“Where have all the trainers gone?” E-learning strategies and tools in the corporate training environment

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Abstract: Online learning (also known as e-learning) will ultimately become the new training paradigm, taking its place alongside traditional contact situation training and changing the face of training generally. A number of trends, which include technological developments and the growth of the Internet, have accelerated the move to e-learning in educational institutions and the corporate world. Technology and the Internet facilitate a more active role in the training process. There is a gap in the literature as to which online tools and learning strategies are suitable for human resources development in the corporate training environment.

The aim of this paper is to identify and discuss e-learning strategies and tools for human resources development in the corporate training environment in South Africa. The study may provide important insights into the future integration of online learning by South African companies, human resources development managers and policy formulators.

This research was based on a qualitative research approach where individual interviews, focus group interviews, observation and document analysis were used to gather data. The participants in the research were corporate trainers, managers and trainees in 15 South African companies in which online learning is used as a training delivery mode. This study tried to involve companies in different industrial sectors. These included the energy, mining, insurance, banking, telecommunication, and services industrial sectors. In this study convenience sampling was used.

The findings of this study appear to indicate that organisations in South Africa were competent in the integration of online learning for human resources development in the corporate training environment. This could be attributed to the fact managers and facilitators were using various strategies, techniques and online tools in their endeavours to integrate online learning in their training environment. The above-mentioned competence holds great promise for the future of the level of productivity in South African organisations.

Keywords: Online learning, corporate training environment, online learning strategies, online tools

1. INTRODUCTION

Many authors have discussed the way in which online learning can be used for the delivery of training, assessment and support (Fichter, 2002). Online learning offers a variety of 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 (Christner, 2003).

A significant benefit of online learning is that it allows learners access to learning material at their convenience (DeLima, 1999). The advantage for the corporate world lies in the fact that training can be offered without the necessity for a physical classroom, as learners can learn anywhere where there is access to the Internet. Moreover, the interactivity inherent in Internet-based courses has fuelled the growth of online learning. Trotter (2002) notes that learners who use the Internet for learning purposes have reported a greater engagement in the learning experience than in the case of the more static learning associated with the traditional classroom. Online learning enables the instructor to monitor the learners’ progress continuously. Learners become involved in the learning process and modules can be designed to suit different learning styles.
Arnone (2002) reports that some learners find that online learning suits their learning styles better than the conventional, face-to-face options - which could be attributed to the fact that some learners are more visual than auditory. Furthermore, some learners prefer working at their own pace and prefer not to restrict their learning to a specific location. Christner (2003) remarks that online learning offers learners a range of options for navigating through the lessons, submitting assignments and holding discussions with other learners. In most instances, discussion takes place by means of a threaded discussion feature, in which learners can send messages on a specific topic. Learners may also respond to messages posted by the trainer. Content may include graphics, tables, screen shots, illustrations and multimedia elements.

Christner (2003) cautions, however, that both critics and supporters have identified some weaknesses associated with online learning. These include the lack of social presence usually associated with physical classrooms, as learners miss the real-life interaction with their colleagues and the instructor. This feeling of loneliness could be a serious stumbling block to learning; in adult education in particular there is much that learners can learn from each other. Christner (2003) further observes that it takes a long time for trust to develop among online learners. A dilemma is posed by the fact that the very technology that makes online learning possible can constitute a hurdle as online learners need certain types of hardware, technical support and fast Internet connection (Abell & Foletta, 2002). Live discussion can be difficult if more learners are involved. Learners may also struggle with the discussion thread software.

Some authors are suspicious about the quality of online learning materials (Abell & Foletta, 2002). Subjecting online learning materials to quality standards, accreditation and legislation could solve this. In South Africa, the legislation requires that the learning materials should comply with principles and requirements of outcomes-based education and training (OBET), National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (South African Qualification Framework, 1995). On the other hand online learning should enable the corporate employers and trainers to meet the requirements of labour legislation (Skills Development Act, 1998, Employment Equity Act, 1998; Skills Development Levies Act, 1999). Employers should also interact with Sector Education and Training Authority (SETAs) with regard to training and human resources development.

Trotter (2002), however, feels that the above-mentioned challenges are not insurmountable, and that one way of dealing with them is through the provision of good instructional strategies and technical support to online instructors. According to Trotter (2002), online learning will overtake conventional classroom training models over the next few years, claiming half of the overall corporate training market share. Corporate instructors should be exposed to a programme that will equip them with online instructional design. The Internet, too, has a number of tools and resources that can help both instructors and learners (Pethokoukis, 2002).

2. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR E-LEARNING IN THE CORPORATE TRAINING ENVIRONMENT

The following literature review is intended to outline the framework for e-learning in the corporate training environment in order to devise a framework necessary for discussing the findings of this study.

2.1 Collaborative Learning Strategy

According to Gokhale (2000) online learning encourages co-operative and collaborative learning. Learning facilitators can also create virtual classrooms and communities, supplemented by Internet services such as email. According to Gokhale (2000), the term “virtual community” refers to a group of people who engage in online collaborative learning. The successful performance of one learner has a positive impact on the whole virtual community. Crook (1999) explains that a virtual community is therefore a platform where a group of participants share common learning practices, they are interdependent, they make decisions together and identify themselves as a learning community.

2.2 Interaction strategy

According to Hannafin and Peck (1988), effective online learning should increase interaction between the learner and the tutorial. Interaction is the active exchange of information between the learning facilitator and the learner (Kaplan-Leiserson, 2003). The learning programme should present the learning content, and the learner should respond. The learning programme will then decide its course of action being guided by the learner’s actions, and the process is continual.

2.3 Individualisation Strategy

Although interaction is regarded as a primary contributor to the effective online learning programme, individualisation should mostly be used for its efficiency (Hannafin & Peck, 1988). The one-to-one nature of online learning programme should be used to monitor learner understanding frequently and to respond based on the individual needs of each learner.
(Porter, 1997). Hannafin and Peck (1988) encourage online learning instruction designers to accommodate a certain element of personalisation. For example, personalised reference to learners in a lesson will make the instruction more interesting, more relevant and more effective. This can be achieved by using learner’s name in assessment and feedback.

2.4 Active Learning and Constructivism Strategies

According to Bonk and Cunningham (1998), constructivism is a recent philosophy on learning that has implications for online learning. A major tenet of this philosophy is the active nature of learning growing out of the learners’ experiences (Alexander & Boud, 2001). This philosophy is compounded by the fact that trainers cannot transmit knowledge and meaning but learners should construct it themselves (Hargis, 2001). Knowledge is not something people possess in their heads, but rather something that is constructed in their minds.

2.5 Blended Learning Strategy

It has already been indicated that the use of online learning has rapidly found its way into the corporate training environment. However, a trend that is emerging nowadays is that online learning is being integrated in other training methods (Van der Westhuizen & Krige, 2002). This includes the integration of online learning with traditional face-to-face models. According to Smith (2001), blended learning is fairly new terminology in education jargon which refers to an approach that uses technology combined with traditional learning. Smith (2001) outlines the following examples:

- Traditional workshops or seminars in conjunction with a teleconference feature.
- Traditional courses with a continuing e-mail connection or ongoing dialogue with the participants.
- A traditional seminar with live broadcasts to more than one site.

3. THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

The question arises whether online learning is an acceptable alternative to face-to-face training in the corporate world. 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; Skills Development Act, 1998; Employment Equity Act, 1998; Skills Development Levies Act, 1999). To date, very little research has been carried out focusing on the use of online learning in the South African corporate environment (Toma, 2000). The corporate world has realised that online learning is now widely recognised as a viable vehicle for education in institutions of higher learning, as evidenced by the number of renowned academic institutions that now offer e-learning courses, including Harvard, Stanford and Pretoria University (Van der Westhuizen, 1999). 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.

There is a gap in the literature as to how the online learning strategies (collaborative learning, cooperative learning, experiential learning, discussion groups, drill and simulation) and tools (multimedia, calendar tools, communication tools, concept maps, chat tools, assignment tools and assessment tools) could add value in the corporate training environment within the South African context (Oakes & Rengarajan, 2002). The literature does not show which online learning tools and techniques are appropriate for human resources development. Online learning in the corporate training environment is integrated through various strategies and tools. Within this context, the research question is formulated as follows:

1. What are crucial issues for the integration of e-learning in the corporate training environment in South African organisations?

In order to answer the research question, it will be necessary to answer the following sub-questions:

1.1 What online learning strategies do managers and instructors perceive as appropriate for the corporate training environment?

1.2 What online learning tools and techniques are appropriate for human resources development?

4. AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the intended study is to assess the way in which online learning is used in the corporate training environment in South Africa. The study will therefore reflect training, learning strategies, learning tools and techniques that are used and perceived as appropriate for the corporate training environment. The study may provide important insights into the future integration of online learning by South African companies, human resources development managers and policy formulators.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 The Research Approach
A qualitative approach was employed, with observation, legislation analysis and focus group and key informant interviews being conducted (Merriam, 1998). The rationale for using the qualitative approach was that respondents could constitute a rich and valuable source of information. This study therefore “went beyond numbers”. The study took the form of a generic study to investigate how 15 South African companies were using online learning to improve human resource development.

5.2 Sampling

The participants in the research were corporate trainers, managers and trainees in 15 South African companies in which online learning is used as a training delivery mode. This study tried to involve companies in different industrial sectors. These included the energy, mining, insurance, banking, telecommunication, cellular communications and services industrial sectors. According to Meulenberg-Buskens (1997), sampling is important because the researcher cannot “study everyone everywhere doing everything”. In this study convenience sampling was used. The above-mentioned companies constitute a convenient sample because they are situated in Johannesburg and Pretoria, South Africa and it would be inexpensive to interact with them because the researcher is based in Johannesburg.

5.3 Data Collection Methods

The study made use of generic techniques for qualitative data collection and analysis. Because multiple data-gathering methods and sources were employed, the principles of triangulation are satisfied (Camp, 2000). Data-gathering methods included individual interviews, focus group interviews, observation and analysis of legislation and policy documents.

Some data was collected by means of semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. There were 31 individual interviews and 2 focus group interviews. These interviews made it possible to obtain information from the multiple sources. These multiple sources included managers, instructors, learners and online learning experts. Interview protocols were used to gather data and to answer research questions 1.1 and 1.2. An example of the question that was asked to managers is: What instructional strategies do you find appropriate for online learning? An example of the question that was asked to learners is: What do you think about the online graphics, tables, screen shots, illustrations and multimedia elements?

The interview was a particularly suitable data collection method for the environment concerned, and made it possible to gather useful information concerning the types of research questions. This provided the opportunity for direct contact with the participants in the study and to obtain facts directly from managers, learners and online learning experts.

Observation was further used as a method to acquire information during the study. While observing, the researcher became an investigator whose source of information was an experience derived from observation. The researcher played a passive role, avoiding all emotional involvement in the situation. In some instances the researcher observed training and learning activities in virtual classrooms. Observation was therefore used to answer research question 1.2. Data was also evaluated against the South African legislation, which is reflected in the problem statement. This kind of data was used to answer research questions 1.1 and 1.2.

5.4 Data Analysis

Data obtained from individual and focus group interviews was analysed using open coding (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001). A constant comparative method was applied to analyse data within and between interviews. Content analysis was also used to analyse the content of interviews. The process involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories (Merriam, 1998). Data was analysed with a view to identifying common patterns and formulating categories (see Table 1); these were compared with the literature and legislation. These categories were used to answer research questions 1.1 and 1.2.

Content analysis was used to analyse field notes compiled during the observation sessions. Common patterns and themes were identified and categories formulated. These categories were used to answer research question 1.2. Data collected through interviews and observation was analysed by comparing it with the South African education and labour legislation policies. Content analysis was also applied to analyse the legislation. The data collected was weighed against existing literature. The results were contextualised to the South African context.

6. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The scope of this paper will only present and discuss findings relevant to e-learning strategies and tools in the corporate training environment. The following table presents categories derived from the facilitators’ and managers’ experience in the corporate training environment.
6.1 Findings Regarding Online Learning Strategies Employed by Facilitators in the Corporate Training Environment

Emerging from the interviews and observations relating to the facilitators’ and managers’ experience of the e-learning strategies, the following findings were made:

6.1.1 Facilitators used online learning to enhance individualisation

Facilitators interviewed in this study employed self-paced learning (individualisation). This was motivated by the fact that real learning always takes place within the person, within his or her brain and emotion. Facilitators also employed individualisation because an average employee wants a comfortable way and a convenient way to study and that is what online learning provides learners. Online learning is characterised by a lot of interactivity built in, a lot of multimedia to keep the lesson to your learner who now essentially may be studying on his or her own to keep him or her motivated.

Facilitators in a mining organisation noted that the delivery of individualised and dynamic online learning material – has proved successful as part of the diamond mining giant’s leadership development programme. According to the facilitators, learners have also seen the benefits of self-paced learning - their attitude is very good. They really want to learn and they are self-directed learners. The employees could work at the right time at the right place and this enhances individualisation (see Paragraph 2.3).

6.1.2 Facilitators used online learning to enhance collaborative learning

Only a few of the organisations that participated in this study enable their learners to participate in collaborative learning, despite the fact that the learning management system and/or virtual classrooms that are used in all these organisations have facilities that cater for collaborative learning: “Truly speaking we don’t really use collaborative learning.” Facilities include online chat rooms and discussion forums: “In this company we do make use of collaborative learning during the asynchronous sessions”, “We are not sure if employees will want to participate in synchronous sessions.” Some learning experts believed that research should be conducted to investigate the efficacy of collaborative learning in corporate training environment. However, research conducted in universities and schools shows that collaborative learning can add a lot of value in teaching and learning activities (see Paragraph 2.1).

6.1.3 Facilitators used online learning to enhance active and co-operative education

The fact that some of the online learning offerings were directly related to the employees’ work activities (co-operative education) allowed the facilitators to enhance active learning: “We’ve got some induction programme on e-learning and then we’ve got basic safety programmes at our mines.” Active learning adds value to the employees’ work activities and that is why in one organisation before the employees did a safety and health training course online there were lots of fatal accidents a month. But now it is reduced to three fatal accidents. In a certain bank, before call centre employees did an online course which focused on their work, “too few customer enquiries were converted to sales; there were incomplete customer requirements to sales staff; there was high staff turnover and limited knowledge of the bank products”, but after the online training “the level of call centre customer service improved; more customer enquiries were converted into sales and product knowledge increased”. Facilitators also used online learning to enhance the skills of employees who perform technical jobs. Online learning programmes are also being offered to blue collar workers, such factory foremen and artisans (See Paragraph 2.4).

6.1.4 Facilitators used online learning to increase interaction

Facilitators used online learning to increase interaction between the learners and the learning programme. According to some facilitators, interaction is very important in the learning process and thus interactivity is the buzzword. Interaction is preceded by a great deal of work so that is successful. That means you have to have trained instructional designers.
who help. You have to have people that create proper Web pages. Facilitators used learning management systems that are interaction-friendly. In the absence of such learning management systems, “you’ve got to have Java Script programmers and graphic people”. In fact, to get a fully interactive online course going involves something like seven kinds of specialists. Learners and facilitators in this study were committed to maximising the benefits of interaction by setting aside time for their studies. Yet, this is one of the major problems, which is being addressed by what they call ‘learner contract’. Facilitators should also make certain commitments to their online learners: “This is what I’ll do for you. I will always respond to your e-mails within 24 hours. I will always give you help but you must also put aside one hour a day to work through this course.” This means that interaction as a strategy needs the active involvement of facilitators, learners, designers and programmers. Morrison (2003) agrees with the above argument (See paragraphs 2.2.)

### 6.1.5 Facilitators used blended learning strategy

Almost all facilitators used online learning with other learning delivery and pedagogical methods such as traditional face-to-face learning, workshops, paper-based learning materials and instructor-led sessions. In fact, some facilitators and experts did not believe that the excellent teacher that stands in front of a small group of people in front of a blackboard with a piece of chalk in his hand, taking learners through an intricate, say, accounting exercise would ever be replaced by online learning and thus it was important to mix online learning with other traditional methods.

A facilitator who wanted to teach his/her learners a high level of, for example, a certain therapeutic approach would give them a lot of up-front reading to do online. They would be able to access the instructor’s notes on that, they’d be able to access World Wide Net, able to access instructor’s notes on articles that she/he has scanned specifically for this group so that they could prepare themselves on a theoretical level, but then, in the end, the instructor would like to have them in small groups, eight people, working in a training room, in a workshop where there’d be role play, where the instructor show them a video of a therapeutic session being conducted, where we can discuss it. The nature of blended strategy employed in a certain lesson also depends on the content. Facilitators, for example, gave learners paper-based handouts or printed out the documentation: “When it’s really intricate, when it’s really difficult, when I really want to apply myself, when it’s complicated, I still have to have a printed paper in front of me and be able to work through it with a pen or pencil in my hand.” (See Paragraph 2.5)

### 6.1.6 Facilitators used various modes and designs of online learning

Facilitators used various modes and designs of online learning such as tutorials, simulations and drill. These strategies enable the facilitator to deliver the message and the learner to comprehend. Another advantage of using these modes is the fact that learners become involved in the learning process and thus interaction between them and the online learning programme is enhanced. Facilitators stated that they used drill when they wanted learners to be acquainted with the speed and accuracy of doing certain tasks. The repetition enables learners to be more accurate and more conversant with the speed. Once learners fully comprehend the speed and accuracy of certain tasks, they can proceed to other tasks or learning programmes.

Simulation was used in instances wherein the real demonstration of certain tasks will be dangerous, dull and difficult. An online learning expert gave an example of a particular South African air transport provider which was using online learning simulations and tutorials to train about 10 000 of its employees this way so that they will be acquainted with conversion to the airline’s new Airbus fleet. The above-mentioned air transport provider was in the process of substituting its existing Boeing airliner fleet with new state-of-the-art airbuses. Tutorials were used to “provide certain facts about the Airbus” while simulations were used to “provide demonstration of certain things about the Airbus”. The tutorials and simulations were not confined to the Airbus conversion only, but were also used “to demonstrate medical, safety and communication skills training to flight deck and cabin crew”.

### 6.2 FINDINGS REGARDING MANAGERS’ AND FACILITATORS’ USE OF VARIOUS QUALITY ASSURANCE STRATEGIES

Emerging from the interviews and observations relating to the facilitators’ and managers’ experience of use of various quality assurance strategies, the following findings were made:

#### 6.2.1 Managers and facilitators employed customisation as a quality assurance strategy

Customisation is a strategy employed by managers and facilitators to ensure that the content is of good quality. A lot of companies will buy generic content that is not customised. This content is then customised to suit the South African environment. In most instances the content is of good quality since it is a global product and the producer would ensure that the quality is fairly good. This affirmation is supported by authors such as Kruse and Keil (2000). The content is also usually aligned to international organisations, such as the International Computer Driving License, which are held in very high esteem by the training industry.
6.2.2 Managers and facilitators employed good instructional design as a strategy for quality assurance purposes

Good instructional design strategy enables managers and facilitators to ensure that their content is of good quality: “I would say content is good if it is instructionally well designed.” However, some facilitators and managers interviewed confessed that “some of the content is not up to scratch; it’s just paper that gets answered electronically and their wording’s pretty bum”. This could be attributed to the fact that some designers put more emphasis on multimedia than good instructional design: “People often perceive that quality has to with rich media content – complex animations and interactivity; a little more bells and whistles have been added to it.”

The majority of managers and facilitators in this study believed that it’s all about sound instructional design. They felt that the emphasis should therefore be on your audience analysis, your content analysis, the up-front design of the whole learning process, how it should take place, what should happen – where, what part of the material should really be developed by means of workshop? These steps lead to the production of quality assured content. The online content should be chunked well: “You can’t write huge amount of content on there.” Managers had also put together instructional design teams to ensure that the content was of good quality: “What happens then is that we have a design team that works with the subject matter expert.” The involvement of the subject matter expert was also emphasised: “We have a team of instructional designers; they meet the subject matter experts.”

6.2.3 Managers and facilitators employed legislative requirements as the yardstick for quality content

In the South African corporate training environment, legislative requirements are employed by managers and facilitators as the yardstick for content quality assurance. They draft the content up in such a way that it meets the SAQA’s requirements. The content is also based in the South African unit standards which are generated by Standards Generating Bodies: “If possible it is linked to unit standards.” There are many of these standards for organisations that participated in this study. The availability of standards is very good for most industries. These standards are also very outcomes-based and that content is handed over to an e-learning developer who actually converts it for whichever media is going to deliver it. Be that as it may, some managers have taken the route not to align to NQF but rather to practise on their business competitiveness because it is considerable work to meet the legislative requirements. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that most managers “don’t know how to start” and “they don’t know how to end”. On the other hand, although the unit standards are available, they are have not necessarily been constructed in an outcomes-based way and they are not truly representative of all parts of industry – industries for that SETA.

6.2.4 Managers and facilitators employed a research strategy for quality assurance purposes

Managers and facilitators who participated in this study employed a research strategy for quality assurance in online learning: “We do research quite a lot.” Organisations usually conducted action and benchmarking research: “Before we decided on learning management system we really did a lot of research into learning management systems.” Some sort of basic research was done by reading books and a lot of research on the Internet. The managers and facilitators acknowledged that putting research into practice is not easy and that this was why they do peg their research a lot on what happens in America. Some managers were of the opinion that South Africans do not do much research here. Although research is done to improve practice and quality in the South African corporate environment, the problem is that “it happens in isolation; coorporates should speak to each other more”.

6.3 FINDINGS REGARDING MANAGERS’ AND FACILITATORS’ EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE TOOLS

Emerging from the interviews and observations relating to the facilitators’ and managers’ experience on online tools and techniques, the following findings were recorded:

6.3.1 Facilitators used various tools of online learning

Almost all the tools mentioned by the facilitators in this study were part of a certain learning management system. These include communication tools, which were used for communication purposes during the teaching and learning process and internal e-mail; discussion forums; global message broadcasting; live chat and news articles. Facilitators also used the online assessment tools such as skills assessment; test, survey and evaluation authoring; and supports certification. The learning class management tools used by facilitators were course catalogue management, manager reviews and approval, resource file management, transcripts and records.

Facilitators mentioned certain tools that they used for support purposes: “Role creation and access definition; support online; live and virtual training; curriculum path and learning programmes; enterprise systems; and support for other South African languages.” The effective usage of online learning tools helps to reduce the number of learners who drop out because they feel isolated. The voice tools help to resolve some of the social isolation problems.
6.3.2 Facilitators used the learning management system tools for various purposes

Facilitators used learning management systems to allow learners to log into a course, track their progress, and show them what courses are available. Some facilitators said that they used very sophisticated systems that have content management engines, assessment engines, workflow and analysis. Facilitators and experts were mostly interested in the communication and collaboration components of the learning management systems because they put your whole learning environment underneath one umbrella. The advantage of these tools is not confined to the learner and facilitator only, but also between the learners themselves.

Facilitators found the learning content management system tools to be very useful because they allowed them to manage the content. This included the ability to allocate certain learners to certain content or to check where the learners are in the content. The learning management system was also used to track learner usage and to report assessment results. Other facilitators felt that the use of the online learning tools should be maximised by adding the voice element: “People that I’ve been e-mailing to for the last year – you can suddenly hear them speak and it turns them into people.”

6.3.3 Managers and facilitators endeavoured to integrate the learning management system tools with other applications

In order to enhance the development of human resources in the corporate environment, managers and facilitators in this study endeavoured to integrate the learning management system tools with other applications: “We developed an electronic performance support system to provide call centre staff with online guidance whilst dealing with customers.” According to managers and experts, there should be direct integration with the human resources in terms of competences and capabilities, training events, events planning, costing, and so forth. They felt that the integration of online learning with electronic performance support systems was yielding good results because sales consultants, with direct access to products information, could answer queries immediately and will not have to keep the customer on hold or call back at later stage. The integration of online learning tools with other applications put all product information at your fingertips – takes away memorising everything. These initiatives infuse online learning with employees’ work.

The e-course could be used as reference guide for the more experienced people and an induction guide for the new people within the Call Centre. Linking online learning tools with other systems enables managers to retain skills and knowledge within the organisation. There are increased product skills despite high staff turnover. In fact, experts interviewed believed that the stand-alone systems don’t have a future in this country. They felt that integration of the learning management system tools would function as management of a whole host of things that concern learning. In some industries, particularly the banking sector, there are moves to integrate online learning tools with knowledge management applications and e-business strategies. Endeavours of this nature are supported by authors such as Morrison (2003).

6.3.4 Various experiences and perceptions of facilitators regarding multimedia tools and techniques

(a) Facilitators avoided confusing the learner with multimedia tools

Although some learning facilitators in this study preferred to use multimedia – graphics, tables, screen shots, illustrations and multimedia elements – to provide an attractiveness that assist with delegate engagement, they found it difficult to provide this without either confusing the learner or simply providing these elements in face-to-face situations because they could then be introduced into the session at the facilitator’s discretion at the right time. In online learning the inclusion of these components in the learning material requires good instructional design; otherwise they may lead to complexity, distraction and inflexibility. They may also increase the risk of the content not achieving the desired end. Graphics should not be included just for the sake of being fashionable. They should add value to the learning experience: “graphic should be there to create understanding and facilitate learning, not to make something look pretty.”

(b) Facilitators used multimedia tools to attract the attention of learners

Some facilitators used graphics, tables, screen shots and illustrations to attract the attention of learners: “It’s very important to have it there, so that people are not bored when they learn.” They felt that including these components would obviously benefit. Some facilitators regarded graphics as critical elements in the learning process: “You have to have a picture of every page. You have to. What’s the point of using the Internet if you’re not using the multimedia?” In fact, some facilitators believed that there should be more of these multimedia components than the text: “There is no point in putting text on the page. Diagrams, pictures, video clips, sound – can convey so much more than straight text.” There was a feeling amongst most facilitators that a picture speaks a thousand words. They believed that it was content, not the multimedia elements that distracted learners. Some of the online courses have more text. The students get tired
and maybe get distracted as well. But if there’s graphics, sound and animation – it keeps their attention. It’s interesting to have graphics.

In online learning the inclusion of these components in the learning material requires good instructional design; otherwise they may lead to complexity, distraction and inflexibility. They may also increase the risk of the content not achieving the desired end. Graphics should not be included just for the sake of being fashionable. They should add value to the learning experience: “graphic should be there to create understanding and facilitate learning, not to make something look pretty.”

(c) Facilitators’ use of multimedia tools was affected by bandwidth constraints

The facilitators’ usage of multimedia was negatively affected by bandwidth constraints: “We don’t overuse those kinds of things because we have severe bandwidth constraints.” Bandwidth seems to be a serious problem amongst the facilitators and managers in the banking sector: “Our bank as you can understand, the bandwidth is there for transactions. So training is normally allocated the very last.” Another facilitator in the banking industry put it this way: “Graphics takes unnecessary space on the server – ours are used sparingly and we do not make use of multimedia and screen shots.” Some facilitators attributed the slowness of the Internet to the usage of multimedia elements: “The Internet is too slow. Bandwidth is a huge issue.” An author who supports this issue is Morrison (2003). In contrast, however, some experts did not believe that bandwidth was such a serious issue: “I don’t think the bandwidth is necessarily such a problem. I just think that learning content should be developed according to the bandwidth.” Many effective interactive learning programmes are developed “with very low connectivity speed. I don’t think technology is much of a barrier as people make it out to be”.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The most serious limitation of this study was the difficulty of conducting focus group interviews in the corporate education environment. During the planning stage of this study it was envisaged that at least five focus group interviews would be conducted. However, only two were conducted. This could be attributed to the fact that learners were very busy. In some instances it was not possible to have learners who were, for example, doing the same middle-management course online in the same venue because they worked in different branches, regions and countries.

In some instances some organisations wanted the researcher to sign a privacy agreement containing clauses that enforced the surrender of the intellectual property to those organisations. The researcher was denied interaction after he refused to sign such agreements.

The researcher is hesitant to claim that the findings are a true overall reflection of what is happening in South African organisations regarding the execution of the online learning strategy. This is due to the manner in which organisations have been selected; convenience sampling could have skewed the findings. Convenience sampling, as applied in this study may not necessarily guarantee a fair representative of the South African organisations.

8. CONCLUSION

These findings would appear to indicate that organisations in South Africa are capable in the integration of online learning for human resources development in the corporate training environment. This could be attributed to the fact that managers and facilitators are employing various strategies, techniques and online learning tools in their endeavours to integrate online learning in their training environments. Initiatives to integrate learning management systems with other applications such as electronic performance support systems and knowledge management applications are adding a lot of value to the success of online learning integration in the corporate training environment. This also confirms that organisations have a broader view of the integration of online learning.

Although the integration of online learning in the corporate training environment is still in its early stages, corporate South Africa is very advanced in certain aspects of online learning execution. Endeavours to integrate online learning with other applications such as the electronic performance support systems, knowledge management applications and e-business initiatives are something new in the field of online learning and human resources development. South African organisations should therefore be commended for these endeavours. It should also be noted that the integration of links is aimed at enhancing the skills and knowledge of employees with regard to their daily work activities. The researcher has observed that the literature on online learning does not have more information on the issues of integrating e-learning with other systems in the organisations. This could be attributed to the fact that the integration of systems is a new phenomenon in the field of human resources development. Still, the researcher has learnt that authors such as Morrison (2003) and, Cronje and Baker (1999) have written about the trend of integration. Generally, the literature on this kind of integration is very limited.
Although these findings relate to a limited number of South African organisations, the lessons learnt could be useful in other organisations and contexts in which online learning is being used for human resource development. It has already been mentioned that being conscious of the pitfalls and managing problems enable organisations to integrate online learning successfully in the corporate learning environment. The study conducted will also provide important insights into the current and future execution of online learning by organisations, human resource development managers and policy formulators.

The use of online strategies and tools in the corporate training environment for human resource development is an important aspect of the improvement of standards of education, training and development in the work environment both locally and abroad. The fact that organisations that participated in this study are reasonably competent in this area holds great promise for the future of our education and learning endeavours.

9. REFERENCES


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