

# E-Learning as Organizational Strategy

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## UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT OF E-LEARNING

The global knowledge-driven economy is characterized by both structural and personnel changes that are driving new models of teaching and learning. Today's workforce has to learn and process more information in a shorter amount of time. New products and services are emerging with accelerating speed. As production cycles and life spans of products continue to shorten, skills quickly become obsolete, leading to the need for almost constant re-training. Managers feel the urgency to have new knowledge delivered to workers rapidly and efficiently so that skill levels can be maintained. Just-in-time training is becoming a critical element of organizational success. Learning is becoming a continual process rather than a distinct event (Urden & Weggen, 2000).

The rapid deployment of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education is facilitating broad-based responses to the need for new knowledge to support learning. Teaching and learning for education and training are taking place outside traditional institutional and workplace venues. Universities and for-profit companies are both responding to the need for technological approaches to teaching and learning, sometimes as partners and sometimes as competitors (Barron, 2002; Brint, Paxton-Jorgenson, & Vega, 2003; Harley, 2004). They are both included in models of transnational education, borderless education, distributed learning, online learning, Web-based learning, distance learning, and global e-learning (Rocket, 2002; van der Wende, 2002).

### The Growth of E-Learning

According to PriceWaterhouseCooper, the worldwide e-learning market was predicted to exceed \$23 billion in 2003, out of which North America accounts for two-thirds. PriceWaterhouseCooper predicts that the

Western European market will grow at the fastest rate over the coming years (Focus: E-Learning, 2003). In the year 2000, 11% (55% of the Fortune 500) had a Chief Knowledge Officer to respond to the need for corporate training including e-learning, up from virtually none in the previous five years (Learnframe, 2000).

Forces supporting the growth of e-learning include:

1. Development of innovations in the information and communication technology market broadens e-learning's appeal to those seeking ways to develop human capital.
2. Enhancement of practice by educators, trainers, and human-resource managers allows them to strategically manage both classroom training and the growing body of e-learning content through the use of learning management systems.
3. Corporations and higher education are able to offer flexible access to learning opportunities from distributed venues such as home, workplace, the community learning center, as well as from campus locations.
4. Corporations and higher education can offer equitable learning opportunities for independent and isolated learners.
5. E-learning providers perceive that e-learning offers a potentially less expensive way of delivering content.
6. Those that offer e-learning believe that e-learning can challenge the larger traditional market for higher education in niche elements of the market, especially in information technology itself.
7. Higher education institutions and employers are adopting "cutting-edge" technologies in order to be competitive.
8. Higher education institutions and employers are adopting e-learning as a matter of survival (Barron, 2002; Dickinson, 2001; Learnframe, 2000; Naidu, 2003; Sommerich, 2002; Stokes, 1999).

## **Problems Mitigating the Growth of E-Learning**

1. Most organizations are resistant to change. Without a shared vision for e-learning, a strategic plan, and key players who are knowledgeable and supportive of e-learning, implementing an e-learning program can be slow and difficult.
2. As the pace of network advances continues to accelerate, the gap between the technology haves and have-nots is widening. Some companies' limitations in bandwidth, formats, and browsers make full implementation very difficult. The gap in network capability and the associated gap in access to e-learning which separates wealthy organizations from poorer organizations can be characterized as a digital divide. "This kind of disparity is arguably the most critical issue that is impeding the proliferation of e-learning" (Naidu, 2003, p. 352).
3. The capacity of the Internet to link vast e-learning networks of individuals across wide boundaries at marginal cost is an appealing prospect. The six largest Internet-based universities are located in developing countries—Turkey, Indonesia, China, India, Thailand, and Korea. Yet, industrialized nations suffer from a credibility gap for failing to deal with issues of affordability or to foster a regulatory environment to support the growth of e-learning opportunities in developing regions of the world.
4. Universities, corporations, programming contributors, and network managers are confronting intellectual property and copyright issues related to the development and delivery of e-learning content.
5. The costs incurred for an organization to establish an e-learning program can be significant. Lack of enough money for ongoing support of the e-learning program can also cause serious difficulties.
6. The absence of online support and electronic access to resources that foster a meaningful learning environment can constitute an institutional barrier to participants.
7. Dispositional barriers by learners lead to low levels of participation in e-learning activities. These barriers include: low perception of need, lack of confidence, low priority, and negative attitudes toward technology.
8. Dispositional barriers by instructors to participation in e-learning activities include: lack of knowledge and skills to design and teach e-learning courses; discomfort with the use of student-centered and collaborative learning activities; concern about the quality of e-learning courses or programs; and (in the university setting) concern over compensation, incentives, and workload for the development and delivery of e-learning courses (Alvarez, 2003; Beaulieu, Borland, McCausland, & Wensveen, n.d.; Berge, 2003; French, Hale, Johnson, & Farr, 1999; Khan, 2001; Mitchell, 2000; Reuters, 2001; Salomon, n.d.).

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF E-LEARNING**

E-learning as a process is relatively new, but it is a quickly growing field. The first generation of e-learning content was developed on CD-ROMs in the 1980s and managed manually. The second generation of e-learning content, developed in the 1990s, was for the Web. This content was still managed manually. The third generation of e-learning content, now used by educators and trainers, includes both content and management of content on the Web (Al Karam, n.d.).

The first article on Internet-based e-learning appeared in *Training Magazine* in 1997 (van Dam, 2004, p. 4). A literature review completed in late 2003 identified over 4,500 citations on this topic (McFarlane, Bradburn, & McMahon, 2003). This review comments that almost every writer defines the term "e-learning" a bit differently. Several complementary and competing terms, concepts, and definitions can be used to discuss and describe varieties and variations of e-learning discussed in the literature (Tsai, & Machado, n.d.). The National Center for Supercomputer Applications, in an extensive report completed in 2000, defines e-learning as the:

*...acquisition and use of knowledge distributed and facilitated primarily by electronic means. This form of learning currently depends on networks and computers but will likely evolve into systems consisting of a variety of channels (e.g., wireless, satellite) and technologies (e.g., cellular phones, PDAs) as they are developed and adopted. E-learning can take the form of courses as well*

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