

Integrating Online Learning for Human Resource Development in the Corporate Training Environment

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Abstract: Most South African organisations are integrating online learning for training purposes. Online learning has made considerable progress since the early 1980s [Lautenbach, 2000], attributable in large measure to technological developments. Technological improvements have been fast, and so have the changes in corporate training methods. Be that as it may, there is little research with regard to the integration of online-learning for human resources development in the corporate training environment. Moreover, it remains to be established whether online learning is providing any kind of solution to the human resource development challenges as required by the South African legislation: South African Qualification Framework, 1995: [online]; Skills Development Act, 1998:[online], Employment Equity Act, 1998 and Skills Development Levies Act. 1999. This paper reflects findings of research, which is currently conducted at the University of Witwatersrand.

Keywords: Online learning, corporate training environment, human resources development.
Computing Review Categories: K.3

1. BACKGROUND

Many authors have discussed the way in which online-learning can be used for the delivery of training, assessment and support in learning institutions and corporate training environment. Online-learning offers a variety possibilities in terms of training, ranging from highly complicated flight simulation to basic drill and practice, from video conferencing to tutor support across an electronic mail (e-mail) link, and learning over the information superhighway using a stand-alone personal computer. Online learning has made considerable progress since the early 1980s [Lautenbach 2000], attributable in large measure to technological developments. Technological improvements have been fast, and so have the changes in corporate training methods. Online learning as a corporate training method has been enhanced by virtuality, which now manifests itself in aspects such as content provision, electronic access to libraries, e-books, discussion rooms and chat lines [Abell & Foletta 2002]. Soon these delivery channels will become mainstream delivery modes for corporate training and will become part and parcel of the competitive advantage of a successful company.

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2. THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

It has already been established in the preceding sections that online learning is used by both institutions of higher learning and the corporate world to deliver and facilitate. However, the question arises whether online learning is an acceptable alternative to face-to-face training in the corporate world. There is also a gap in the literature as to how the online-learning instructional strategies could add value in the corporate training environment within the South African context. The literature does not show which online-learning tools and techniques are appropriate for human resources development. Moreover, it remains to be established whether online learning is providing any kind of solution to the human resource development challenges as required by the South African. To date, very little research has been carried out focusing on the use of online learning in the South African corporate environment. To ascertain the scope of this research, a number of searches were conducted to identify South African studies that relate to how online learning can be used by companies in South Africa to improve human resource development. The lack of results with regard to the use of online-learning in the corporate environment in South Africa seems to indicate the need for research in this field.

3. PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH AND SAMPLING

The participants in the research are corporate trainers and trainees in 20 of South African companies in which online learning is used as a training delivery mode. The companies involved are in the following sectors energy, mining, insurance, banking, consulting and telecommunications.

In this study convenience sampling was used [Jakovljevic 2002]. The above-mentioned companies are convenient sample because they are situated in Johannesburg and it will be inexpensive to interact with them because the researcher is based in Johannesburg. Travelling costs of the researcher will not be very high due to the short distance between the researcher of this study and research participants. On the other hand a lot of travelling time will be saved.

4. THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The study is using of generic techniques for qualitative data collection and analysis [Walliman, 2001]. Because the researcher will use the multiple-data gathering methods and sources, the principles of triangulation will be satisfied. These include individual interviews, focus-group interviews, observation and analysis of legislation and policy documents.

5. A SUMMARY OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Online learning in the corporate training environment is still in its early stages and started in about 1995. Less than 40% of South African companies have already integrated online learning.

Drivers of online learning include convenience, return on investment and saving money.

Most companies do not have a documented e-learning business case or strategy. In some companies top management is reluctant to provide resources for e-learning endeavours. Be that as it may, some top management and business units managers have supported e-learning initiatives in the absence of a business case. Employees are enthusiastic about online learning. It is on this premise that in one organisation there are more than 20 000 employees doing online courses at the same time. Such large-scale participation and capacity, even in the developed countries, is rare.

Some companies offer online courses through their own learning centres or learning institutes.

Employees use their desk computers or else the computers in company-based computer centres to access their online classrooms and learning materials.

Assessment is done either traditionally or online.

In some organisations, online learning is offered not only to the internal employees, but also to external clients and business partners.

Organisations are using learning management systems obtained from vendors. Some companies are building their own systems so that their specific and unique requirements can be met. Organisations in South Africa use either the intranet or the Internet as a platform for online learning. The rationale for using the intranet is to ensure that the company does not endanger its security, while other companies use the Internet so that their employees can access the virtual classrooms wherever they are. Some companies are contemplating linking e-learning with other systems such as human resources and knowledge management systems. There is little interaction between the corporate world and the academia with regard to research and issues pertaining to training and learning.

6. REFERENCES

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