

Barriers to the effective implementation of e-learning

It can be seen that the drivers for implementing e-learning in a corporate context centre around cost reduction and flexibility, however it can be argued that with the level of investment required to implement e-learning there is an expectation by organisations that the medium will deliver effective training contributing to Return on Investment (ROI) and sustaining or increasing competitiveness through improved employee skills and knowledge (London & Hall 2011b). While the use of appropriate pedagogical design is imperative for effective training through any medium, literature highlights other factors that may impede or increase the effectiveness of e-learning within the corporate context. Waight & Stewart (2005b) propose a conceptual framework for the adult learner and e-learning within corporate contexts and propose the success of corporate e-learning is reliant on “championing factors” (p. 338). These factors are defined as leadership, learning culture, technology infrastructure and financial support. They suggest that where these factors support antecedents such as training needs analysis and work and content analysis and moderators such as learning theory, creativity and technology the result is engagement, learning and transfer. With regard to leadership factors, research carried out by MacPherson et al (2005) indicated a higher level of resistance to e-learning from more senior levels in the organisations. Hopp (2012) suggests senior management need to lead the way and embrace new ways of learning, warning if they fail to do this there is no encouragement for the rest of the workforce. This view is supported by Weinstein (2011) who contends that employees judge the importance of a training initiative by their managers’ reaction to it. She suggests that this reaction will either promote or discourage participation by employees. The study by Cheng, Wang, Moormann, Olaniran and Chen (2012) supports this view with their findings indicating that supervisor and manager reinforcement act as a motivator for employees expectations of gaining a beneficial outcome from using e-learning.

In addition to leadership, learning culture is a requirement for successful e-learning. Arth (2011) defines learning culture as “a collective set of values, processes and practices that influence and encourage self-sustaining and continuous learning in the organization” (p. 26). Tynjälä & Häkkinen (2005) propose e-learning is not a “miracle remedy” (p. 325) to workplace learning and contend the success of e-learning is reliant on the learning culture. Roy (2010) agrees and argues that the development of an e-learning culture is a requirement to ensure an effective transition to e-learning. Both Roy (2010) and Masie (2001) highlight the responsibility of the manager in creating a learning culture by raising awareness with employees of the role of e-learning in their own individual development and in organisational development. The difficulty that exists for organisations however is that different units within the same organisation may have different learning cultures Hodkinson and Rainbird (2006) which adds to the complexity of implementing the change to an e-learning strategy.

In addition to leadership and a strong learning culture successful e-learning depends on adequate information and communication technology. Macpherson et al. (2005) comment that while technology enables e-learning it can also be a barrier within organisations to the achievement of its possibilities. Medárová, Bureš, & Otčenášková (2012) highlight barriers such as poor connectivity, inadequate software and a lack of technical support. Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, & Yeh (2008) argue that as e-learning needs the internet the learning environment is more complex and slow response times or regular technical difficulties deter learners from taking online courses. Roy (2010) proposes the need to upgrade employees skills in technology, ensure technical support is available and increase bandwidth where needed is required to overcome the barriers identified while Sun et al. (2008) remind us that flexibility is an important factor in e-learning satisfaction and system administrators need to ensure all system functionalities are always available to ensure it accommodates learner needs. Lastly Cheng et al. (2012) highlight the need to be cognizant of the additional workload and feelings of uncertainty that employees may experience as a result of the implementation of a new online learning system.

Finally the successful implementation of e-learning requires appropriate financial support. Waight & Stewart (2005a) advocate that as financial resources support the learning culture and the technology infrastructure, they are a key component in creating relevant and authentic learning experiences. Newton & Ellis's (2005) case study on the implementation of e-learning in the Australian army emphasises the need for policies supporting on-going infrastructure funding. They contend where e-learning projects were not centrally funded development was “erratic and often inadequate” (p. 388) and suggest strategic support resulted in e-learning acceptance and a coordinated approach to course development, training methods and infrastructure requirements.