Chapter XVII

E–Learning and the Global Workforce:
Social and Cultural Implications for Workplace Adult Education and Training

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ABSTRACT

Workplaces are transforming in the global age. Jobs are expanding and varying. Workers are more and more participating in a global workforce comprising people who are socially and demographically diverse, multicultural, multifaceted, and whose views on workplace priorities, accountabilities, performance, and productivity may be socially and culturally very different from one another. Ultimately, these trends infer that how workers are educated and trained in the workplace must also evolve to meet a dynamic cohort of employees with a progressively complex profile of learning needs. To make matters more interesting, one of the most noticeable trends in the workplace today is 'e-learning,' which is frequently upheld as the panacea for workplace adult education and training needs. This chapter is about e-learning, the global workforce, and their social and cultural implications for workplace adult education and training in the global age.

INTRODUCTION

Workplaces are transforming in the global age. Jobs are expanding and varying. Workers are more and more participating in a global workforce comprising people who are socially and demographically diverse, multicultural, multifaceted, and whose views on workplace priorities, accountabilities, performance, and productivity may be socially and culturally very different from one another. Ultimately, these trends infer that how workers are educated and trained in the workplace must also evolve to meet a dynamic cohort of employees with a progressively complex profile of

learning needs. To make matters more interesting, one of the most noticeable trends in the workplace today is 'e-learning,' which is frequently upheld as the panacea for workplace adult education and training needs. This chapter is about e-learning, the global workforce, and their social and cultural implications for workplace adult education and training in the global age.

Including the "Introduction," this chapter contains six sections. The next section, "Background," describes some of the primary drivers of workplace transformation in the global age and its implications for workplace adult education and training. This section develops the implications that the global age, characterized by globalization, technological innovation, and the knowledge-based economy, has for workplace transformation which leads to changes in work and the workforce.

This section also points out a noticeable contradiction between workplace transformation and its implications for workplace adult education and training. Whereas work is becoming more homogenized and normalized, the workforce is becoming more socially and culturally disparate. Yet existing traditions of adult education and training in the workplace are more universal in outlook, and favor European and Western paradigms of education and training. They value workplace adult education and training economically. Such practices are unprepared to answer the socioculturally specialized learning needs of the non-European, non-Western workers who will come to constitute more and more of the global workforce. All this forms a much needed context from which e-learning can be better known and assessed.

The third section broaches the questions of "Issues, Controversies, and Problems" of e-learning. By e-learning, this chapter assumes Honey's (2001) definition that "e-learning is the process of learning from information that is delivered electronically. … It leaves us, the learners, to identify relevant information, convert it into something

meaningful and apply it appropriately" (p. 201). At this time, e-learning is heavily based on European and Western traditions of work and workplace adult education and training. It epitomizes a homogenized, normalized, and universalized solution in the workplace. It speaks to economics and technology, cost savings, hardware, and software. Still, this section argues for a more sociocultural standpoint to look at e-learning in the workplace to better inform the promise of e-learning given workplace transformation and a global workforce.

This section also introduces *constructivism* and carries out a brief overview of this set of psychological theories about knowledge and instruction. Constructivism is increasingly incorporated as an instructive foundation for adult education and training in the workplace. Again, one of the chief criticisms leveled at constructivism is its general promotion of European and Western values and ways of learning and knowing. This section examines the complex and unpredictable benefits of constructivist, adult learning theories when interpreted for e-learning. What this implies is that facing an increasingly global workforce, the theories of learning on which workplace adult education and training practices are based are primarily designed for the needs and expectations of European and Western workers.

The fourth section, "Solutions and Recommendations," posits several guiding principles on how decision makers in an environment of workplace transformation and facing a global workforce may start to think about e-learning options that use constructivist learning. In essence these principles represent an alternate, sociocultural paradigm for e-learning decision making that may be especially relevant *prior to* significant investment in e-learning solutions.

The fifth section contemplates "Future Trends." Thinking is extrapolated here around a number of uncertainties that need to be further researched. These include the future of e-learning, and the escalating necessity of a socially and

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