An Empirical Study of a Corporate E–Learning Portal

Meliha Handzic
Sarajevo School of Science and Technology, Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Herzegovina

Joon Ho Hur
IBM Business Consulting Services, Australia

INTRODUCTION

Technological advances, globalisation, changing demographics and privatisation are the main driving forces behind the current transformation of education. Market research firms estimate that electronic learning or e-learning is the fastest growing sector of the global education market with an annual growth rate of 10-15% (Hezel Associates, 2005).

The proponents of e-learning argue that such technology-mediated learning (also known as virtual, online or distance learning) may improve students' achievement, their attitudes toward learning, and their evaluation of the learning experience. They also suggest that e-learning may help to increase student interaction and to make learning more student-centered. In addition, many researchers suggest that e-learning can potentially eliminate geographic barriers while providing increased convenience, flexibility, currency of material, retention of students, individualised learning and feedback over traditional classrooms (Piccoli, Ahmad, & Ives, 2001). In contrast, some researchers warn that e-learning may lead to the student feelings of isolation, frustration, anxiety and confusion. Furthermore, inappropriate e-learning practice may result in reduced interest in the subject matter and questionable learner achievement (Schank, 2001).

The literature indicates that current research interests in e-learning fall into three areas: (1) measuring e-learning outcomes, (2) measuring preferences for learning methods, and (3) proposing and evaluating hybrid models. With respect to outcomes, the research has produced mixed evidence regarding the benefits of e-learning (Cho, 2002; Rosenberg, 2001; Urdan & Weggen, 2000; Yoo, 2002). With respect to methods, researchers are seeking to better understand learner preferences for one delivery system over another (Rivera, McAlister, & Rice, 2002). Finally, there is a growing interest in hybrid courses that meet in the traditional classroom for part of the course and meet online for another part (Reasons, 2004; Young, 2002).

The main purpose of this article is to address the issue of user preferences of e-learning/traditional class in the context of a large Asian organisation and from the knowledge management (KM) perspective. In particular, the article examines employee-trainees' perceptions and attitudes towards their corporate e-learning portal compared to the traditional classroom environment. The current study is a part of the ongoing research project on corporate e-learning by Handzic and Hoor (2005). The investigation was carried out in Korean Air, a global-sized airline that is ranked 12th for passenger transportation and 1st for cargo transportation in 2003. Korean Air flies to 87 cities in 31 countries and has offices worldwide. The company introduced its first e-learning course in 2001 and is gradually increasing the number of e-learning courses, in order to replace most of its on-site trainings with e-learning eventually. The focus of the current investigation was on the KALCC's (Korean Air Lines Cyber Campus) Microsoft Word e-learning portal.

E-LEARNING PORTAL

According to Handzic (2004), the main objective of any educational portal or Web site is to provide learners with a one-stop point of interaction for all their study needs, a place that students can go to obtain lecture notes, assignments, reference materials, discussions, surveys, search facilities, links and many other useful features. Different KM features on the Web site can accommodate different

Figure 1. KM features by knowledge types

Types of knowledge	Explicit	Tacit
Know-what	Course Outline Lecture Notes Resources	Announcement Discussion Forum
Know-how	Table of Contents Search Facility	Tests Questions & Answers Progress Report

types of knowledge. It is assumed that learners respond differently to different types of KM features, and if all are available, the productivity and enjoyment of the learning experience is likely to be increased.

With respect to the KALCC's Microsoft Word course portal, Handzic and Hoor (2005) have found that it contains various KM features including lecture notes, course outline, resources, announcements, discussion forum, table of contents, search facility, online tests, questions and answers and progress report. Essentially, the portal captures different quadrants of the Handzic and Jamieson (2001) knowledge matrix through the use of the suitable KM support. Figure 1 shows specific KM features in KALCC's portal categorised into four groups based on the type of knowledge they support.

Explicit know-what features from the KALCC's Microsoft Word course portal include the following knowledge repositories: (1) Course Outline that gives students an insight into the course content, structure and assessments weighting; (2) Lecture Notes that aid in learning specific topics and increasing overall knowledge of the subject; and (3) Resources that come in the form of recommended texts, case studies and research papers. Wider knowledge about the subject matter may be gained from these readings. These electronic documents are compared to paper notes, books and reference materials in the traditional learning environment.

Explicit know-how features found on the KALCC's portal include the following: (1) Table of Contents that is an efficient means of mapping knowledge concepts, com-petencies and processes, and it helps in understanding and provides guidance; and (2) Search Facility that is a direct means of access to what students are looking for; It allows students to find knowledge on relevant topics quickly, whether they are looking for course content or trying to find the details of a staff member. These KM features are compared to manuals, guidebooks, FAQs and library catalogues used in the traditional learning environment.

Tacit know-what features found on the KALCC's portal include the following: (1) Discussion forum that allows students to interact with each other in an asynchronous way. This allows students to post questions regarding assignments, exams or make general queries in relation to the subject, thus allowing them to transfer and acquire knowledge from each other; and (2) online announcements that allow students to keep up to date with everything that is going on in the course on a 24-hour basis, eliminating any delays. These virtual spaces are compared with face-to-face announcements, class discussions and debates in the traditional learning environment.

Tacit know-how features are provided on the KALCC's portal in the form of: (1) Online Tests that allow students to progress through the subject and acquire knowledge at their own pace by allowing them to participate in quizzes in the comfort of their own home and in their own time; (2) Questions & Answers that is an efficient means of gaining knowledge about most important classes of issues, as well as additional clarifications of assignment queries; and (3) Progress Report that is a means of gaining up to date information such as personal performance results. It

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