Implementing and sustaining effective online learning in organizational environments

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Implementing and sustaining effective online learning in organizational environments

Abstract
This literature review will address specific issues and concerns that are prevalent when organizations begin to migrate training and learning activities to an online environment.

The structure of many organizations has been changing over the years to include a diverse and geographically dispersed work force. In an effort to continue to provide training and learning opportunities, while at the same time reducing travel and time away from work, more organizations are seeking to implement online learning alternatives. Online learning offers a unique learning alternative to traditional instructor-led training. However, organizations must be prepared to effectively support online learning and be prepared for the challenges that exist with this methodology.

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Implementing and Sustaining Effective
Online Learning in Organizational Environments

A Graduate Review
Submitted to the
Division of Educational Technology
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Of the Requirements for the Degree
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By
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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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Introduction

This literature review will address specific issues and concerns that are prevalent when organizations begin to migrate training and learning activities to an online environment. In today's fast-paced environment, organizations are faced with a unique challenge to manage how the business operates while effectively supporting the individuals who are responsible for its success. Traditionally, organizations seek to support their employees by providing training and learning resources to increase knowledge and skills. In the past, most organizations have relied on traditional instructor-led training to provide employees with the opportunity to participate in various learning opportunities. This is rapidly changing.

The structure of many organizations has been changing over the years to include a diverse and geographically dispersed workforce. In an effort to continue to provide training and learning opportunities, while at the same time reducing travel and time away from work, more organizations are seeking to implement online learning alternatives. Online learning offers a unique learning alternative to traditional instructor-led training. However, organizations must be prepared to effectively support online learning and be prepared for the challenges that exist with this methodology.
There are many factors to be considered when organizations prepare to pursue and implement an online learning environment. The content of this literature review will define the context of online learning appropriate for this review, identify the importance of management support, explore organizational culture considerations, the importance of appropriate learner support, and review the blended learning approach.

The information included in this review of literature is appropriate in that it includes the views of various authors who recognize the challenges encountered when implementing an online learning environment. In addition, many authors provide prescriptive methodologies in an effort to guide organizations to success. The information included explores each of the identified topics and reinforces the significance online learning has to organizations that are seeking to enhance their employee development.

The content of this review is applicable to the successful implementation of online learning. It will assist in identifying issues that may require special consideration prior to implementation. This may be especially helpful to individuals who are seeking to implement online learning for the first time. In addition, the content may also be useful to organizations that are struggling with an existing online learning program.
Methodology

The methodology used to identify and locate sources of information included the use of the Internet, searching the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database, referring to the bibliographies of other sources, performing a search of materials in the library, and examining trade magazines related to the organizational training profession. The intent of the search was to identify literature that supported each discussion area to be included in this review. The sources selected represent articles or books published within approximately the last two years. Reviewing literature within this timeframe allowed for a thorough examination of current topics and discussion. This is an appropriate timeframe due to the rapid pace of technological change that occurs in the online learning industry.

The majority of the source information was obtained from training industry publications and books related to the identified topics. The ERIC database proved to be a good search engine for the training industry publications. In addition, the ERIC database also yielded some results from educational journals and published papers within ERIC. However, the majority of the content of the published papers focused on online learning contexts within formal educational settings not corporate environments. Additional source information was obtained from books and the Internet. The Internet was used primarily as a search engine to identify articles or sources available in a secondary location.
In addition, some sources were selected from reputable Internet sites such as the Online Learning Magazine. An independent review was also conducted of trade magazines related to the organizational training profession beyond the use of ERIC or the Internet as a search engine.

Analysis and Discussion

Definition

Online learning is a component of the distance education methodology. The application of distance education has evolved over time and continues to change rapidly. In order to define online learning, one must first understand the definition of distance education. Berge (2001) defines distance education as organized training or education in which the learner is separated from the resources useful to achieve the instructional goals. The separation of the learner from resources such as the instructor is an important distinction when defining distance education. In comparison, Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2000) define distance education as “institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated geographically, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” (p. 20). There are many definitions of distance education available in the literature. However, the Simonson et al. definition offers a comprehensive understanding of distance education. This will assist in defining and understanding online learning in relation to the context of this literature review.
There are many definitions of online learning that are present throughout the literature. An important distinction to make is the interchangeable use of the terms online learning and e-learning applied by the various authors. For the purpose of this literature review, the term online learning will refer to distance education that occurs via the Internet. Rosenberg (2001) defines online learning as a methodology that applies Internet technology to provide learning solutions that improve knowledge and performance. This definition is unique in that the author believes that online learning goes beyond training and seeks to influence knowledge and performance. In comparison, Brewer, DeJonge, and Stout (2001) define online learning as “…instructional text-based and multimedia-based presentation formats used in a web-based delivery system” (p.37). While this definition includes the important component of utilizing web based technologies, it is fairly limited in the overall scope. Online learning is much more than only text or multimedia presentations delivered via the Internet.

The literature also identifies two distinct online learning environments, synchronous and asynchronous learning. Synchronous learning occurs when the learners and the instructor engage in online learning at the same time during scheduled time frames. This allows for online collaboration and real time learning facilitation. Asynchronous learning occurs when the learners and the instructor access the course when it is convenient for them.
This type of learning relies on communication tools such as e-mail and discussion forums to facilitate learning. For the purpose of the literature review, online learning will refer to an asynchronous learning environment.

The definitions present in the literature reviewed represent online learning in its current state. As Internet technologies evolve, the online learning environments of today will continue to change. This evolution will reflect an effort to meet the new demands of technology while seeking to achieve the desired levels of employee education.

Management Support

As organizations prepare to introduce and implement an online learning environment or sustain an existing one, attention must be paid to a critical component of success. In order to achieve success, all levels of an organization’s management team must support and advocate online learning. This includes all front line leaders up to and including the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The literature identifies a common obstacle to the success of online learning as a lack of management support (Meister, 2000).

A common misconception is the notion that management support equates only to obtaining the funds necessary to launch and sustain online learning. Meister (2000) states that “…senior management must be the champions of education and manage education strategically” (p. 55). This is a fairly new concept to many organizations.
A successful online learning environment must be built into the overall corporate strategy. Galagan (2000) identifies the importance of integrating online learning initiatives with the corporate strategy in an effort to create company wide strategic learning initiatives.

Integrating online learning initiatives into the corporate strategy can serve as a powerful communication tool and an example of the level of commitment from management. Rosenberg (2001) identifies that without the appropriate management support the online learning initiative will never get off the ground. The literature reviewed identifies the CEO as serving an essential role in the success of online learning. Meister (2000) offers a variety of roles a CEO committed to online learning should fulfill. This includes the role of visionary, sponsor, learner, and chief marketing agent. A CEO who serves as a visionary and sponsor of online learning exhibits support by communicating immediate and long term commitment to the organization. A common management mistake is to view online learning as a short term solution to reduce expenses related to travel and the classroom time invested by participants who are away from their desk.

A CEO should also assume the role of learner and chief marketing agent. A CEO can become a role model learner for the organization to follow. The function of learner can also support the position of chief marketing agent.
An individual who is committed to the online learning program can demonstrate that by participating in the online courses themselves. Their involvement can be used to market the program to the rest of the organization during speeches, in written communication, and in various methods of advertisement.

Although the author referred to the above roles as relevant to the CEO, all members of management within an organization can and should apply these characteristics to strengthen the organization’s commitment to online learning. Managers who lead by example may be far more powerful than any communication or advertisement used to advocate online learning.

**Organizational Culture Considerations**

Once management support is obtained for online learning, a far more challenging task lies ahead. Online learning represents a significant change in the manner in which individuals participate in courses and acquire knowledge. Many organizations have come to rely on the traditional instructor-led courses to facilitate learning. Existing training expectations and methodologies are an integral component of the organization’s culture. Hagberg and Heifetz (2000) state, “Culture drives the organization and its actions. It is somewhat like ‘the operating system’ of the organization. It guides how employees think, act, and feel. It is dynamic and fluid, it is never static” (p. 2). A shift in the learning paradigm will impact the culture of an organization.
An organization’s culture must be prepared to accept online learning in order for the initiative to succeed. Many online learning programs fail because the culture was not accepting to the change. Online learning may need to be slowly introduced to an organizational culture. Brewer, DeJonge, and Stout (2001) indicate that a successful migration to online learning should occur in small increments. A gradual migration will allow for the culture of the organization to process the change over time.

Although organizations may vary in which method of migration is preferred when introducing online learning to their unique culture, the literature did offer some prescriptive suggestions. Lewis and Orton (2000) identify five attributes that are useful in promoting cultural change related to online learning. These attributes include relative advantage, compatibility, simplicity, trialability, and observability. Each of these attributes will be reviewed in relation to the introduction of online learning to an organization’s culture.

Relative advantage is the degree in which the learners perceive online learning to be better than the current learning methodologies. Relative advantage may seek to advocate online learning as a means for just-in-time training. This provides employees with immediate access to courses available online when the timing is convenient for them.
A second relative advantage of online learning can be attributed to the ability to focus on specific skills or areas of knowledge. A learner may have the ability to customize their learning experience to focus on specific skills or knowledge.

Compatibility is the degree in which online learning can be viewed as consistent with the values of an organization and their corporate vision. Management must seek to create an online learning environment that embraces the existing corporate philosophy. This will create a sense of familiarity for the learners and may lessen the uneasiness that is often associated with new learning methods.

Simplicity is the degree in which online learning is perceived as easy to use and understand. Online learning may experience rejection if learners are intimidated by using the technology. Simplicity should be applied to the ease of navigation, access to courses, and interaction with course content.

Trialability is the degree in which online learning can be utilized on a trial basis. Lewis and Orton (2000) state, “The opportunity to try an innovation—with no requirement or expectation for continued use—gives users a chance to see how it works under their own situations and conditions, and helps to dispel uncertainty about the new practice” (p. 49). Offering learners the opportunity to experiment with online learning may increase the level of cultural acceptance related to a formally implemented learning plan.
Lastly, observability is the degree in which online learning provides visible results to others. This may be the most difficult attribute to apply relative to online learning. As with other training initiatives, it is often the most difficult to prove that learning has occurred as a result of participation in the program or course. Online learning may be viewed as more desirable if an increase in knowledge or skills can be observed. Lewis and Orton (2000) believe that a successful integration into the culture will occur if the online courses that develop observable skills are introduced first. This will maximize the immediate short term effects that are visible and may contribute to the acceptance of the long term goals of the online learning initiative. For example, introducing an online course that teaches a learner how to use Microsoft Outlook may prove to be more beneficial at first than an online course teaching leadership skills.

An effective integration of online learning into an organization’s culture will occur over time, but not without effort. Zielinski (2000b) supports the notion that online learning has a better chance of survival when it becomes part of the cultural expectation. The challenge is to successfully shift the cultural expectations to include online learning without minimizing the significance of change to the organization and its learners.
Learner Support

Implementing and sustaining an effective online learning environment is greatly influenced by the acceptance of the learners. The individuals who are ultimately responsible for using the program become the deciding factor in regard to the overall success or failure. An organization must seek to support the learners as they experience a new way of learning. Online learning may represent a completely new way of learning for many employees in the organization. Brewer, DeJonge, and Stout (2001) indicate that in an online learning environment the role of the learner changes. Individuals may be accustomed to traditional instructor-led training in which the instructor leads the course and influences the learning process. Online learning requires the learner to become self directed and accountable for the learning process.

Organizations must recognize and seek to support the change online learning creates for their learning audience. A common misconception is that learners will use and find success with online learning if it is the only option available. Zielinski (2000a) disagrees with this notion by stating, “simply eliminating classroom training as an option would seem to ignore a very real issue: a preference by some, if not many learners, for instructor-led classes” (p. 70).
Completely eliminating classroom training may isolate and frustrate learners who experience a higher success rate of learning in a traditional classroom environment. In order to avoid isolating learners who prefer classroom training, organizations should seek to find a balance in their learning organization. Online learning may not be the answer to all training or learning objectives. Organizations may experience a higher rate of success with their online learning program if instructor-led courses are still available in some capacity.

The reviewed literature identifies one of the largest obstacles in online learning is the challenge to keep learners online. If online learning is not integrated into an employee’s daily job, organizations may experience a very high number of incomplete courses and drop outs. In an effort to increase the number of completed courses and overall usage, Dobbs (2000) identifies that online learning must be part of an employee’s development plan. Specific courses relevant to an employee’s job must be identified and integrated into the development plan. This creates an atmosphere of accountability for both the employee and his or her manager. Some organizations affiliate the completion of online courses with an employee’s compensation or promotion. While these may be effective suggestions, an organization must create standards and guidelines to ensure managers are applying expectations and rewards fairly among all employees.
When implementing online learning for the first time, it may be difficult to immediately begin integrating learning expectations into individual development plans. The literature reviewed identified additional incentives to assist in keeping learners online. Organizations must create a network of support that encourages the use of online learning and rewards individuals for their success. Raths (2001) offers some unique suggestions to introduce individuals to online learning and encourage continued use. For example, organizations can schedule demonstrations and give away prizes to employees who attend. Organizations can create and distribute instructional cards or a tip sheet with helpful hints. In addition, employees should be encouraged to set aside time on their calendar to participate in online learning. Advocate the online assistance available, which may include resources such as online manuals and user discussion forums. Zielinski (2000a) supports the suggestions above by stating:

That dropout rates for online training are high when learners are put off by one or more of several factors. Among them: poor incentives to learn; lack of accountability for completing classes; problems with technology; and the inability of poorly designed courses to hold a person’s attention. (p. 66)

Applying all or some of the suggestions above may increase the interest and usage in the online learning program.
A popular method of advocating online learning is the use of demonstrations. An organization can offer demonstrations to show learners the features of the online courses. The demonstrations are an excellent tool to use when online learning is being introduced to an organization. Once the online learning program is established, the demonstration can evolve into a regularly scheduled start up session. The start up session can provide a hands-on environment in which learners can become familiar with the technology and experiment with the courses in a controlled environment. This will also ensure that new employees are being exposed to the established online learning program.

Lastly, the online learners of an organization must be provided the opportunity to learn. Many organizations initially look to online learning to reduce travel costs related to training and the time individuals spend away from their job. While online learning can drastically reduce travel costs, it may not necessarily reduce the amount of time individuals spend away from their job. A distinct advantage of online learning is the flexibility to learn anytime, anywhere. However, for most learners this translates into learning at their desk during work hours. This may be one of the most controversial aspects of online learning.

An organization that is committed to establishing an effective online learning environment must address this issue. Zielinski (2000b) identifies that “the desktop is still a rushed and interruption-plagued environment, not conducive to sustained, focused learning or reflection” (p. 40).
It may become a deterrent for some individuals if the only alternative to participating in online learning is to do so at the desk. The literature reviewed offered primarily two suggestions for overcoming this obstacle. Lewis and Orton (2000) suggest the use of learning labs to offer an alternative to the desktop. The optimal environment for a learning lab would be in a separate room or location away from the individual’s desk. This would offer employees the opportunity to schedule time in the learning lab and work uninterrupted at their own pace.

The second suggestion is to allow employees to participate in online learning outside of their normal working hours. This may be viewed as positive or negative. It may be viewed as positive if there are additional incentives to complete online courses after normal working hours or if this alternative is used in conjunction with others such as a learning lab. Some individuals may see this as a component of the anytime, anywhere advantage of online learning. Zielinski (2000b) indicates that a negative aspect emerges when employees have no other option than to complete online courses during their own uncompensated time. In an effort to manage the opportunity to learn, each organization must reflect on their culture, values, and employee expectations. This will assist in creating an environment that will encourage and sustain a positive online learning experience.
Blended Learning

The implementation of an online learning program does not necessarily mean that the organization should completely eliminate traditional instructor-led training. Blended learning combines online learning and traditional instructor-led training to create a learning atmosphere that maximizes the application of each methodology to better serve the learner. Organizations may find success in adopting a blended learning approach for topics that support it. Although blended learning is not appropriate for all courses, integrating this approach when applicable may increase the usage of online learning. Lewis and Orton (2000) advocate the use of blended learning when there is both information and behavioral skills to be taught. Employees can utilize an online learning course to study the informational content. Once the online course is completed, participants attend an instructor-led course to apply the information and build the behavior skills.

Blended learning can also apply online learning as a communication tool to prepare learners for the instructor-led training. Hoekstra (2001) supports this approach by identifying that online learning can be a primer to the instructor-led course. Prior to attending the instructor-led course, learners must be required to complete the online learning component. This can reduce the amount of time spent in class on pre-test activities and explaining introductory concepts.
Organizations which are new to online learning may prefer to attempt blending learning after the online program has been established and is successful. Once implemented, blended learning does offer distinct advantages. Dabbagh (2000) identifies numerous advantages to blended learning. These advantages include the ability to provide learners with access to content outside of the traditional classroom. Blended learning also offers the ability for learners to further explore course content online and through classroom discussions. Lastly, blended learning advocates a distributed learning approach which allows for individuals to be exposed to multiple perspectives.

Many training professionals are beginning to acknowledge that blended learning may offer the best of both worlds. Ganzel (2001) identifies that of 120 organizations that participated in a survey conducted by Online Learning Magazine, approximately 67% of them currently use a blended learning approach. The survey also identified the most popular topics in which blended learning is applied. These subjects include information technology skills, management skills, and new employee orientation.

Blended learning is also a good method to apply if the organizational culture is hesitant to adopt online learning. This methodology may alleviate the feelings of uncertainty some employees experience with online learning. Blended learning allows an organization to continue to provide exceptional classroom training while concurrently introducing the exciting new world of online learning.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall the quality of the literature reviewed was good. Online learning is quickly becoming a popular tool for many organizations. The ability to implement a flexible learning environment is a key consideration for organizations that seek to offer quality learning experiences. The various Internet technologies that are available today create an exciting and unlimited number of online learning possibilities.

The literature was very complete in identifying the common issues that should be addressed when seeking to implement online learning. The reviewed literature share a common underlying theme which advocates a proactive implementation approach that addresses each topic of this review. This approach will assist in a successful integration and a sustainable program. There was consensus among many authors that in order to succeed, online learning must be proactively introduced to the organizational culture and the employees who will participate in this type of learning environment.

The sources analyzed recognize both the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. However, many of the negative aspects associated with online learning may be alleviated if organizations address the topics in this paper. This literature review offers a variety of prescriptive methods that can be applied when implementing a new online learning program or seeking to enhance an existing one.
There are important factors to be addressed when attempting to implement an online learning environment. An implementation plan integrating the topics included in this paper will establish a foundation of solid online learning opportunities. Organizations must understand that there is more to online learning than simply offering courses to employees via an Internet link. Successful online learning begins at the highest levels of an organization and needs be integrated into the complete framework of the corporation.
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