and developing a robust technical infrastructure - the opportunities offered by e-learning will be missed.

Comment

This review is based on “The implementation and use of e-learning in the corporate university” by Allan Macpherson, Gill Homan and Krystal Wilkinson, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School. Manchester, UK.

The article presents research highlighting the adoption of an e-learning strategy across three corporate organizations and analyses the key factors that need to be taken into consideration before the successful implementation of such a strategy.

Reference

Macpherson, A., Homan, G. and Wilkinson, K. (2005), “The implementation and use of e-learning in the corporate university”, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol. 17 Nos 1/2, pp. 33-48.

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