

Chapter 7.10

Challenges to Implementing E-Learning in Lesser-Developed Countries

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ABSTRACT

The integration of communication technologies and the Internet has created an explosion in the use of e-learning both locally and globally. The beneficiaries of this new media integration are organizations at large, in both developed and lesser-developed countries. For instance, globalized organizations have been able to develop training programs that serve their needs. However, global e-learning raises some implications, which include communication, culture, and technology, that must be addressed before successful implementation and outcome can occur.

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING E-LEARNING AND LESSER-DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

As communication technologies and the Internet continue to merge, organizations continue to integrate them within their activities and corporate practices. One of the key benefits of such integration includes learning and curriculum development, which is otherwise referred to as e-learning, and more appropriately referred to as global e-learning. Because of the trend toward globalization of research and development (R&D), there exists the need for uniform and customized training. On a more comprehensive scale is the need for employees' continued training, which circumvents traditional college training and re-

quires participants to be in a specific location in order to access and participate in learning. It is not surprising that online universities (e.g., AIU Online, Capella University, Devry University, Kaplan University, University of Phoenix, Walden University, and Westwood College Online) are thriving and attractive to corporate travelers and expatriates. Notwithstanding, as corporate e-learning solutions continue to explode and gain popularity in the sphere of global e-learning, challenges exist from cultural standardization rather than differentiation. Standardization creates problems for learners who are culturally different from the culture that developed the learning content.

The major advantage of e-learning remains cost savings. However, for e-learning to produce desired results, there should be some kind of accounting for effectiveness of the learning program. Effectiveness of e-learning cannot be assessed outside of its cultural underpinnings. To this end, the current chapter examines cultural implications of global e-learning and education. It explores significant challenges created by learning preferences and adoption of innovation using the Hofstede's REF (1983) dimensions of cultural variability. Finally, the chapter provides recommendations for implementing successful global e-learning programs.

As the Internet goes global, so does e-learning (Van Dam & Rogers, 2002). However, the e-learning programs mostly emphasize organizational goals in terms of how and what organizational leadership intends to accomplish in their respective region and employees. In essence, users of e-learning often ignore cultural implications and insights that employees or customers have in controlling how they learn and the learning process as a whole. Specifically, consumers of e-learning (e.g., purchasers, instructors, students, and end-users) are expected to work with curriculum designed in and for another culture.

Internet Usage and E-Learning

There is a correlation between Internet usage and global learning penetration and adoption in any given society. In Asia, Internet usage was expected to increase from 64 million in 2001 to 173 million by 2004, but the most recent data on internet usage in Asia show an actual figure that reflects a jump to 323.76 million—a 405% increase from the 2001 figure, and a 87 % increase above projected figure (Internetworldstats, n.d.). A 65.8% increase is reported for Japanese Internet use while a 357.8% jump was recorded for Chinese between 2000 and 2005, which represents a jump from 22.5 million to 103 million users (Internetworldstats, n.d.). In spite of the tremendous increase in the number of users, the overwhelming predominance of English is considered a major deterrent that limits Internet usefulness for most countries and regions (Barron, 2000). For instance, when the number of Internet users is compared with actual population figure, it reveals that there are still a lot of potential users to reach. The Internet world statistics, for example, puts the total Internet usage for China at 7.9% of the country's population figure.

CULTURE AND E-LEARNING

In order to realize the aim of e-learning as an educational tool, it is essential to accommodate the learning needs of different cultures in order to promote equitable learning outcomes for targeted students, and to promote education and technological literacy that improve socio-economic opportunities in developing nations (Dede, 2000; Henning, 2003; Selinger, 2004). Attention to geographic cultures and implications for diffusion of technological innovation is warranted. But first it is important to look at the dimensions of cultural differences. One useful model in exploring cultural differences includes Hofstede's dimensions of cultural variability (Hofstede, 1980). The four dimensions of cultural variability are power

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