

Chapter 6.5

Collaborative e-Learning and ICT Tools to Develop SME Managers: An Italian Case

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) create a dynamic and successful European economy. Existing skill deficiencies in sales, management and administrative staff are adversely affecting competitiveness in almost a third of those small firms surveyed (Bolden, 2001, 2007). Additionally, attending face-to-face and classroom-based development courses is problematic for time-poor SME managers. Thanks to the development of new technologies online learning is becoming commonplace due to wireless and mobile devices, together with the Internet boom, are providing the infrastructure necessary to support the development of new learning forms. Collaborative learning, especially as represented by an action learning approach, would seem ideal for SME managers. But can collaborative learning be adopted as a blanket approach in the case of SME managers? Or should one first take into account the contextual influences on learning, networking and collaboration?

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BACKGROUND

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have a vital role in creating a dynamic and successful European economy. However, faced with the ever-increasing and overwhelming legislative, political and competitive demands, SMEs have to respond by accelerating their rate of learning and adaptability to equip them to compete in the digital economy. Research shows that involvement in competence development activities has a positive effect on individual SMEs' competitiveness and performance (Observatory of European SMEs, 2003). Research has also identified that existing skill deficiencies in sales, management and administrative staff were adversely affective competitiveness in almost a third of those small firms surveyed (Bolden, 2007, 2001). Moreover, research by Smallbone (1998) and Smallbone and Rogut (2005) reported that increasing competition and internalisation of markets are major concerns for small businesses, especially those in the new EU member states. Indeed, the factors believed to be the most important for the future survival and growth of the firm are still the capabilities and skills of the owner in adapting the organisation to change. Hence attention should be directed towards helping these companies survive and find new ways to innovate and deal with change (Bolden, 2007). Attending face-to-face and classroom-based development courses is nevertheless problematic for time-poor SME managers. However, thanks to the rapid development of new technologies online learning is becoming more and more commonplace. Indeed, wireless and mobile devices, together with the booming of the Internet, are providing the infrastructure necessary to support the development of new learning forms.

Life in the real world implies constant interacting and networking with other people and it is hard to deny that there is a social dimension to learning as well (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991). For many SME managers there is a clear argument for membership of an inter-organisational learn-

ing community (possibly described as a group or team) for several compelling reasons. First, many SME organisations do not have more than one general manager and the only option available to individual managers to gain the preferred level of socialisation in the learning process is to look outside the organisation. SME managers, as indicated earlier, tend to be focused on immediate problem solving, so it is often essential to extend their perspectives on issues confronting them and to have their assumptions challenged by outsider views. Since their statements and actions are open to immediate interpretation and could provoke reactions in ways which would limit the opportunities for learning, managers may not feel able to expose either their full thinking to a small group within their own organisation or ideas whilst at a formative stage (Birchall & Giambona, 2007).

Hence, collaborative learning, especially as represented by an action learning approach where real-life business challenges are discussed and experiences shared, would seem ideal for SME managers. In particular, it is widely assumed that:

1. Action learning sets are particularly useful for chief executives in small companies faced with complex policy decisions;
2. Executives find it difficult to discuss the situation, float ideas and seek feedback within their own organisation;
3. Executives want their actions to be based on objective thinking which has been submitted to the scrutiny of an informed peer group;
4. Executives need to know that all the feasible options have been generated and evaluated.

The bottom line of all this seems to be that other executives operating at a similar level must have found themselves in similar situations and will be useful advisers, consultants and confidants. Hence, networks will be very useful and a collaborative approach will aid the learning process.

But is this really true? Can collaborative learning be adopted as a blanket approach in the case

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