

Chapter 2

Strategic Management of Workplace E-Learning

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ABSTRACT

Continuing education has become a necessary component of the modern knowledge worker and, by extension, of the modern firm. Increasingly, cost effectiveness points firms to using e-learning solutions in the workplace over older, more traditional methods. This chapter explores the strategic positioning of e-learning in the workplace, the instructional design process, and different types of training that are necessary in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

The modern workplace is a rapidly changing environment, one that demands both organizations and individuals keep pace with constant shifts in technology and the economy. Oye, Salleh, and Iahad (2012) explain that, “Our survival in the 21st century as individuals, organizations, and nations will depend upon our capacity to learn and the application of what we learn to our daily lives” (p 48). In order to effectively work in such a dynamic environment employees need to be actively engaged in continuing education and

professional development. Because these activities are necessary for employees to be successful they are, by extension, necessary for the company to be successful. Effective employee and organizational learning is a key issue for firms operating in a competitive environment (Chen & Kao, 2012).

Traditionally workforce education has mirrored traditional formal education. For large organizations face to face seminars or training series were held on-site, with outside experts and professional trainers traveling to the company’s location and delivering instruction. For smaller firms who lacked the resources to deliver training on-site employees were often the ones to travel, attending educational conferences or other train-

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ing events at the trainer's location. In either case there was a substantial cost to the firm in actual dollars for paying trainers, travel, lodging, and other related expenses. There was also a high cost in lost productivity as the employees taking part in training activities were away from their jobs but still drawing their regular pay throughout the training process.

While these costs can be substantial well-designed training improves the productivity and efficiency of a workforce and should, over time, provide positive financial returns. Jan, Lu, and Chou (2012) say about e-learning for workers that, "...it is now a fundamental tool for organizations to gain a competitive edge" (p 326). Wang (2011) explains that continuous innovation, the basis of which is knowledge, is a key process in today's highly dynamic business climate and that workplace learning drives knowledge to improve competitive advantage. Even in the recent economic downturn businesses are continuing to invest in e-learning for their employees (van Rooj, 2011). This connection of workplace learning, and e-learning specifically, to competitive advantage in the marketplace is evidence of the strategic importance of workplace e-learning in the modern firm.

There are two issues impacting this consideration in the modern business. First is the ever-present desire to improve financial performance from either the top or bottom line, that is to increase revenues or lower expenses. Thus, even if training yields positive financial returns over time, improving those returns is always a goal. Second, because of the increasing popularity of lean systems more and more organizations simply cannot operate at all if more than one or two people are missing from the system. This adds challenges to the traditional training model; while temporarily reducing the efficiency of an organization while people are gone for training is one matter, closing operations for training is quite another.

These many different factors surrounding training and professional development in the modern workforce are ultimately driving change in how training is delivered. The most common answer is to move from the physical to the virtual domain and utilize e-learning as the medium for developing workers. While there is great opportunity in adopting workplace e-learning it will not be effective without being properly planned and executed. This planning and execution does not take place in isolation, rather it must be incorporated as a core component of the firm's strategic plan and linked to organizational goals and objectives.

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF LEARNING

Workplace e-learning, while in many ways similar to e-learning approaches in formal institutions of education, is also very unique. Ubell (2010) presented the differences in corporate and academic e-learning as: Training vs. Education, Procedural learning vs. Conceptual learning, Behaviorism vs. Constructivism, and Autonomous vs. Collaborative respectively. While the business of a college or university is to deliver education, the business of business is to create value for customers and, as a result, increase the wealth of the shareholders. In both cases the individuals receiving training are undergoing a transformative process; they are moving from a state of not knowing to a state of knowing, understanding, and applying. The difference is that in the workforce what the learner grows to know, understand, and apply must in some way support the core function of the business. Cheng, Wang, Moorman, Olaniran, and Chen (2012) defined workplace learning, "...as the means, processes, and activities in the workplace by which employees learn from basic skills to high technology and management practice that are immediately applicable to their jobs, duties, and roles." (p 885).

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