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Ugochuckwu Digwo
University of Bolton, ucd1lis@bolton.ac.uk

Dumebi Oderinde
University of Bolton

Mildred Brown-Houston
University of Bolton

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LEVERAGING E-LEARNING IN ORGANISATIONS: CHALLENGES, BENEFITS AND MODELS FOR ADOPTION

Ugochukwu C. Digwo, Dumebi O. Oderinde and Mildred Brown-Houston

Business Logistics, Innovation and Systems Research Centre, University of Bolton

Email: ucd1lis@bolton.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper is an analytical review of the journey so far on e-Learning adoption by organisations, with a focus on identifying a model-based approach from existing research, and identifiable success factors. Every organisation needs to assess and identify where employee performance sits in their balanced scorecard in order to allocate sufficient resources, planning and strategy development for optimal success. This paper reviews the major trends in e-Learning for organisation while identifying critical elements that should be incorporated into every strategy framework or model developed. It discusses the need to adopt a pre-implementation analysis based on identifying organisational requirements, objectives and learning goals. There are current practices among leading organisations that are worth adopting as they are proven to be effective and have addressed some of the challenges faced by organisations adopting e-Learning. This paper is not a field research using any methodology, but simply a review of e-Learning models that best describes learning needs of both learners and organisations.

Keywords: e-Learning, e-Learning Models, Best Practices, Organizational e-Learning, Blended Learning.

1.0 Introduction

As business cycle times compress and business processes become even more dynamic, workers from the plant floor to the executive offices require new skills almost weekly (Minton, 2000), and with demands on an employee's time seemingly overwhelming, new tools for delivering knowledge are needed. The need for employees to update their skills at the rate of technological advancement creates a sense of urgency for organisations to adapt to other learning channels. The mantra "fast-better-cheaper" was applied to learning strategies and one method that rapidly gained popularity was e-Learning (Monro, 2005). For this study, e-Learning is defined as the delivery of content, training and knowledge through electronic mediums. These mediums are in various formats, including, in current trends, audio, video, simulation, text-based, virtual classrooms and the mobile digital formats. This form of learning is innovative, accessible and flexible, among other characteristics. E-Learning as the

transfer of knowledge through technology has become very important (Kathawala & Wilgen, 2004) with an increasing number of organisations adopting e-Learning as a strategy with each passing year. One of the goals and relative challenges of any human resources department is how to improve skills of employees so they are most efficient in performing their jobs. This is an evidential requirement for organisations to sustain strategic advantages in the business community in which they function. The lure of this learning strategy has been due to several identified benefits. Some of these benefits are listed by Kathawala & Wilgen (2004), building on the work of numerous authors who will be mentioned below. There are identifiable benefits in implementing e-Learning, which does not just include improving the performances of employees and learners, but benefits overall organisational performance. Hammer and Champy, in their book *Reengineering the Corporation*, groups success criteria to justify e-Learning investments into four measures; namely cost, quality, service and speed. These four groups are broken down into several units used to identify business benefits of e-Learning.

2.0 Identifiable benefits of e-Learning

2.1 Cost-effectiveness

A lower budgetary investment in e-Learning has been identified as one of the most quoted important advantages. E-Learning training delivery delivers savings on the huge expenses involved in training employees for many organizations. The main reason is that it eliminates or reduces travelling expenses, travelling time, instructors' pay, course delivery costs and maintenance over a period of two to three years (Kathawala & Wilgen, 2004). IBM estimated that it saved \$200 million in 1999, while providing five times the learning at one-third of the cost of previous methods (Strother, 2002 in Kathawala & Wilgen, 2004).

2.2 Business responsiveness

Business practices and processes change rapidly within the business community, and organizations must be dynamic and flexible to manage these changes as a means of staying afloat. Business responsiveness is measurable by the rate of adaptability to change in the organization via the workforce. Having an e-Learning portal becomes critical for businesses when all employees need immediate awareness of new processes and adapt simultaneously for business to continue as usual.

2.3 Productivity improvements

E-Learning, like training in general, can result in improved employee effectiveness. This is especially true when e-Learning is used to support on-the-job training. The opportunity to learn binds employees to the organization, which helps to decrease the employee turnover as a source of costs (Leary, 2001; Phillips, 2002; Oakes, 2003 in Kathawala & Wilgen, 2004). Keeping the employee turnover down helps organisations reduce knowledge loss. An e-Learning benchmark survey carried out by SkillSoft in 2007 within 16 European/Global status organizations, showed proof of increased productivity when e-Learning was deployed on the job. Most of the areas highlighted with increased levels of productivity include sales,

customer service, and IT. There were areas of management and leadership skills that were also significantly improved, and this created an awareness of the value and prospects e-Learning holds for growing organizations. Other benefits identified by Kathawala & Wilgen (2004) include IT skills that resulted in an increase in overall employee performance level.

2.4 Customized and personalized learning

This benefit is essential as it allows users to define their learning styles, when and where they want to learn, and to set the learning pace to one that meets individual needs. The learning content for every learner remains the same, but the method of communication via different learning formats to suit learners' preferences, makes learning easy. Technologies in use today include multimedia tools such as video conferencing and groupware. These tools incorporate video and audio facilities, as well as asynchronous tools that can provide anonymity in group-based learning. Learning can also be enhanced when it is made available uninterrupted via other tools including personal and mobile laptops, podcasts, webcasts, or MP3 players. A fraction of employees, 1.8% from the industries surveyed by SkillSoft suggests the introduction of learning through computer games. Though this is a contentious idea, it may be practicable when considering engineering and IT personnel who are more inclined to the technicalities of computing.

2.5 Faster learning and better retention

Individuals learn more when learning is informal and in an informal setting. Learners consume larger volumes of information through on-the-job learning. Unlike traditional learning methods, e-Learning provides the user with the opportunity to recap on training wherever and whenever. The Research Institute of America found that, in traditional courses, by the second day after a class the retention rate of the studied material is 33 per cent, and at the end of three weeks, only 15 per cent of the knowledge is retained (Leary, 2001 in Kathawala & Wilgen, 2004). E-Learning in contrast leads to more control over the learning process, and a 60 per cent faster learning curve compared to instructor-led courses.

2.6 Content consistency and dependability

Organizations that have global aims and international offices need uniformity and standardization for deploying important information across its value chain. E-Learning could serve as vehicle for delivering this consistency. E-Learning content can be enhanced with an effective knowledge management system and updated immediately and regularly, making it more accurate and reusable. All participants in a training programme can have access to the same material, which is dependable, thereby making it easier to ensure that the organization maintains thorough standards and consistent quality.

2.7 Universality

There have been concerns in recent years about integrating differences in internet protocols, operating platforms and browsers, but this is ebbing away gradually with technologies that are more complex and with interoperable interfaces built into learning management systems. With technologies advancing, the concerns faced today regarding e-Learning programs are about the strict relevance of materials and content in these programs.

2.8 Availability

E-Learning technologies provide a readily available resource for information and knowledge for learners. Employees are in constant need of information on-the-job and off-site, e-Learning provides a platform for learning and information transfer to take place even outside the confines of the office. Providing access to on-line books, reference ware and learner support, forms integral and essentials tools afforded by e-Learning. All e-Learning facility support is year round, twenty-four hours, seven days a week learning and access to information.

2.9 Interaction and knowledge sharing

The Web today is a platform for communities of practice to share blogs and ideas on topics varying from professional practices to personal experiences. These tools are rich and can be used interactively for different purposes, which could be either for social networking or for knowledge insights and sharing. Several organisations go further towards integrating social networking tools such as messaging into their e-Learning programs, to help employees interact more and so share knowledge and ideas with other colleagues (Capuano et al., 2008). This aspect produces a wealth of information now converted into wikis and other online resources within the organization.

2.10 Scalability

There is the potential for online courses to be scalable with respect to participants registering on a course. E-Learning programs can accommodate from 10 learners to 100 learners without many constraints, but only as long as there is standard infrastructure on the ground. The potential cost saving of running e-Learning programs, compared to other classroom-based training that takes the employee out of sight and away from the office, is potentially huge. The participants for e-Learning would only need to register for the course and plug their systems in or log on to join a class.

2.11 Source for knowledge management

Knowledge Management, as defined by knowledge experts, captures information, data and tacit knowledge from within an organization, to improve business practices and overall performances. Technology on the other hand, enhances processes to provide employees with relevant and useful information, and best practices proven within the organization. The knowledge management philosophy is a vital aspect of e-Learning, as it affords knowledge experts the ability to share information from documents made available online with real-time communication and experiences, and to leverage organizational know-how with other employees through various media without physical inhibitors. AT&T Global Services Organization faced the challenge of how to retrieve market intelligence from their sales representatives in the field, bring them in for in-house training at the launch of a new product, as well as keep business information dynamic and relevant in the industry. They built an Information and Knowledge Exchange (IKE) portal that could furnish their various teams who were constantly out in the field. The portal became the source of real-time information

for new products among other things - market intelligence, new training available in real-time and best practices in the industry.

2.12 Corporate Leverage of Investments

More managers and heads of departments are beginning to seek new opportunities for leveraging investments on local intranets for e-Learning. At the initial stage of introducing technology into business processes and internal activities within the organization, there were many failures of such IT projects characterized by huge spending. Organizational e-Learning has become an emerging tool within an organizational intranet and huge returns on investments have characterised the training embarked on by employees. Stakeholders consult e-Learning professionals to help streamline internal operations and transform the learning culture in the organization with less cost, richer learning content and a wider reach.

2.13 Private and Risk-free

"Students taking an online course enter a risk-free environment in which they can try new things and make mistakes without exposing themselves" (Urda and Weggen, 2000 in Kathawala & Wilgen, 2004). It affords users with the opportunity to experiment without having to worry about other people's attention.

As with any new tool, there have been drawbacks to implementing e-Learning in organisations. Opinions regarding e-Learning adoption have not been unanimous; Munro, (2005) states that there are many people who still do not like to use electronic means of learning.

There are five top drawbacks and barriers in successfully implementing e-Learning within organizations as highlighted in the Towards Maturity Benchmarking report (Overton and Hill, 2009). A study which showed that in 2004 IT infrastructure was the number one barrier to implementing e-Learning; in 2006, the cost of set up channelled the course for e-Learning and posed as a top challenge for organizations; while in 2008, a new set of barriers emerged as stated below:

- i. Reluctance by staff to adopt new technology
- ii. Lack of knowledge about its potential use and implementation
- iii. Lack of skills amongst staff to implement and manage e-Learning

3.0 Drawbacks in Implementing e-Learning in Organizations

This next section outlines some of the major drawbacks in implementing e-Learning in both small and large organisations. They are faced with these challenges at different levels in implementing and sustaining e-Learning, but most of the drawbacks listed in this paper are common to them all.

3.1 Incoherent Training

One of the main issues some employees have found about e-Learning, is that training materials have little relevance to what jobs or roles they play. E-Learning course content needs to be parallel to business objectives and goals, in order to for employees to perceive the training as top priority. Designing e-Learning course content should emanate from identifying what the organizational business drivers are and what steps need to be taken to improve overall employee performance.

3.2 Management Vision

The question asked is what is the organizational management's vision for training employees? It is a widely shared belief among HR personnel that training is as critical as information sharing for the corporate capability of an organization to flourish. Management need to identify the fore-frontiers of the business and keep them well informed, trained to close any skill gaps.

3.3 Takes Too Much Time

Training time restrictions constitute one of the setbacks faced when employees embark on in-house training. Managers are not readily disposed to employees embarking on an online course while on their desk or during a job. Courses that are lengthy and not exclusively relevant to employees' current roles and tasks are viewed as time wasters. E-Learning demands that employees allocate time off their jobs to complete a course, and this has not fared well enough since employees could not find time to complete the training needed for a job. This resulted in complaints and setbacks in projects that could not be completed within schedule, and employees reacting negatively to inadequate managerial support. Dell Computer Corporation, a high-tech company, found that to create an e-Learning culture required allocating time for its sales representatives to be off the phones and taking courses online.

3.4 Lack of Employee Motivation

Employees need to know how and why the training offered through e-Learning is relevant and consistent for strategic business goals. In this way, they will not feel coerced into e-Learning but see the need and appeal of it. Oftentimes, these training materials should also reflect current job best practices for standardization across industries such as accreditations and future prospects for promotion. T-Mobile attracted a high percentage of employees in training programmes by offering free communication packages when they registered.

In a study carried out by Overton and Hills (2009) for the 'Towards Maturity Learning Technologies Benchmark Report, the 'people factor', or employee, poses one of the major drawbacks in implementing e-Learning in organizations. Over 50% of the 261 respondents to the study cited reluctance by staff to adopt new technology, while 40% of the SkillSoft study, 2007 identified a lack of knowledge of the e-Learning program and a low rate of involvement or commitment.

3.5 Costs Too Much

This is a recurring drawback amongst most organisations looking to adopt e-Learning capabilities. The initial cost of setting up an e-Learning environment involves deciding what learning software design to use. The costs of IT hardware, consultancy fees and staff re-training amongst others, tend to be discourage organisations in adopting e-Learning strategies.

3.6 Human-Computer Interface as a Factor

In attempting the e-Learning approach, some learners seem subtly menaced by the shift from the conventional face-to-face learning mode to the use of the Internet in learning. It is not an obvious option for learners who have not yet experienced or have not been prepared to use the new learning and knowledge transfer processes offered by a Web-based learning environment. On the other hand, replacing interpersonal relationships, typically occurring in conventional classroom-based settings, with interactions between the learner, tutor, and teacher in a Web-based learning environment, requires new skill and competence on the part of trainers, tutors, and authors of learning materials (Helic et al., 2005). The unsuitability of the e-Learning approach for another group not wholly disposed towards the web stems from different learning methods, approaches, and learning styles. The Visual-Auditory-Kinesthetic learning styles, also known as VAK model, provides a perspective of understanding and appreciating the different types of dominant thought life of an individual, and ways to improve their learning experience.

Several researchers argue that the way to improve learning is not by full adaptation of e-Learning, due to the tension it creates with respects to employee involvement, retention and motivation. These issues are being addressed by adopting “blended learning” for certain course training. Blended learning adopts a methodology of both e-Learning and a mix of other delivery methods. In summary, it combines traditional classroom learning methods and all its varieties with e-Learning in defined portions, designed to benefit from the advantages of both methods (Munro, 2005 & Kathawala & Wilgen, 2004). It involves delivering pure content through e-Learning methods, while interpersonal skills development takes place within the classroom environment. The flexibility afforded by this method leverages both technology and economies of scale to capture a larger audience of employees retained and motivated for training.

3.7 Blended learning

A major challenge faced by trainers is the issue of learning styles. It is widely recognized that different people learn differently: orally, visually, or using tactile or kinaesthetic forms (Piskurich, 2003). Most instructors try to varying the learning styles used in their classes, but in traditional learning mode the scales are tipped heavily towards those who have

oral/auditory learning styles, and vice versa with pure e-Learning - several other learning styles could be disadvantaged.

Blended learning achieves a better result in addressing the issues around different learning styles. It provides instructors with a new package of tools that affords them the opportunity to blend more elements into both classroom and online PC based exercises. By offering learners a more diverse palette of learning options, they are more likely to adapt the learning programmes around their individual learning styles (Roshan, 2002; Piskurich, 2003). This decision on which mode to adopt e-Learning, fully or as part of a blended strategy, is one that organisational management needs to assess whilst considering an e-Learning adoption strategy. The next section addresses a major requirement of organisations considering e-Learning. Researchers propose that organisations conduct a detailed pre-implementation analysis that clearly defines the objectives, expectations, resources available (human, infrastructure and finance) to determine the best suited learning strategy and the mode of implementation as well as the organisation's strengths and weaknesses.

5.0 Pre-implementation Analysis

It is also of the utmost importance to understand the individual business objectives and goals in a bid not to buy into existing and fashionable technologies, but to align business needs with e-Learning. Hartley (2000) advises individual firms to have a detailed framework of business goals and needs while considering e-Learning implementation. Researchers argue that before the decision to implement e-Learning as a learning strategy is taken, organisations need to conduct an internal assessment of their strengths, goals, needs and expectations (Roshan, 2002; Minton, 2000; Engelbrecht, 2003; Piskurich, 2003).

5.1 Proposed Pre-implementation Questions for e-Learning

To effectively set up and administer an e-Learning program, there must be a parallel alignment of skill gaps and development needs with organizational goals and objectives. This assessment would ensure that the training is relevant, up-to-date, and scalable and that it addresses the specific business needs and objectives identified in the pre-implementation stage.

Some questions identified by research championed by Hartley, 2000 include:

Functionality: this deals with the practicality of the technology; what would the application do when it is installed?

IT Specification: this entails identifying your standard IT systems in the organization and their specifications. This is a bid to avoid complex interoperability and security issues when installed.

User-interface specifications: this helps you to identify how the interfaces work within the organization, as well as to determine what the end-screen would look like.

Legacy system interface: there is the issue of how the new application would interface successfully with other training software already in place. There is the question of support and standardization throughout the organization.

User characteristics: this requires initial identification of who would be using the application and how they would use it.

Learning Content: content must be measurable and performance-based to determine if it has any strategic value for the organization or not.

Some of the questions organisations need to answer at this stage include:

- What is it you want e-Learning to do for you?
- What business problems can it resolve?
- What should the end-result look like?
- Do you understand the changes e-Learning will bring to your organization?
- Is e-Learning part of your organization's integrated training strategy?
- Is there appropriate leadership throughout the organization to support e-Learning?
- Are the organizational support systems in place to sustain the adoption of e-Learning?
- Is your technology capable of delivering e-Learning predictably and effectively?
- Are learners prepared for distance learning?
- Do you have an overall Change Management plan in place to transition your organization to e-Learning?

5.2 Proposed Pre-implementation Questions for Blended Learning

Piskurich (2003) proposes that organisations that would rather adopt the blended learning strategy, or might be considering it, would have to consider an effective mix of learning styles.

To determine the most effective blended learning mix for their training projects, organisations will need to gather information regarding the following:

Target Audience: It is important to know as much as possible about the target audience when designing blended learning. Particularly, the familiarity and comfort level of the target audience regarding learning via computers will have to be determined.

Skills/Content: The type of skills and content learners need to master will greatly influence the delivery methods selected. Some skills, such as supervisory and communications skills require interaction with an instructor, while others like technical skills and basic cognitive material are best suited for a self-paced environment. By matching the content carefully with the methods available, instructors will ensure the effectiveness of the programme.

Technical resources: Blended learning relies, largely, on the technical resources of the organisation. Therefore, careful cataloguing of what the organization does and does not have will narrow down the choices available and avoid costly mistakes.

Personnel resources: The personnel resources available for development, delivery, and technical support will influence organisational learning choices. Training staff not experienced in e-Learning methods will have to be done through options that are easiest to design, roll out, such as on-line discussion, and chat groups. Another alternative would be to use third-party vendors for some aspects of the project.

Budget/time constraints: In the real world, there are always budget and time constraints that organisations have to consider in choosing their blended learning mix. Organisations have to remember to factor in maintenance costs and timeframes as part of the constraints they will need to manage.

This then leads to the next consideration identified in the pre-implementation analysis, the e-Learning model approach best suited to the organisation because there are several proposed models that has been applied successfully in different industries. These recommended models are reviewed in the next section.

6.0 A Model-based Approach for e-Learning

Adopting a model-based approach for e-Learning involves finding the right models, concentrating on organisational core competencies, targeting the right group and designing the right product for deployment. There are different models of e-Learning more suitable for different businesses to adopt either for medium or long-term success sustainability. Current assessment of e-Learning still indicates that proportional needs of learners are not fully realised in a formal learning environment compared to any informal method. There is the urgent and compelling need for management to approach e-Learning to meet specific needs in the organisation and to improve the performances of new graduates. The National Audit Office for the UK reported in 2005 that despite large budgetary expense on education, six per cent of employees have skill shortages and twenty per cent have a skills gap, equivalent to ten billion pounds worth of losses in revenue (National Audit Office, 2006). The need for business-process models for e-Learning is becoming a more dominant issue for organisations. As noted by LeyKing et al. (2007), employees are the intellectual assets of any organization and thus, a continuous development of skills and competencies is inevitable for optimization of processes. A correlation between business-process models, business process, and the learning process has to be defined. This is to provide advantages for organizations and learners by a “Process-Oriented Learning and Information Exchange”, PROLIX, a project which began on 1st December 2005 under the European Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development. Its main objective is to identify complex business processes and identify individual and organizational learning goals to be aligned for efficiency and effectiveness. This model supports an all-round approach for individual learning lifecycles (Martin & Wolpers, 2005).

Competence-driven content development emphasizes the suitability of e-Learning content designed to close any competency gaps and requirements identified by the previous process.

Course content and learning goals become relevant, suit a learner's immediate need to carry out his job effectively, and the learning process becomes coordinated with organizational goals. This platform authors a new chapter for organizational own learning management systems that render on-time learning tailored to individual profiles (Zimmermann et al. 2005). 'EXPLAIN' is a content development project funded by the Federal Ministry of Economy and Technology in Germany. The focus was to develop a technology-enhanced environment for organizations to build learning objects.

Implementing business-integrated learning management serves as a strategic tool for smooth organizational performance where individual profiles of employees are enhanced based on process competencies, with a view to close skill gaps and be ready for anticipated change in the organizational knowledge mapping structure.

6.2 E-Learning models

E-Learning models are attempts to develop frameworks to address the concerns of the learner and challenges presented by the technology, so that online learning can take place effectively. In the strategic planning process, these models provide useful tools for evaluating existing e-Learning initiatives or determining critical success factors (Engelbrecht, 2003). By 2008, the e-Learning market should have more than doubled rising to \$13.5 billion in the United States and \$21 billion globally, according to International Data Group Inc. subsidiary International Data Corp. (IDC), a research firm that uses almost 800 analysts in 50 countries to track technology and industry trends (Tucker, 2005). A large number of organisations across diverse industries worldwide are integrating e-Learning into their learning strategy and several models have been designed. Two of these models have been selected in this section and are based on the different components included. These tools are used to enhance learning, keeping the learner and organisational needs in focus.

6.3 The Wyeth e-Learning Model

This e-Learning model gives a description of what it entails in aligning organisational learning with business objectives and strategies for success. Every good framework should provide multiple channels for learning and support in order to create flexibility and unlimited access to information. This model consists of two major components:

(i) Learning and Performance Support: the first component provides employees with various learning opportunities based on business needs and learning styles. It utilises the blended learning style by providing the organisation with the opportunity to combine traditional learning methods with that of e-Learning. These opportunities include learning through instructional methods such as Web-based training (self-study), or instructor-led training that can take place either in traditional classes or in virtual classrooms through synchronous Web-based access. Learners are able to gain tacit knowledge through interaction with business experts and peers who are experiencing or have experienced similar learning processes in real project based work environments; or similarly, learning through collaboration with other company employees worldwide, or with business partners, external research institutes, and academic experts. Finally, there is learning through knowledge assets of the company, such as internal or external research findings, articles and other documents, best practices templates, or any other company lessons from the past.

(ii) *Competency Management*: Roshan (2002) states that this component provides a learner-centric and user defined learning environment. This creates opportunities for learners to customise their performance improvement, with an emphasis on each individual employee's career path and development, performance needs, desired outcomes, and personal interest. Of great advantage to management are the performance administration capabilities, such as tracking and monitoring of learning processes by training administrators or supervisors, who might suggest attendance at classroom instruction, seminars, and conferences, or call for reporting and documenting of the employee's learning achievements.

Figure 2. Shows the two components of the e-Learning model are tightly linked and interdependent; to provide a continuous and active learning environment that supports the company's business objective (Roshan, 2002).

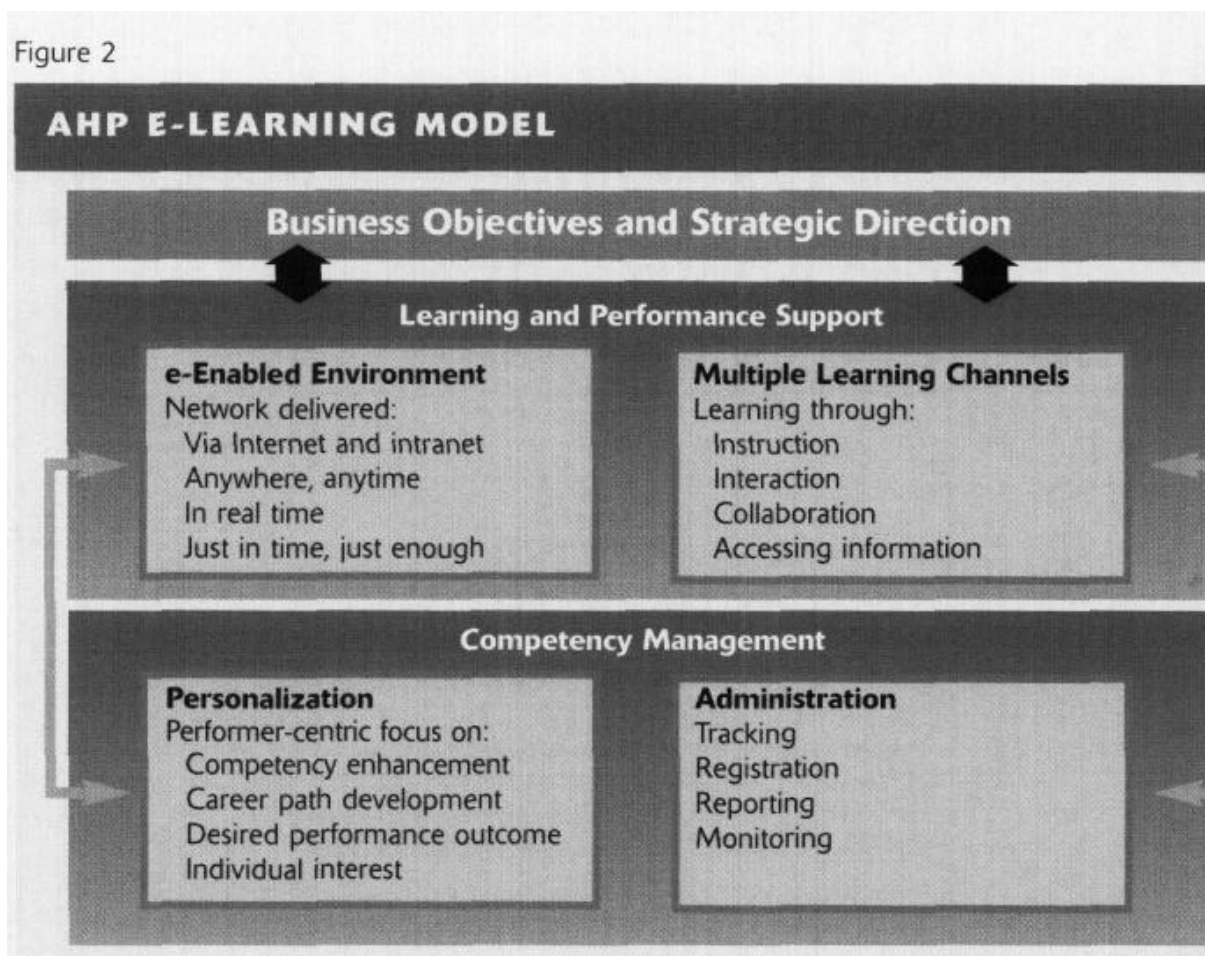


Figure 2. The Wyeth E-Learning Model (Roshan, 2002).

The next model could be described as a further step from the Wyeth e-Learning Model to a more detailed structure for designing an e-Learning strategy. The model also highlights the importance of realising the changing needs of learners and their employers, and the pedagogical changes that could be made to content and services in order to meet these needs (Engelbrecht, 2003).

6.3 The Demand-Driven Learning Model

This model was developed in Canada as a collaborative effort between academics and experts from private and public industries (MacDonald et al., 2001). The model sees technology as support or a tool to achieve the desired learning outcomes in a cost-effective way. The primary purpose of the model is to encourage academics (and organisations) to take a proactive role in the development and use of technology in the teaching/training process. It emphasises the three major consumer demands: high quality content, delivery, and service (Engelbrecht, 2003). Content should be comprehensive, authentic and researched. Delivery is web-based, and the interface of e-Learning programmes should be user-friendly with communication tools to support interactivity. Service should include resources necessary for learning and administrative/technical support.

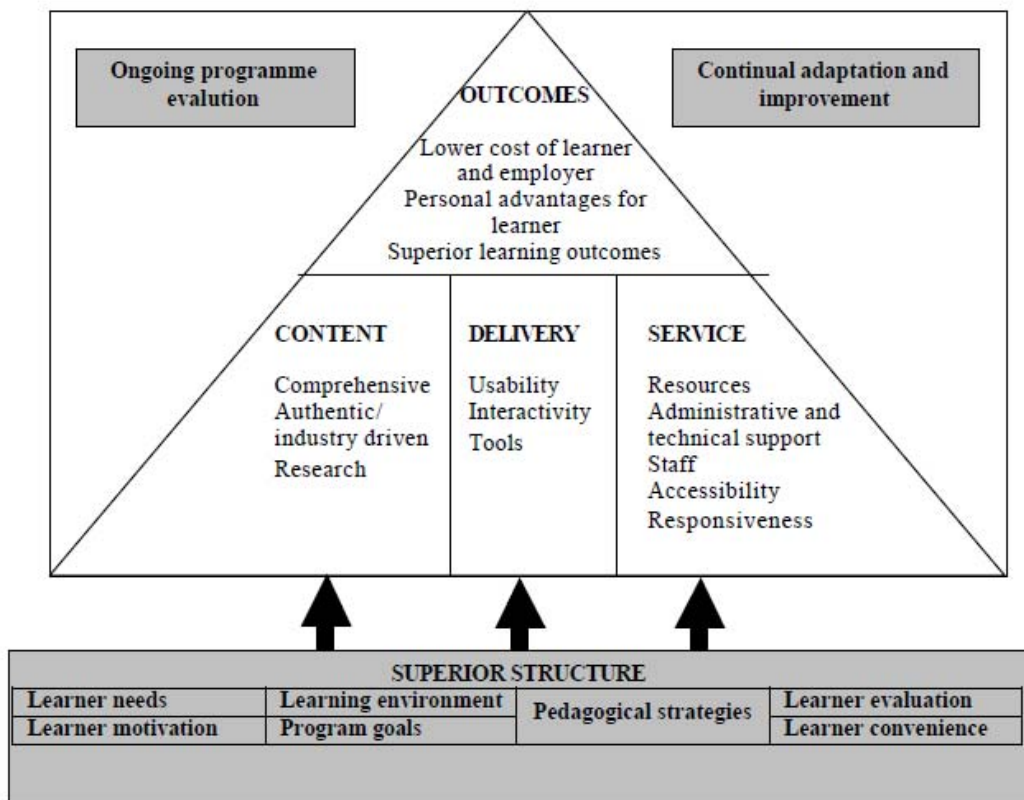


Figure 3. The Demand-Driven Learning Model, (MacDonald et al 2001).

It is important to have a long-term planning vision for e-Learning. Priority course content should fulfil high-profile critical needs within the organisation. Content should be delivered in small chunks for effectiveness. Courses should portray segments of jobs handled by a particular division; this way, the learning will become relevant to a team's immediate need and create motivation vital for business performance and other courses once successful. The Grant Thornton University follows this concept of web-based tailored content for learners. Bob Dean, the chief learning officer, held onto the philosophy that daily learning at work is

the key to competitiveness and profit for every organization. He created a theory that the course contents for employees attending or accessing the university must follow a customized learning path aimed at addressing business needs and providing solutions for each business unit. Therefore, no two departments were undergoing the same online learning. Managers would work with employees by accessing feedback on individual performances and identifying needed competencies and skills for the department and relevant training courses. They would also choose the most appropriate method of delivery for each particular course topic that was not limited to self-paced study, but included live virtual classrooms, workgroups, question-and-answer sessions, and case studies.

The model at the Grant Thornton University is a blended learning model that suited most of the company's learner types. It eliminated the antagonism developed by employees towards e-Learning with respect to its relevance and suitability. It created the perfect environment for learners to liaise with their peers and work experts who were usually in separate groups. This way, they did not feel abandoned in learning, or uncomfortable learning online.

Current trends of e-Learning seem to evolve continuously around the objectives of promoting a flexible and dynamic method of learning. A survey carried out by the Guild Research in 2004 shows that 48% of learning takes place in an informal way or among peers; while formal training with learning objectives takes a portion of 23% and other learning 29% via learning on the job. Conrad and Donaldson (2004) hold strongly to the thought that more is being achieved by e-Learning through the increased level of creativity and critical thinking. Two key issues addressed continually in e-Learning development for the way forward include the need for new methods and skills for collaboration, and the need for effective online assessment. These will become fundamental packages necessary in designing e-Learning technologies for the future.

- (a) Collaboration: some learners tend to be more attracted to learning when it is conducted through visual representations. This is one of the issues addressed in learning styles as a guide to building e-Learning modules and course content. Jitendra, (2002) calls for more active online learners, resulting in higher satisfaction levels when visuals representations are used in communicating course content.
- (b) E-assessment: The use of quality and benchmarking tools for e-assessment has grown considerably and stands to validate e-Learning as a viable learning method. Mason (2002) suggests stronger measures be adopted in e-assessment to create valid yet flexible and authentic assessments that cater to various learning styles.

6.4 Examples of Demand-driven e-Learning Models and Best Practices

Today, organizations are faced incessantly with the challenge of providing training and workshops for employees in line with roles and responsibilities for high effectiveness on the job. More and more organizations use Learning Management Systems to integrate learning for employees at work and attempt to capture and assess overall performance. Sixty percent of North American IT and business professionals confirmed, in a survey, that it is extremely important for content delivered through these learning systems to be in the context of the business process in which they are involved.

There are downsides and repercussions when management in organisations do not consider e-Learning components thoroughly, as well as when it is inaccurately prioritised. High personnel turnover in the automobile industry has reached a peak of 75%, and this has created a hole in delivering best customer experiences to car buyers. On-site sales representatives need to have quick access to newly launched products, sale-points and services, as well as a working knowledge - especially for cars with 'high tech' specifications. Forrester (2005) suggests an integrated e-Learning portal with training content vendors like Global Knowledge Network and Thomson NETg and SkillSoft.

There have been good examples of organisations that have executed e-Learning strategies which aligned with their organisational goals and objectives, and that have been successful. Cable & Wireless, a British telecommunications company, began reinventing its technological business strategy to be more service-driven by focussing on its largest group of users of telecommunications globally, and reducing complexity in products, systems, and processes. SkillSoft developed a one-stop shop learning system, iLeARN, in which employees can pick specific e-Learning options tailored to related tasks at their time of need. It provides an increased level of access and flexibility for learning, which is fundamental in meeting business needs both quickly and economically. The learning courses and content are created on short timescales due to the rapid changes in business processes and technology. This supports the overall business transformation, where e-Learning and its technologies become integral and critical components of the business. Today, Cable & Wireless maintains a successful business strategy in e-Learning (Becta, 2008).

Nike Corporation, a major sportswear and equipment supplier with headquarters in the United States, used specialized online training to drive a 2% increase in sales and so did Best Buy, an American electronic retail store. Its slow moving products increased in sales by 20% after online training was adopted (Bünger et al., 2005). Nike's e-Learning portal integration allows employees to choose courses and modules aligned with organizational goals, but with reference to regional activities. These include online discourse that surrounds the unit, task-specific and soft skill development, which could be virtual classrooms, training sessions with tutors on particular topics they need, unscheduled practical sessions, workshops or audio lectures. Materials from experts' repositories, such as the technicians' message boards and other internal forms of communication, can be added for other colleagues and teams to use. The method used by employees to glean information and gain knowledge becomes broad and easily accessible. Their e-Learning experience becomes a personal online training portfolio that goes with them as they move on through other roles and regions in the organisation. The portal is accessible by management to monitor and assess employee progress, content case study, and reusability. This was also typical of GM's DealerWorld Workbench and IBM's Sales Compass Portal. IBM's Sales Compass Portal provides on-the-job training on its Signature Selling Method (SSM) to 60,000 sales representatives and consultants worldwide.

6.5 The IBM Sales Compass Portal

The goal for the Signature Selling Method is to keep IBM's market valued skills responsive to changing markets, industry trends and client demands (IBM, 2004). Four major objectives were set out towards meeting these changes:

1. To re-skill the workforce quickly on limited schedules
2. To do so on cost-effective and limited budgets
3. To continuously adapt to changing requirements
4. To globally address and meet the training needs of a dispersed and mobile workforce.

In summary, with evident proofs of these best practices and models being turned into business results, more organisations are beginning to reassess and evaluate their potential e-Learning programs. Many organisations are developing a balanced mix of both formal and informal content for employees, and view e-Learning and learning investments as major projects and top priorities. The agenda of positioning business objectives at strategic points helps create value for learning and for economical advantage. We can also say that every good model adopted has been pruned thoroughly to meet only essential needs of learners.

7.0 Conclusion

We can conclusively say that e-Learning in organisations is very much a part of organisational strategy in present times and looks to be a trend that most, if not all, will be adopting in the near future. In this paper, we can say that existing research show that there are drawbacks and benefits to e- adopting e-Learning practices; this should serve as a set of guidelines to organisations seeking to join the bandwagon, or organisations presently reviewing existing possibilities. E-Learning should not necessarily be a stand-alone strategy or an alternative to traditional learning methods. Blended learning provides the opportunity for organisations to combine the best feature of both learning methods. Everything starts with a first step which, in this case, is the pre-implementation analysis aimed at assessing an organisation's ability to properly implement and support an e-Learning strategy; a look before the jump. Finally, e-Learning models are attempts to develop frameworks to address the concerns of the learner and the challenges presented by the technology, so that online learning can take place effectively. A framework that incorporates all these desired elements guides a successful strategy.

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