Chapter 7.24
Critical Success Factors for Distance Education Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education is playing an ever-growing role in the education industry. As such, it is prudent to explore and understand driving conditions that underlie this growth. Understanding these drivers and their corresponding concerns (Table 1) can help educators in the distance education field better prepare for the industry.

BACKGROUND

Distance education's primary driver is that it is the major growth segment in the education industry. In 1999, nearly 80% of the public, four-year institutions and over 60% of the public, two-year institutions offered distance education courses. Over 1.6 million students are enrolled in distance courses today. Over 90% of all colleges are expected to offer some online courses by 2004 (Institute of

Higher Education Policy, 2000). Corporations envision online training warehouses saving large amounts of training dollars. Combined, the virtual education market and its sister market, corporate learning, are predicted to grow to over $21 billion by the end of 2003 (Svetcov, 2000).

A second major driver is employer expectations. Fundamental job market expectations are changing. Today, employees are not expected to stay in the same job for long periods of time; 20-plus year careers are not expected. The current modes of careers include multiple careers, combinations of part-time work in multiple jobs, telecommuting, leaving and re-entering into the full-time work force, switching jobs, and so forth, and today's employee easily accepts the need to maintain a level of knowledge current with the career demands (Boyatzis & Kram, 1999). To complement these changes in employer expectations, employees have begun to accept the need for life-long learning.

Table 1. Influences on the distance education industry

Drivers	Concerns
Growth segment in education industry	Retention
Job market expectations	Fading Back
Life-long learning as an education paradigm	Less social learning
Profit center for educational institutions	Trust & isolation
Possible strategic competence	Impact of technology

A third driver is the profit potential. Cost savings may be obtained and if significant enough may drive up demand and costs may be lowered. For example, elective classes that do not have enough students enrolled in them on-campus may pick up enough distance students to make teaching the course more feasible (Creahan & Hoge, 1998). A final driver is the institution's mission. Most educational institutions serve a geographical region, either by charter or mission, and a distance-learning program may be a practical method to help satisfy this strategic mission (Creahan & Hoge, 1998).

However, the "commercialization" of education raises its own concerns about the basic process of learning (Noble, 1999). For example, are there any problems fundamental to the distance environment because of limited social interaction?

Retention may be one such problem. Carr (2000) reports a 50% drop-out rate for online courses. Tinto (1975) compared the learning retention of distance groups with traditional groups and found that the social integration was a key factor in successful retention of traditional groups. Haythornthwaite et al. (2000) think they found another one. They looked at how social cues such as text without voice, voice without body language, class attendance without seating arrangements, and students signing in without attending Internet class impacted students "fading back." They found that the likelihood of students "fading back" is greater in distance-learning classes than in face-to-face classes. From the United Kingdom, Hogan and Kwiatkowski (1998) argue that the emotional aspects of this teaching method have been ignored. Similar concerns are raised from Australia, where technology has been supporting distance- teaching for many years, as Hearn and Scott (1998) suggest that before adopting technology for distance teaching, education must acknowledge the social context of learning. Finally, two other factors, trust and isolation, have been researched by Kirkman et al. (2002), whereby communication helped improve the measures of trust in students using the virtual environment.

By definition, the paradigm of distance education changes the traditional education environment by expanding it to cover geographically dispersed learning. In turn, this means that students will probably respond differently to this environment than they do to the traditional classroom. In addition, academic researchers have always been interested in explaining how people react to the introduction of technology. This body of work can be useful to the distance education environment.

Poole and DeSanctis (1990) suggested a model called adaptive structuration theory (AST). The fundamental premise of the model is that the technology under study is the limiting factor or the constraint for communication. It further proposes that the users of the technology, the senders and the receivers, figure out alternative ways to send information over the channel (technology). A good example here is how a sender of e-mail may use combinations of keyboard characters or emoticons (i.e., :) – sarcastic smile, ;) – wink, :o – exclamation of surprise) to communicate more about their emotion on a subject to the receiver.

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