# Chapter 45

# 21st Century Learning Opportunities for SME Success:
## Maximizing Technology Tools and Lifelong Learning for Innovation and Impact

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter informs SME (small and medium enterprise) owners, developers, consultants, and academics with the reasons, means, and possibilities afforded by 21st century technology in helping SMEs to improve their operational efficiencies and discover more effective marketing strategies for their products and services. With the rapid development and broad-based integration of web-based technologies across domains of communication, marketing, e-Commerce, and training, SMEs can benefit greatly by using these inexpensive tools to their advantage. SMEs typically underutilize opportunities to enhance their efficiencies by using more complex e-Business systems, and in so doing under develop the talents of their workforce for innovation and success. This underutilization is not just because of ignorance of technological capabilities, but also from a lack of exposure to leadership and HR development training. Knowing the need to learn must be a strong foundation before technological development can ensue. This chapter provides a synthesis of research and literature across several related, but seldomly connected fields - including, organizational theory, leadership, adult development and learning, 21st century learning, distance learning and human resource management. In developing this chapter, the authors are attempting to communicate the need for SMEs to both develop leadership and technological program developments to implement the changes needed to compete in a marketplace that reflects rapid change and imperfect information.*

## INTRODUCTION

With the great proliferation and social adoption of web-based communication tools, e-Commerce platforms, and distance learning, SMEs are in a prime position to broaden their scope of service, increase scalability, cultivate innovation, and add to their profit margin. However, as the literature reveals, most SMEs do not know how to utilize e-Business platforms, nor are they aware of the various forms of education available to become proficient in this media. This chapter defines the current dimensions of what e-Business is, what it offers SMEs, and strategies for evaluation and possible implementation. Moreover, the chapter documents current issues and trends regarding how SMEs are, or are not, using the e-Business potential, and what the obstacles are for learning and implementing these changes. In addition, the discussion includes a review of salient limitations and risks which SMEs may review as they weigh these substantial strategic organizational opportunities. The chapter concludes with an overview of the macro level of the opportunities and recommendations for action.

In addressing options and strategies to encourage SME adoption of e-Business technology, we will build upon the literature of human resource development, business management, organizational theory, leadership, adult development, adult learning, 21st century learning and distance learning. Specifically, the chapter defines a business epistemology for the proper mix of e-knowledge and vision that are relevant for SMEs who are developing an e-Business platform. The chapter focus culminates in proposed solutions to encourage SMEs to embrace e-change, and a call for future directed research in this business challenge. The chapter begins by clarifying e-Business types and their definitions which are essential to the focus of the discussion.

## Definitions

In any discussion of such emergent and evolving concepts as e-Business, it is always beneficial to define the terms used. Therefore, this section defines the types of e-Business especially pertinent to this chapter. In reviewing the academic record, uniform nomenclature to describe the various types and platforms of e-Business has not as yet been normalized; however, for our purposes:

**E-Business** is the umbrella term for all uses of inter-company electronic networks to connect to intra- and inter-company systems, where the use of those networks and software is to organize and transact business activities in cyberspace (Brown & Lockett, 2004, p.1; Wu & Hisa 2009, p. 95).

**E-Commerce** is the simplest subset of e-Business, and relates to using the internet to order and pay for products or services, plus general e-mail activities (Wu & Hisa 2009, p. 96). Most SMEs (like many individuals) already use these base skills in order to communicate and order supplies. Research on SME adoption of e-Business has shown that SMEs are fine with e-mail/e-Commerce (low to medium technology) applications, but have very little engagement in highly complex applications (Brown & Lockett, 2004, p. 1). Most e-Business definitions exclude e-Commerce from their measurements of adoption of e-Business solutions.

**E-Marketplaces**, also known as inter-organizational networks (IONs), use the Internet to allow for the development of many e-Business models, which results in SME aggregation via IONs. These IONs form a web of SME exchanges that reflect cooperative and competitive elements, and vary in the form of network autonomy versus dependence, based on the specific needs, trust, and control requirements demanded of each individual network of SMEs. Aggregations in these IONs can range from social networking to formal integration (Brown & Lockett, 2004, p. 2-3).

An example of the first aggregation would be an industry social media which used blogs (web

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