Communication

E-Training: A Dynamic Interface of Corporate Training with Technology

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Introduction

The changing patterns of the economy have altered the relationship between the different interacting forces within the organizational context. The faster-paced technology has managed to replace traditional training by giving the platform for e-training. Though still in the nascent stage, it appears to be very promising not only because it is cost-effective, but many studies have found the results are in favor of e-training. E-training is basically training with the use of technology. It delivers learning programs for employees via a wide range of computer systems outside the classroom. Colin Barrow (2003) argued that e-training can be defined "as using some form of technology to deliver training and other educational materials." Ramayah et al. (2012) pointed out that e-training can be delivered using online training, desktop training, desktop video conferencing, interactive training, computer-assisted instruction, self-paced training, multimedia training, software training and web-based training. "Typical types of e-training are video conferencing and web-based training." The question arises what makes it beneficial? Is it its cost-effectiveness (low cost), availability and interactivity, flexibility, consistency of contents across organizations convenience?

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E-learning can educate demographically distributed workers cost-effectively using standardized course materials.

In recent years, due to the affordability of personal computers and rapid increase in the usage of the internet, e-training has received great attention in corporations as well as higher education. To reduce the attrition rate and to enhance the retention rate, organizations are continuously investing in the development of e-training. The assumption behind this investment might be coming from the idea that e-learning can educate demographically distributed workers cost-effectively using standardized course materials.

E-learning

E-learning is a term used to describe a diverse range of applications of digital/ electronic technology (Internet, TV, Radio, DVD, CDROM, Cell phone, etc.) in the process of learning/education, with an emphasis on learning using the Internet. There are many meanings ascribed to the term "E-Learning". Sangrà and Vlachopoulos (2010) gave four categories of definitions related to the applications of e-learning: technology-driven, delivery system-oriented, communication-oriented, and as an educational paradigm by itself. Abbas et al. (2005) argued "E-learning can be defined as a wide set of applications and processes, which uses available electronic media (and tools) to deliver vocational education and training." Koohang & Harman (2005) defined e-learning as "the delivery of education through various electronic media. The electronic media could be the Internet, Intranets, satellite TV, video/audio tape, and/or CDROM". Many researchers pointed to the significance of technology in the constructive generation of knowledge. Herrington & Oliver (2000) stated "E-learning can support and improve highly effective types of learner-to-learner interactions through various communication tools, guidance, coaching and feedback." Henri (2001) addressed a comprehensive nature of e-learning as: "the appropriate application of the Internet to support the delivery of learning, skills and knowledge." From the above definition, we can infer that the e-learning is an innovative approach to deliver interactive, student-centered, well-designed learning environment with the use of digital/electronics technologies and different forms of learning materials to provide flexible, open, and diverse and distributed learning environment.

The assumptions of E-learning are used as a fundamental basis to design E-training. Though e-training is more or less similar to e-learning in many ways, the difference between them is similar to the difference between training and learning. Derek Stockley says, "Training is the conscious and planned process of transferring knowledge, skills, and attitudes to others" and "Learning is the processing and assimilation of what we hear, see or experience that alters or improves our knowledge, skills and attitudes."

Lately, organizations have started using technology to keep the cost of training low. In the traditional training programs, the employees on the training would have to give up their office work to attend those trainings. In periods of recession, to enhance the performance of the employees without giving up the productivity of the workers for a few days, organizations chose to go for e-training. However, many researchers have come up with various factors as to why organizations are using and moving towards e-training programs. It has been found that due to its beneficiary effects such as cost reduction in travel expenses and training time, variety of available content, flexibility in pace and delivery of training, standardized and consistent course delivery, permanent use of material within the company, boost worker productivity, increase in number of people trained, stay competitive, etc. (Chen,

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2008; Womble, 2008; Newton & Doonga, 2007; Schweizer, 2004; Burgess & Russell 2003; Bonk, 2002). Byun & Mills (2002) found that the formation of a learner-focused e-training environment helped employees develop new and better knowledge and enhanced their performance. Maki et al (2000) found that the content knowledge was greater for the students in the web sections. Also, the use of computers for academic purposes showed a greater decrease in computer anxiety. The students in the online sections expressed appreciation for course components and the convenience of the course, but the lecture sections received higher ratings on course evaluations than did the online sections. Learning and course satisfaction were dissociated in the two course formats.

Model for E-Training

David Smith (2016) explains Virtual Gurus' DECREE model for adapting face-to-face courses for virtual use. According to him, the design for any sort of e-training should follow six steps:

Define. The business need should be defined as well as the learning objectives required to meet it. Determine if the virtual classroom is the best platform for presenting the information.

Evaluate. Review existing content to make sure it's still relevant before repurposing it. Also, determine if learners have the technology, they need to take a virtual course, and they understand how to use it.

Create. Map out the learning journey for participants. What steps will they take to learn the necessary information and skills? What media will they use?

Repurpose. Prepare existing content for use online. Note that you can't simply convert a face-to-face course to a virtual one. Instead, you need to "translate" the content into something suitable for an online audience.

Engage. Think about how to engage participants, especially before and after the course. Are there information participants can learn before the course, so they can spend class time practicing? How can you ensure buy-in from managers, so they support participants after the course ends?

Execute. Deploy the course and evaluate. Go beyond smile sheets, measure knowledge transfer.

Evaluation of E-Training

It has been found that E-training is less expensive than the traditional classroom type of training. There are many types of expenses; for example, travel costs for employees or trainers, booking training facilities, employee time away from the job. Therefore, economically e-training seems to be less expensive.

However, the issue arises, whether the investment in e-training provides the same level of return (the return they would get in terms of increased level of employee performance if they would have chosen the traditional method of training) or is it lesser than that. In fact, more corporations look for options such as "blended learning", using more than one method of delivery (e.g., a mix of e-learning and traditional style of delivery of content). In such cases it becomes more important to measure which method is better and at what cost.

The classic study by Kirkpatrick (1979) on the evaluation of training methods gave four levels of evaluation:

Level I: Reaction as a measure of learners' reactions to the course.

Level II: Learning as a measure of what they learned.

Level III: Transfer as a measure of changes in the trainee's behavior when they return to the job after the training program.

Level IV: Results as a measure of the business outcomes that occur because they are doing their jobs differently.

However, at the end of the day, the organizations look for profits out of their investment in training. That is the tricky part because it becomes difficult to identify how much the profit increases because of the investment in the training. To deal with this issue, Phillips (1996) recommended the addition of a fifth level to Kirkpatrick's model. The new Level V is a measure of the Return on Investment (ROI), the cost-benefit ratio of training. In this level, the Level IV data are converted to monetary values and then compared with the cost of the training program. Though, it sounds easier to say but difficult to implement as what parameters should be included as a measure of the business outcomes and they should be quantified. However, many organizations have chosen to evaluate and to convert it in numerical values at every level. For example, the following results were obtained from an ASTD-Masie Center study involving the experiences of more than 700 e-learners (ASTD, 2001):

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_ Eighty-seven percent preferred to take digital courses during work hours.

_ Fifty-two percent preferred e-learning in a workplace office area.

_ Eighty-four percent would take a similar e-course if offered again.

_ Thirty-eight percent said they generally preferred e-learning to classroom training.

Also, a few evaluation methods were chosen to take the trainer's feedback. In a recent survey conducted by ecollege.com (1999), eighty-five percent of the faculty said their students learned equally effectively online as on campus. Some said that their students did even better online than in traditional classroom

settings. In another Tele-education study, one hundred thirty faculty respondents, sixty-two percent said their students learned equally effectively in the online environment; twenty-three percent of faculty stated that their students learned better online; while ninety percent indicated that they were satisfied with online teaching.

E-training versus Traditional Method of Training

The most important question and ongoing debate is which one is more effective: e-training or traditional method. Many studies have been done to compare both of them. Wegner, Holloway, and Garton (1999) provide an example of a study showing no significant differences between the test scores of experimental (e-learning) and traditional (classroom-based) students at Southwest Missouri State University. Although there were no statistically significant differences in test scores, this two-semester study yielded qualitative data that indicated that students in the e-learning group had, overall, more positive feelings about their experience than did the control group. This observation is consistent with those found in several of the "no significant difference" studies. Navarro and Shoemaker (1999) reported, "We see that cyber-learners performed significantly better than the traditional learners. The mean score [final exam] for the cyber-learners was 11.3, while that for the traditional learners was 9.8. With a t-test statistic of 3.70, this result was statistically significant at the 99 percent level. Nettles et al., (2000) report that, while the majority of the forty-nine studies they examined reported no significant difference between e-learning and traditional classroom education, nearly thirty percent of the studies report that e-learning programs had positive outcomes based on student preference, improved grades, higher cost effectiveness, and a higher percentage of homework completion. Serrano and Alford (2000) conducted research that clearly showed that incorporating technology across the curriculum acts as a catalyst for all learners. They concluded that e-learning empowers students to engage actively in language-content learning tasks and to develop higher-order critical thinking, visualization, and literacy skills. Nelson (2001) reported a significant difference between the mean grades of four hundred and six university students earned in traditional and distance education classes, where the distance learners outperformed the traditional learners. Similar results in support of e-learning came from Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALN) (2001), which reported a summary of empirical studies submitted to them. Of the fifteen papers in which the effectiveness of ALN was compared to that of the traditional classroom instruction, two-thirds reported e-learning to be more effective. The remainder of the papers reported no significant difference.

Hoekstra (2001) found the claim by Unilever that e-learning helped their sales staff produce more than US$20 million in additional sales. They track the results of their e-training programs by asking course participants to take part in a teleconference several months after the

course. Hall and LeCavalier (2000) after the study of eleven U.S. and foreign companies identified best practices within these companies, which have significant e-learning success stories. Zimmerman (2001) studied Etera, a nursery supply company, that used e-learning to train its national sales force. Their headquarters claimed that an Etera-certified dealer who has gone through the online training has one hundred and seventy percent more sales than an untrained dealer.

Conclusion

Organizations appreciate online training as a convenient, cost-effective, and effective way to deliver corporate training. From the literature, it seems that e-training is a win-win solution for the organizations, the trainees, and the trainers. For the organizations, it reduces the cost of training. For the trainees, it is convenient as it can be taken according to their schedule and for the trainers, it becomes easy to deliver as they can get connected to many trainees at the same time. However, over the years, the trainers and the organizations have faced challenges in selecting, organizing, and implementing digital training materials. Organizations struggle to integrate new learning management systems into existing systems. But despite all the challenges, the e-training is going to stay, and it provides a good opportunity to study how trainers can improve it to make it work better than the traditional method as it brings convenience and profit for all the stakeholders in the e-training and more research in this area will help in making it work better.

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