Chapter XVI
Advancing Women in the Digital Economy:
eLearning Opportunities for Meta-Competency Skilling

Patrice Braun
University of Ballarat, Australia

ABSTRACT

In view of the fact that women are playing an increasingly important role in the global economy, this chapter examines business skilling in the digital economy for women in general and women-led small businesses in Australia, in particular. With employability and entrepreneurial capacity of women increasing, so too is their need for a comprehensive skill set is increasing. It is proposed that business courses currently offered do not necessarily consider their target audience or include new economy considerations. This chapter discusses the need for meta-competencies that will allow women in both developed and emerging economies to operate more effectively in a changing work environment and an increasingly digital business environment. For meta-competency efficacy, it is further proposed that evidence-based learning models, gender-sensitive approaches to business learning, and collaborative uses of technology underpin content and (e-)business learning designs.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of globalisation, technological innovation, diffusion of information via the Internet, and related changes in business models and values, entrepreneurs everywhere are taking advantage of changing work environments and increased business opportunities. Today, with an

economy enabled and driven by connectivity, a fundamental shift in business models is occurring whereby information, knowledge and relationships underpin competitive advantage (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000).

Globalisation and deregulated markets have created a flat world (Friedman, 2006), which provides companies of all sizes – including small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) – an opportunity to participate in the market economy. Thus, the digital economy has the potential to become an increasingly level playing field. Information and communication technologies (ICT), and especially the Internet, allow knowledge to spread quickly, making it available to/by anyone with computer access and a telephone connection. As part of this phenomenon, women are becoming increasingly important in the global marketplace, not just as workers, but also as consumers, entrepreneurs, managers and investors. Indeed, women are now considered the most powerful engine of global growth. As reported widely in the popular press, women have contributed more to global GDP growth than have either new technology or the new giants, China and India (The Economist, 2006).

The explosive growth of ICT in every aspect of society offers a unique opportunity to engage more women in the active workforce of both developed and emerging economies. New technologies lower the costs of information access and facilitate communication across geographic distance, allowing for more flexible working arrangements for those located far from metropolitan centres. In particular for women living in regional and rural areas, whose work patterns are frequently characterised by pluriactivity (Ross & McCartney, 2005), connectivity and new technologies can offer important flexibility in terms of both the times and the places where work is carried out.

ICT is also a primary enabling factor for business and e-business. In Australia, small business operators have increased by 6.5 per cent since 1995 and more women are involved in operating these businesses than ever before (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). Despite these opportunities, ICT, web-enabled business or e-business are still poorly understood by Australia's SMEs and the

Figure 1. Small businesses in Australia; source: ABS (2004)