

# E-learning and earning

## The impact of lifelong e-learning on organisational development

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### Abstract

The focus of this paper is the perspectives of people, both employers and employees, who are engaged in lifelong e-learning, within the UK economy. It puts forward two models of lifelong e-learning. One of which reflects employees' approaches to their own e-learning and self development, the employee model. The other model reflects the motivations of employers in promoting lifelong e-learning opportunities, by way of engagement in e-learning courses, to their staff in order to improve the organisation's effectiveness, the employer model.

### Key words

E-learning, lifelong learning, organisation, employer, employees.

### Introduction

This paper will examine the contribution of lifelong learning to organisational development, specifically in relation to e-learning courses. It presents two new models of lifelong e-learning. Firstly, that lifelong e-learning is used by employees to improve their current, or future, employment prospects. Secondly that lifelong e-learning is used by employers as a way of improving their organisational performance.

Osborne and Oberski (2004, p.414) held that 'a prevailing discourse within lifelong learning is that of flexibility of provision on meeting students' needs at time and places of their own (or their employers') choosing and the availability of open and distance learning opportunities based on the use of communication and information technologies seems to be especially important in achieving this flexibility.' This flexible provision includes e-learning which is 'a rapidly expanding category of E-Business. Defined as using the Internet for instruction in post-secondary education and training, the prospects for e-learning appear to be tremendous,' Katz and Oblinger (2002, p.4). This paper draws on the author's experience of e-teaching and of distance tutoring students who are in full time employment.

Phillips (1991) put forward a number of areas where organisations might expect to find positive results from employees being involved in learning, and or developmental experiences. All of these areas are capable of being measured, using quantitative information. They include cost savings, time savings, new work habits, and improved working climate, which would be evidenced by low, or reduced, turnover, staff commitment and satisfaction. Finally initiative that could be measured by the generation of new ideas and accomplishments by employees. This clearly reflects the employer model of promoting lifelong e-learning to improve organisational competitiveness, which is more cost effective as their employees do not have to attend a college or university to study.

In contrast Edwards (1997 p.16) held that employees, as a result of significant changes in work patterns now have 'to make their own way without fixed referents and tradition anchoring points in a world characterised by rapid and unpredictable change, uncertainty and ambivalence, where knowledge is not only constantly changing but is becoming more rapidly and overwhelmingly available.' Here e-learning is significant as it is possible for employees to work fulltime and at the same time to pursue learning opportunities in their 'own time', in fact at any time of their choosing. As Green (1997, p.194) held 'at higher education level information technology may well lead to a substantial decoupling of learning from institutional spaces.' This reflects the employee model of lifelong e-learning, where

e-learning is a method of remaining in employment, which can be more easily facilitated by the use of e-learning methods than more traditional ones.

### What is Lifelong learning?

Smith and Spurling (1999) provided a simple definition of lifelong learning, that it relates to people learning consistently throughout their lifespan, covering all life from the cradle to the grave, and which may start at any age. Clearly lifelong learning takes place within an economic context be that organisational, national or global.

Indeed Longworth and Davies (1996) put forward four value systems in relation to lifelong learning, viewing it as a form of economic investment. These are firstly organisational learning as an investment in survival, here the model is one of employer improving organisational effectiveness by creating and sustaining learning in order that employees are empowered to cope with a changing external environment. The writer argues that this can be regarded as reflecting the employer model of lifelong e-learning as it provides the business with skilled workers whose skills and knowledge are used to promote organisational competitiveness. The second is national here learning is viewed as a national investment. This agenda centres on the creation of national programmes for enabling and stimulating lifelong learning. This mirrors Drucker's (1969) concept of the knowledge economy, where knowledge is used to produce economic benefits. The predominant discourse being that of governments, which will be discussed later. Their third value system is societal, learning as an investment in wisdom and social harmony. The agenda here is one of creating and sustaining learning societies, both in communities and globally. It is the writer's view that these reflect the employer model of lifelong learning, using learning to create sustainable competitive advantage. E-learning is an ideal vehicle for organisations to promote learning opportunities to employees, given both its flexibility and availability.

Longworth and Davies (1996) final categorisation is that of the individual, or consumer, here learning is regarded as a personal investment in the future encouraging personal growth and developing potential, possibly to ensure continued employment. The writer argues that this can be regarded as the model of employee lifelong e-learning where the employee takes responsibility for their own learning in relation to their own employability. Here e-learning, with its flexibility, makes the decision to study much easier to put

in place than more traditional methods of learning. There is no need for the employee to alter dramatically their schedule as they would need to if they were attending a traditional course. Instead they need to adjust their lives to provide time for study. This can, usually, be at a time which is convenient to them be that at midnight or Sunday afternoon. Becker (2002, p.294) held 'people with fulltime jobs can choose the most convenient time...including weekends, before work and after.' However this may have costs for the e-learner socially, in relation to their domestic situation, or perhaps both.

Lifelong e-learning can therefore be viewed as being promoted by employers to improve their organisational competitiveness or being engaged in by employees to ensure their continued, or improved, employment prospects. The next section will consider the environmental factors which influence these views.

### The environment within which lifelong learning takes place

In the decades since the end of the Second World War the strength of the UK economy has fluctuated, as global economic and social structures have changed. European Commission and national governments' policy statement, in relation to lifelong learning, are 'couched almost universally in terms of ensuring greater economic competitiveness', Osborne and Oberski (2004, p.415). In 2002 the UK government established the Sector Skills Development Agency which Duff (2003, p.54) regarded as a 'real commitment from government departments to resolving skills issues.' Herrington and Herrington (2006, p.2) suggested 'what employers, governments and nations require are graduates ...who can create, innovate, and communicate in their chosen profession.' Many of these skills can be achieved by way of distance learning. This provides clear evidence of a model of employers promoting lifelong e-learning to improve their organisational competitiveness. It has been estimated that the e-Learning market in Europe is developing at an annual rate of 30%. This is a significantly higher growth rate than that experienced by traditional university courses, many universities are now heavily committed to developing, and are involved in delivering, e-learning programmes.

The causes of these changes have included moves in the economy, increased global competition, technological change and demographic trends all of which demand flexible and multi-skilled workers. In turn this flexibility, on the part of workers, is viewed by employers as promoting competitiveness, economic growth and guaranteeing employment. Contemporaneously there has been a delayering of management structures in UK industry together with the end of jobs for life. Workers can no longer rely on stable employment in one organisation, or area of work, for their lifetime. All of these changes have led to the emergence of high performance organisations with flatter hierarchies, which emphasise teamwork, require high levels of skills and creativity in the workforce.

This in turn has generated a demand for continuous updating by employees to respond to the higher skills, which the workforce is now required to have, which are more easily provided by way of e-learning opportunities than more traditional ones. As Smith and Spurling (2001, p.104) held in the 'current economy short-term shareholder value dominates corporate strategy, reclassifying any sentimental attachment to the specific labour force...as a luxury.' In some organisations, employees are now viewed as little more than current assets to be used, or disposed of, as economic circumstances dictate to ensure organisational competitiveness. The organisation may choose only to sponsor short e-learning modules rather than allowing employees to take time from their jobs to study. Indeed some organisations now work in partnership with universities to provide suitable programmes for their staff.

In order to ensure the quality of training and development in organisations the UK government introduced the Investors in People in 1990 as a national standard, or benchmark. Reynolds and Ablett (1998, p.24) held that government initiatives, such as these, have 'proved attractive to organisations and in many instances are perceived as a route to becoming a learning organisation, or indeed to becoming (in some instances) synonymous with the learning organisation.' It may therefore be argued that Investors in People, and similar awards, support a model of lifelong e-learning being promoted by employers as the outcomes will provide them with skilled workers whose skills and knowledge will enhance the economic competitiveness of the organisation. Becker (2002, p.293) held 'modern economies require that people invest in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and information not only when young but throughout most of their lives.' The perspectives of the employers will now be considered.

### Employer Perspectives

Longworth and Davies (1996, p.64) took an instrumental view of organisationally promoted learning when they suggested that 'for the individual, learning is employability and employability is learning. For the organisation, learning is survival and survival is learning. For both lifelong learning is lifelong learning.' This was supported by Smith and Spurling (2001, p.1) who held that the 'motivation to learn is an urgent issue politically, economically and socially. Indeed it has been suggested by Training Strategies for Tomorrow (2002, p.19) that organisations like e-learning 'because it promises to save them money on training.' 'Most workplaces can be described as organisations and that the learning activities intended and supported are usually aimed at benefiting the organisation, in the form of improving its functions, process, products or practices,' Tynjälä and Häkkinen (2005, p.320). Here the model of lifelong e-learning is predominantly one of employers providing themselves with skilled workers whose skills and knowledge will improve the performance of the organisation. This can be reinforced by the use of e-learning technologies and Internet based courses, which can provide quick solutions to specific problems of performance or competence or can be used to facilitate change programmes in the organisation. 'The key economic advantage of distance learning over traditional on site learning is that it saves students time,' Becker (2002, p.294), time which can be spent in the workplace.

Waterman et al (1994) summarised this approach to employee education and training in the following way 'employers give individuals the opportunity to develop greatly enhanced employability in exchange for better productivity and some degree of commitment to company purpose...for as long as the employee works there.' They also discussed the concept of a career resilient workforce which they defined as employees who are not only dedicated to the idea of continuous learning but who are also ready to reinvent themselves to being persuaded to take responsibility for their own career development and are committed to the company's success as long as they are employed by it. The perspectives of employees will be considered further in the next section.

### Employee Perspectives

Maund (2001) held that employees have a number of motivations for learning. These encompass both models of lifelong e-learning, and include intrinsic pressure, external pressure, the quality of provision available to them, specific drives and personality factors. Employees' intrinsic motivation, engagement with

e-learning opportunities, is relevant to the course to their future career, their personal interests, social needs and domestic circumstances. Whilst extrinsically they are motivated to study they may also be concerned with the value of the underlying qualification, and that it will be recognised by their current, or future, employers.

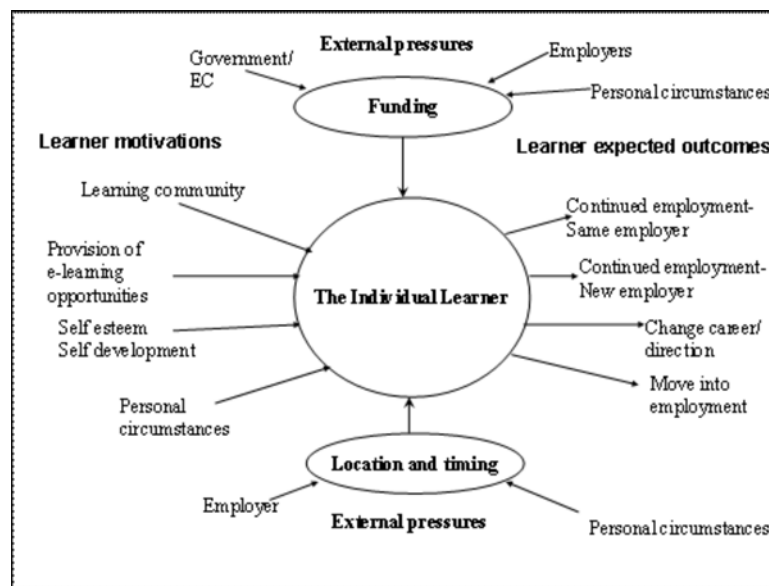
Here the provision of e-learning opportunities are important as the 'achievement of competence...is an ongoing process...given the constant change that takes place in the workplace,' Ladyshewsky and Ryan (2006, p. 62). It has been suggested by Training Strategies for Tomorrow (2002, p. 19) that employees like e-learning 'because it they have greater control over when they do the training.' Macfarlane and Ottewill (2001, p.16) took the view that the one thing which employees have in common is that 'whatever their level or background, is that their prime motivation in studying is very probably economic.' Their underlying motivation is wither to improve their career advancement or their performance in their current role, both of which will have a positive impact on their employability and earnings potential. Their underlying motivation being to improve their career advancement or their performance in their current role. So learning is relevant to the course to their future career, and to other factors, which are personal to each individual learner.

Whilst Smith and Spurling (2001, p.1) held that 'the levels of motivation displayed by individuals reflect their social and economic experience in general, and their family experiences in particular.' The writer would argue that the decision to become an e-student can be influenced by both social and economic factors. For some the thought of entering a formal classroom environment could be threatening, this is especially true for people who were regarded as failures during their school days, or who have no family tradition of further or higher education. Economically it makes sense for many employees to remain in employment whilst studying. All of which highlights the employee model of lifelong e-learning where the employee, takes responsibility for their own learning either in relation to their own employability or their own self development.

The process of knowledge construction can be viewed as a social process where communities of practice facilitate learning. Tynjälä and Häkkinen (2005, p.320) held that 'communities of practice are informally and naturally formed of people working and interacting together.' 'On line instruction also allows greater flexibility for students to...' chat' with other students', Becker (2002, p.294). E-learning can foster a learning community which enhances the learning experience and increases individual motivation, this may even be across cultures and national boundaries. Whilst students are intrinsically motivated to study they are also concerned with the value of the underlying qualification, whether they obtained it by traditional or e-learning methods, and that it will be recognised by their current, or future, employers. This is a model of lifelong e-learning by employees with them engaging in e-learning or developmental activities, to ensure their continued employability. It may therefore be argued that employees' intrinsic motivation is relevant to the course to their future career.

## Conclusions

These models are reflected in the following figures. Figure 1 illustrates the model of employee lifelong learning where people engage in e-learning opportunities to maintain, or improve, their employability.



**Figure 1.** New Model of Lifelong E-Learning

Whilst Figure 2 illustrates those forces which lead to the provision of lifelong e-learning opportunities to employees, within a work based context. These are accessed by people in the workplace and are ultimately consumed by the organisation by way of their improved performance, and/ or improved productivity. This is the employer model of lifelong e-learning.



**Figure 2.** New Model of E-Lifelong Learning

Senge (1990, p. 139) held that 'organisations learn only through individuals who learn.' Therefore, it may be argued that the only source of competitive advantage is an organisation's ability to learn, to promote e-learning in its employees, and to react more quickly than its competitors. Individual learning does not guarantee organisational learning but without the former, the latter cannot occur. This view is reflected in Figure 2.

Clearly the discourse of the e-learner, the employee, is also significant. As Hicks (2002, p. 350) held 'learning means a change, but a change of relatively permanent kind.' In her view, learning implies a different internal state, which results in new behaviours or actions or new understanding and knowledge on the part of the individual, enabling them to survive in a turbulent environment.

This is model of employee lifelong e-learning, Figure 1, and was supported by Longworth and Davies (1996, p.22) who held that 'lifelong learning is the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge...and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to supply them with confidence...in all roles, circumstances and environments'...which clearly include virtual ones such as those offered by e-learning. One challenge for employers and universities in the arena of lifelong e-learning is to 'link employees' personal development with organisational development and learning', Tynjälä and Häkkinen (2005, p.326).

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