E-LEARNING INNOVATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE: QUALITY AND COMPETENCE IN STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Teemu PATALA & Dr. Alan BRUCE
ChangeLearning
www.changelearning.eu

ABSTRACT:
This paper highlights the experiences of Finnish companies, which are using e-learning in new and innovative ways to cut costs and improve the quality of personnel training. The Finnish e-learning model of best-practice is introduced by using the *"e-diversity"* course developed by *ChangeLearning* as a case-example.

KEY-WORDS:
e-learning, web-based training, diversity, return on training investment, work-place.

Background

The current global economic downturn has had a significantly negative effect in all major industrial sectors in the world. Since 2007, leading economists have released ever more pessimistic estimates about the state of the globalized economy and its ability to recover from the general impact of slower growth rates. One of the very few positive developments of the current recession is that companies have been forced to look critically at their organizational structures and processes. This is critical in an effort to improve operational efficiency and save costs. Organizations most seriously hit by the recession are struggling to find fast, short-term cost-savings as a means to survive.

However, more critical for long-term competitiveness is an organization's ability to make sustainable decisions about the use of both internal and external resources. According to a recent study published by the *Official Statistics of Finland*, personnel training costs make up an average 1.6% of all personnel costs in European companies (TILASTOKESKUS, 2005). E-learning methodology, when applied

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appropriately, can be used to improve the quality of training while at the same time cutting down the time required for employees to complete training programs. Especially in large organizations, shorter study time accumulates to massive cost savings over time. The enhanced time-efficiency resulting from investment in e-learning strategies exponentially increases the benefits of return on investment. Shorter study time and improved quality performance combine to produce demonstrable savings and cost reductions.

Cost-efficiency benefits of e-learning have been thoroughly studied and demonstrated by a number of studies (KRUSE, 2010). There has been, however, some doubt expressed about the impact of e-learning from time to time. Those used to traditional views of in-company training and development methods are sometimes unable to visualize the structure of e-learning, its potential benefits and whether it can in fact be as powerful an enabler for learning as more traditional forms of learning.

Encouraged by the impact of recession, a number of Finnish companies have taken the opportunity to turn economically challenging situations into benefit. They have begun to look for new opportunities to improve both operational efficiency and quality. An essential part of this is the re-organization of personnel training and development activities using e-learning. The experiences and results from Finnish companies are convincing. They stand as strong evidence for the fact that company personnel training can be addressed and achieved by e-learning methodologies on a large scale and, similarly, that the quality of personnel training can be improved.

Tapiola Group, one of the largest providers of insurance, bank, savings and investment services in Finland, is an e-learning success story. Since 2002, the company has introduced 30 e-learning programmes to its employees in a wide range of topics. As result of a number of successful e-learning experiences, *Tapiola Group* has made a decision to optimize the use of e-learning methodology in its personnel training. According to *Mrs. Ritva Uusitalo*, the Training Manager of *Tapiola Group*, e-learning is the primary alternative for all personnel training programmes in the company. *Uusitalo* continues:

"*We have let our employees decide whether they take their training in classroom or e-learning format. Employees seem to prefer e-learning, and we've been forced to cancel a number of classroom sessions, because very few employees attend them anymore. The general opinion is that e-learning is at least as efficient and valuable for employees' learning as classroom training. Employees prefer e-learning because of its flexibility (meaning that courses are available for use 24/7) and the possibility to review training whenever it's needed*."

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Our cooperation in the development of e-learning with *Tapiola Group* has been one of the cornerstones in constructing the Finnish model of best-practices for e-learning in applied working life contexts.

The following sections reflect our experiences and lessons learned in developing e-learning for the Nordic employer market. We will look at this from the perspective of the example of diversity training and use our innovative e-learning programme "*e-diversity*" as example. This programme has been utilized to train the customer service personnel of European companies to deal with the increasing range of issues and challenges in dealing with diversity – among staff, customers and stakeholders.

Focus on the learner

Even today – nearly ten years after the technological hype caused by the rise and eventual fading of Learning Management Systems providers – the e-learning industry is still more driven by technological innovations than by a more grounded and solid understanding of the needs of individual learners. Employers that consider implementing e-learning face their first real challenge when they look for potential e-learning service providers. An array of fascinating new technologies is indeed available. But meaningful and relevant solutions, scalable yet flexible enough to meet the complete range of company training needs, are very rare. The days of multi-million euro training projects (which were not rare in the 1990s) are over and will not return. Employers now need to look for sustainable solutions which do not depend on provider-specific technology, are generic enough to fit any training need that may emerge in the organization and which provide pedagogically sound and time-tested concepts, which can be tailored to each specific context. Ease-of-use is a critical, but unfortunately very rare feature in e-learning programmes. Based on our experience, each additional mouse-click (unless it is an essential element that triggers learning in terms of interactive exercises for example) takes the learner further away from learning. The development of media and networking technologies brings new and exciting possibilities to learning. History has shown that people have a tendency to implement something new and exciting simply because it is new and exciting. A critical element to keep in mind when implementing new technologies for learning is that the solution should always stand for learning in the first place. Otherwise, no matter how advanced and technologically innovative the solution may appear, it is useless for the learner.

The **e-diversity** programme by **ChangeLearning** is a self-study programme built around real-life stories and case examples about

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diverse customers in specific service environments. These environments are those of the client organization itself. The programme is available for employees through the company's intranet or learning management system. The programme has an intuitive, but simple user interface which provides the learners with easy access to the learning path.

Learning today reflects a world that is, in a contradictory sense, both more connected and more fragmented. The impact of globalization and new technology has produced a planetary connection. For contemporary industry, issues of diversity and equality are pressing ones for a number of connected reasons. In this, industry partly reflects the demographic, social and cultural changes of the wider socio-economic environment. It also reflects the powerful challenges and struggles in the organization and structure of work that have emerged with a new globalized environment.

The nature of the modern labour market displays increased complexity and diversity emerging from social change and population movements. These touch on diversity in regard to rights, ethical practice, conflict resolution and promotion of equal opportunities. The labour market therefore manifests changes in work practice that have been conditioned, on the one hand, by the process of globalization and, on the other, by the enactment of equality-based legislation in various jurisdictions.

The added impact of European Union rules produces a strong emphasis on common standards both to affirm rights and to regulate workforce conditions. Both European and American concepts of diversity management in labour market contexts have a number of shared concerns. Diversity management aims not merely to address issues around equal opportunities. It is a critical element in responding to the new needs of a growing diversity in customers and markets. Developing intercultural competence not only eases potential conflict – it creates a vast space for engagement with new and emerging market realities.

Clarify objectives: define metrics

A very basic, but too often forgotten principle in any learning design is that everything should start by the clarification of learning objectives. The challenge whenever new technology is involved, is that it may misshape our understanding about what is essential for learning. If technological solutions are applied to learning without first defining the key learning aims and objectives that match defined needs, there is a significant risk of wasted investment of resources. Years back, when the first mobile learning applications were introduced, we remember some customers asking about the possibility to use mobile learning in personnel training. When asking about their motives and reasons to use

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mobile learning, they found it difficult to answer. They found the new technology interesting, but were not able to see the purpose for using it. Today the situation is different – our understanding about the use of mobile technology for learning has improved significantly. The technology and the implications of the use of the technology is applied in a way that adds value for the learner. The content is not subordinate to the technology, but the other way around.

Objectives should always be only those that can be measured. For example, in customer service training, the objective could be to improve the level of customer satisfaction, as measured by a customer satisfaction survey. Combination of so-called "hard" metrics (such as the number of customer complaints within a specified period of time) and "soft" metrics (such as the learner's feeling about whether he/she has learned something or not) increases the reliability of measuring. Implementing reliable measures is not easy. But it is critical to see if learning interventions are effective at a number of levels. Human learning cannot be crudely quantified. But measuring the long-term impact of new skills, practice and return feedback are all critical tools in improving performance and effectiveness.

Advanced technological delivery systems are linked to challenging materials in diversity e-learning. A range of theoretical and attitudinal issues is linked to a practical, user-friendly learning matrix that improves confidence in dealing with new or unfamiliar cultures. Employers have been impressed by the demonstrated and measurable changes in their employee-learners in terms of customer satisfaction and displayed abilities to respond more flexibly to customer-service situations where diversity and cultural difference have been problematic. The learning methodology permits experimentation and fault-analysis in a secure environment free of any potential embarrassment. Staff trainees report increased satisfaction in being able to deal with diverse customers, improved confidence in handling sensitive issues and an enhanced appreciation of the benefits of different thinking and approaches based on diversity.

Raise motivation

Demands for e-learning solutions in working environments differ significantly from the needs identified in schools and universities. This brings us to the question of motivation and how it should be addressed. It is extremely important to understand these differences when designing any kind of training for work-life contexts. A student taking a university degree is expected to have high motivation levels for learning and be always ready to walk the extra mile to get what he/she is looking for – new knowledge about an interesting topic, for example. Motivation

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to learn a particular topic primarily depends on the relevance of the topic for the learner. The learner has independence to learn what he/she finds useful for his/her personal development.

Workplace training programs are built from the needs of the company. Training is strongly linked with the competence profiles defined for individual employees or employee groups. The primary objective of training programs is to improve employees' ability to perform work tasks – those that help the company to achieve its strategic goals. Most often, the learning topics are mandatory and the decision to learn them is not made by the employee. Motivation to learn does not arise from the employee's personal interest in the first place. It may arise from his/her strong commitment to the strategic goals and values of the company, but unfortunately this is often not the case. A common fault when designing company e-learning programs is that learners are expected to have a very high level of motivation for learning the topic under discussion. According to feedback collected from the users of ***ChangeLearning*** e-learning programs (this includes roughly 350 000 completed programs over a 4-year period), the learning topics themselves (example: information security) very seldom motivate learners. What is critical for motivation is the learning experience and how the learned issues can be applied in one's own work. This sets a challenge for those designing company e-learning programs – how to engage learners, how to deliver the strategic message so that it is relevant for the learner, and how to use learning technology so that it supports the application of what was learned in ones own work role.

The e-diversity programme raises motivation by locating issues around diversity and equal opportunities in a strictly relevant context. Theory and best practice are subsumed into the commercial and operational context within which the company operates. External social developments (such as migration, gender or ethnic minority customs) are referred to in contexts of potential and actual contact, communication skills, problem solving and alternative approaches that enhance satisfaction for customer and employee alike. A critical factor has been the ability to relate diversity to patterns of social and economic change which are relevant, real and shared between all social groups. Reflective learning on the impact of change is cascaded out to consideration of the impact of needs of new populations. Relevant information on new communities is imparted through quizzes, problem solving and situational explorations.

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Facilitating change by impacting attitudes

When apprehension and fear of difference are transformed by exploratory learning, positive attitudes towards learning and motivation increase exponentially. Diversity management is transformed from a formal compliance with legislative imperatives in to a truly exciting field of communication and creativity. Change and innovation are the foundations of this approach. The methodology treats information about new diverse groups with openness and curiosity. Legitimate questions are encouraged as a springboard for learning. Storytelling, concrete examples, problem solving activities and empathy with the perspectives and perceptions of other helps to build a wide range of diversity-related competences. It also helps to construct parallel competences in conflict resolution, communications and customer service.

Conclusions

Traditional approaches to workplace learning are often built on the assumption that learning happens in isolation from the workplace environment. This means less and less time available for training – similarly, the requirements for competences and skills are increasing. New and more efficient concepts are needed for learning. Economically challenging times have forced companies to look for new alternatives and significant cost-savings. As result they are getting much more – increased efficiency and improved quality. The recent development and successes show that e-learning is undergoing a renaissance. The trust in e-learning has been won back. Success stories like the Finnish model are needed in new and different environments and can be applied with significant benefit. The learner has to be the main focus. Virtual elements can be used to enhance learning, but learning itself is always REAL. Learning is a means to an end (ROSENBERG, 2001).

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