

Chapter 5.12

Developing Social Skills through an On-Line Learning Environment: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The rapid pace of social change deriving from technological and financial revolution and globalization, effects greatly people's lives. Adults nowadays need to stay relevant with their environment, to be proactive and to take important decisions that affect their personal and professional future. Thus, they need to be equipped with advanced social skills such as time management, leadership, communication, teamwork, problem solving, flexibility etc. Such skills can be developed through training programs, designed and delivered upon the Adult Education and Experiential Learning theories and principles. A central aim of this chapter is to highlight the methods through which e-learning can contribute to the development of social skills, implementing at

the same time the above mentioned principles, in the context of a large organization.

INTRODUCTION

The general goal of this chapter is to pinpoint the essentiality of social skills development through training programs which are designed and delivered according to the adult learning theories. It will also present a case study in which on line training seems to respond successfully to the learning needs of the employees working in today's demanding environments.

The chapter's specific aims are:

1. To bring out the necessity of social skills development for adults working in contemporary and complex environments.

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2. To elaborate on the preconditions demanded in order for social skills to be developed in the context of large organizations.
3. To explicate the emerging obstacles during social skills development.
4. To analyze a case study which shows that e-learning can enforce and ensure most of the Adult Training and Experiential learning principles.
5. To present results demonstrating the effectiveness of developing a collaborative and creative on line learning environment.

A. The Necessity of Social Skills Development in Contemporary Complex Professional Environments

Contemporary social conditions and constant change are greatly and variously influencing adult lives, often resulting in professionals' difficulty to stay relevant and meet their career demands. Caffarella & Lewis note that: "*In a society of constant change, like ours, learning and preparing for new challenges has become an industry targeting to all citizens and ages. Furthermore, and contrary to previous times, adult lives and choices are far more complicated and of a broader range.*" (in Brockett & Knox, 1994, p. 1)

According to bibliography¹ such changes concern three major areas: social structure, financial globalization and rapid technological progress.

Constant *sociological* changes create the need for ongoing adult training and development so that citizens can face contemporary demands. Goleman (2000) supports that in times of employment instability, where the term of "labor" is replaced by the term "transferable skills" such skills are becoming of great importance allowing adults to ensure their present and future employment opportunities and progress. This means that members of the society should be armed with advanced skills in order to manage changes – both voluntary and involuntary – and must be flexible and fast learners. Furthermore, adults need to own such

skills not only for surviving in today's society but also in order to lead a creative life, feeling content, utilizing a wide range of employment and personal development opportunities, and successfully encountering potential threats.

Equally the increase of competition and institutionalization of *globalization* affect the world economy. Organizations aim at decreasing costs and increasing the quality, as well as the variety of their products. Achievement of such aims can be pursued through human resources who can undertake multiple and complex roles and duties and thus should be characterized by self motivation and creativity, flexibility and problem solving skills, in order to overcome crisis and demanding work conditions (Phillips, 2006).

Last but not least, *technology* catalytically influences knowledge, entertainment, employment, economy and government. The necessity for technological conversance and new information technology practices daily entering working environments as well as the continuous data creation lead to rapid depreciation of existing professional skills and knowledge, (Meriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 15).

Due to the above mentioned changes new working conditions are being created leading to the necessity of Social Skills for various employment roles. The term Social Skills refers to a group of skills – excluding knowledge, qualifications and work experience – that each professional should be armed with in order to meet the demands of his/her role and duties. In an attempt to clearly define the term Social Skills through Bibliography research, one often detects an indisputable core of skills containing abilities such as communication, teamwork, leadership, time management, flexibility etc. (Brookfield, 1986).

Goleman, (2000) reports some quite distinct examples in order to show the necessity of Social Skills in contemporary society:

- "In a modern technology company the group of employees dealing with the

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