

E-Learning Adaptability and Social Responsibility

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INTRODUCTION

The global, knowledge-based economy is causing rapid change when it comes to workforce composition and the nature and character of work itself. At the same time, 'e-learning' is increasingly positioned as the panacea for workplace learning needs for a transforming workplace and the global, knowledge-based economy (Industry Canada, 2005; Rohrbach, 2007). In this information age of intense political, social, technological, and environmental upheaval, do organizations bear any social responsibility towards their employees when mandating workplace learning from their employees through e-learning?

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO, 2007a) specifies four key areas that all organizations need to pay heed to for 'social responsibility' to be accomplished: "environment; human rights and labor practices; organizational governance and fair operating practices; and, consumer issues and community involvement/society development" (para. 6). Accordingly, given the criteria of "organizational governance and fair operating practices," this article argues for e-learning adaptability as a burgeoning social responsibility in the workplace, when thinking about workplace learning, by discussing: (a) the workforce diversity, and other workplace changes, that increasingly challenge the current approaches to e-learning at work; and then, (b) highlights the e-learning adaptability framework (Remtulla, 2007) as one methodology to assess and enable e-learning adaptability to meet this social responsibility for the benefit of a global workforce.

BACKGROUND

Diversity at Work

Skills shortages are becoming more severe in advanced economies (OECD, 2005; Rohrbach, 2007). This is primarily due to the fact that the European Union and North America are facing an aging workforce, a dwindling youth cohort, and declining birth rates, simultaneously, resulting in a smaller workforce in the future to fuel the needs of mega-corporations. This means that the workforce is not only becoming more demographically diverse, but also more multicultural, because immigration from developing countries will count

for most of the labor force growth in advanced economies in the near future.

Workers are also becoming more multifaceted. To remain competitive, workers are assuming personal responsibility for their learning and upskilling. One outcome of this is mass underemployment as workers bring with them an increasing range of talents to each new job. Many workers' skills and knowledge already far exceed the career opportunities available to them and their employers' ability to use these skills despite demanding it of their workers to get work in the first place (Mirchandani, 2003).

Other Workplace Changes

Work is becoming more homogeneous when it comes to tasks and responsibilities. One widely accepted reason for this is the influence of international standards bodies that promulgate systems to harmonize various job tasks across various industries and regions. Well-known examples of this are the ISO, International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), and International Telecommunication Union (ITU). In turn these standards become a form of accountability on the job, mandating everyone to act in accordance with these 'international' standards. These international standards bodies work together and construct uniformity as necessary and universally beneficial (ISO, 2006).

Jobs are also becoming more normalized around certain competencies and behaviors with respect to 'high skills'. This comes from a pervasive belief that high-skilled work and competencies, based on knowledge and continuous innovation, are universally tantamount to business continuity and profitability (Rohrbach, 2007).

Social Responsibility, Workplace Learning, and E-Learning

Given the knowledge-based economy and corresponding workplace changes, e-learning is being promoted as the 'grand solution' for workplace learning, ushering in an era of anytime education and anywhere access to knowledge (Gasco, Llopis, & Gonzalez, 2004; Pollitt, 2005). However, the expression 'e-learning' is at present associated with a number of definitions that take a highly limited view of this form of workplace learning, such as:

- “A wide set of applications and processes, such as Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms and digital collaboration. It includes the delivery of content via Internet, intranet/extranet (LAN/WAN), audio- and videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV and CD-ROM.” (DeRouin, Fritzsche, & Salas, 2005, p. 920)
- “The use of Internet technologies in order to provide a wide range of solutions that might improve knowledge and performance.” (Andrade et al., 2005, p. 658)

As exemplified by these definitions, the dominant focus on e-learning remains almost exclusively on the issues of instructional design, hardware, or software. They focus on the mechanics and not the people, nor learning. Similarly, workplace learning professionals respond by tailoring their programs and practices to support these same homogenizing, normalizing, and standardizing trends in jobs, skills, and competencies and to this fixation on the ‘technology’ (Gagnon & Doray, 2005; Remtulla, 2007). However, what of the changing workforce? The changing nature of the workforce necessitates some acknowledgment of the needs of the global workforce and their unique circumstances.

The relevance and urgency for such acknowledgment in the implementation of mass, workplace learning interventions like e-learning were identified as a social responsibility as far back as the late-1990s, when the global, knowledge-based economy began to unequivocally impact the daily lives of individuals at work (as described earlier). This is echoed, for example, in the following passage from “Adult Education: The Hamburg Declaration—The Agenda for the Future” (UNESCO-UIE, 1997):

The development of the new information and communication technologies brings with it new risks of social and occupational exclusion for groups of individuals and even businesses which are unable to adapt to this context. One of the roles of adult education in the future should therefore be to limit these risks of exclusion so that the information society does not lose sight of the human dimension. (p. 6)

Yet, as noticed from the above definitions of e-learning and approaches to workplace learning, the acknowledgment of the needs of the global workforce remains elusive. Recognizing the lack of the ‘human dimension’ in organizational standards, the ISO (2007b) is already working on the development of an international standard (ISO 26000) providing guidelines for social responsibility; it is scheduled for release by 2010. Ziva Patir, chair of the ISO Technical Management Board, sums up the inequities in the current situation this way:

Our traditional role was to promote the standardization of products, services, processes, materials and systems. Then

we evolved by developing standardized tools for management practice and now we are evolving further to develop standards that address the human aspects.

Today, in the light of ISO strategic vision for 2005-2010, we understand that everything is interconnected and one can no longer differentiate between software and hardware, between product and service, between management tools and the values of the organization. ISO has developed a policy to ensure the global relevance of our work, and today there are few areas more relevant than social responsibility (SR). (p. 3)

The significance of e-learning, as an issue of social responsibility in acknowledging the workplace learning needs of the global workforce, will become paramount in the future, as already noted by the efforts of the ISO and its global partner organizations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

THE E-LEARNING ADAPTABILITY FRAMEWORK

To assist organizations in meeting their social responsibility through organizational governance and fair organizational practices, a multiperspectival framework may be one approach for assessing e-learning adaptability that brings together the elements of the knowledge-based economy, workplace changes, hardware, software, instructional design, skills, competencies, workplace learning, and the global workforce into a socially responsible and cohesive methodology. Such a framework represents a more ‘socially responsible’ alternative to current hardware, software, and instructional design-only based approaches to e-learning because this framework looks not just at how e-learning influences the global workforce, but also how the cultural and the social variability of the global workforce influence e-learning and workplace learning through their needs, motivations, and attitudes.

The e-learning adaptability framework (Remtulla, 2007) comprises a media perspective, a genre perspective, and a learning perspective, to allow for a multiperspectival take on e-learning in the workplace based on context, culture, and community. These three perspectives are further aligned along an *adaptability continuum*: ‘media’ at one extreme (which considers workplace context); ‘genre’ (which takes into account user communities in the workplace); and finally, ‘learning’ (which concerns notions of culture and how people learn differently). When taken together as a continuum, these perspectives represent an interconnected, mutually symbiotic, multiperspectival framework as a socially responsible methodology that potentially provides

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