

Survey of e-Learning Experience in Slovak SMEs

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Abstract:

As a part of a doctoral thesis, the author has studied possibilities and barriers to implementation of e-learning tools in employee training in Slovak companies. The focus of the study is on e-learning in the workplace, especially applied to language learning in the group of full-time employees of Slovak small and medium-sized organizations. In order to get an overview of the current situation, the author has conducted an anonymous online survey in the period of June – November 2014. The survey dealt with experience with e-learning in general and with employee-focused language courses specifically, taking into account potential learner motivation, organizational factors, barriers to e-learning in the workplace and other factors.

Key words:

e-learning. Small and medium-sized companies. Human resource development. Language learning. Adult learners.

1 Introduction

E-learning in the workplace has great potential since development of the knowledge society is unimaginable without life-long learning. In Slovakia, employee training using e-learning technology is still not widespread or fully developed. This limitation is even more obvious in language learning with the use of e-learning technology and methodology.

In our paper, we analyze conditions of effective employee training using e-learning technologies and the most common obstacles that hinder the education process in the workplace. The area of our research for the purpose of dissertation thesis is the possibility of effective introduction of e-learning in language education in the specific category of Slovak adult learners with full-time employment. This category of learners has been selected due to their specific learning needs and limitations. As fully-employed adults, they do not have easy access to language education in the traditional format of language courses. However, the current job market and the overall economic situation in Slovakia put pressure on Slovak employees to develop their language skills, mainly in the English language. The language learning system in Slovakia has still not sufficiently met those learning needs.

The research focuses on application of adaptive e-learning methodology for this specific learner category. The goal is to propose a set of efficient learning tools that can provide the right content to the right person at the right time.

2 Theoretical Overview

Organizations have to make sure they are ready to implement e-learning. They should determine the level of their “e-learning readiness” prior to the implementation. E-readiness presents ability of learners to use technology, to cooperate, to learn both synchronously and asynchronously, to be motivated and self-disciplined; an e-ready organization should have the necessary infrastructure, clear e-learning goals, learner support and knowledgeable management (Schreurset et al., 2008).

This rather open and flexible approach to individual learning progress is justified by the belief of many researchers. For example, Sanchez-Villalon *et al.* (2010) state that learners should become developers of their own learning path, while tutors should act as their guides and help them develop their critical thinking.

Application of e-learning tools in education in Slovakia is not wide-spread practice in corporations and organizations; therefore, e-learning has not fully fulfilled its potential yet. Small and medium-sized organizations all over the world face similar obstacles to implementation of effective e-learning programs in the workplace. Our research of this topic has led to realizing 4 main categories of barriers to implementation of e-learning in SMEs. These are: conceptual barriers, organizational barriers, technological barriers, and the human factor. The conceptual barriers are related to definition of the purpose of e-learning in the organization and its alignment with the organization's needs. The organizational barriers include planning, communication, funding, control and improvement, and application of skills. Technological barriers are related to quality, support, and update of information and communication technology (ICT) and communication media. Last but not least, individual and social factors play a significant role in application of e-learning in the organization (Medárová et al.).

Conceptual barriers are reflected in misunderstanding of the purpose of e-learning and inability to adjust the e-learning system to the needs and target users of the organization. That situation occurs when the e-learning system is

not chosen properly or it has simply been overestimated. In some cases, the course content does not suit the target learner group and needs of the organization. Also, some online courses do not follow proper professional design. Finally, too much or too little emphasis on technical aspects can be counterproductive, too. (Medárová et al.).

Organizational barriers include: ineffective communication between the involved participants, poor planning, limited budget, poor control of the system's operations and failure to apply the adopted (learned) skills in the workplace. Planning should include thorough preparation, scheduling, time management and promotion of e-learning in the organization. A sufficient amount of time is needed to support an efficient learning process. Failure to select responsible staff and miscommunication between staff members may lead to difficulties and discrepancies in the implementation and operations of the e-learning system. Insufficient funding may result in failure to obtain the necessary technical equipment, to finance the development of online courses, to hire professionals in the area of e-learning and ICT, etc. Lack of continuous control of the system's functions presents another organizational obstacle. User feedback should be collected regularly because it is also necessary for successful implementation and improvement of the e-learning system. Finally, unless the learned skills are applied in the work process, the invested effort and resources are wasted. (Medárová et al.).

Technical barriers are mostly represented by inadequate information and communication technology (e.g. hardware or software does not meet the system requirements; Internet connectivity is unreliable; software components are incompatible), low quality of instructional media, lack of technical update, and missing technical support. (Medárová et al.).

The human factor barriers are individual and social. The individual human factor is represented by an individual's attitude to the e-Learning as such, and to adopting the e-Learning methodology and instruments. On the other hand, the social human factor is reflected in relations and communication between users of e-Learning systems. The users are managers of organizations, developers/designers of online courses, technical and IT support staff, and end users of the system, represented by learners and tutors. The mentioned user groups often experience the problem of low motivation, limited knowledge of the e-learning concept and requirements, limited involvement, or poor communication, ICT and learning skills. (Medárová et al.).

All the above-described e-Learning barriers are interconnected and dependent on one another. For example, poor organization of online courses can cause technical problems and threaten learners' motivation, so the organization's goals will not be met. (Medárová et al., 2012).

3 Methodology

Educating employees in the workplace is a necessary part of human resources development, even more so in the turbulent times of today's economy. Due to various constraints, including mainly organizational issues and lack of time for regular study, e-learning is becoming a very effective and popular tool of increasing one's qualifications and gaining new knowledge. According to our findings, e-learning is still not widely used in Slovak companies and organizations, where more traditional methods of learning prevail. Therefore, finding a sufficient amount of information on the use and effectiveness of e-learning in Slovak companies presents a big challenge. A specific focus of our research is on online learning in language education in the workplace. This has led us to compiling the above-mentioned online questionnaire.

The survey questions cover information on motivational, technical, organizational, and other aspects of e-learning in Slovak companies, with a specific focus on learning the English language in the online or blended format. The information was collected in an anonymous electronic survey using the web portal Survey Monkey between June and November 2014. The total number of respondents in the given period was 88 and they came mostly from small and medium-sized companies of both private and public sector in the Slovak Republic. The results of the research show very limited use of e-learning tools in the workplace.

The questionnaire contained the following questions:

- Does your company have experience with e-learning programs for employees?
- What are the main obstacles to e-learning in your company?
- Are foreign languages used in your company's communication?
- Does your employer organize any language courses in the company's premises?
- What is the form of language courses in your company?
- What is the frequency of language courses in your company?
- Is participation in company language courses optional/obligatory?
- Do your company's managers monitor effectiveness of language courses in the company?
- Would you be interested in implementation of any online or blended English language courses in your company?

4 Survey Results

The following tables present responses to the individual questions and the percentage numbers of respondents with specific responses.

Question # 1: Does your company have experience with e-learning programs for employees?

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| Yes | 38.6 % |
| No | 52.2 % |
| Not aware | 9.0 % |

Total number of responses: 88

Question # 2: What are the main obstacles to e-learning in your company?

| | |
|----------------|--------|
| Organizational | 52 % |
| Methodological | 22.6 % |
| Technical | 20 % |
| Financial | 26.6 % |
| Motivational | 54.6 % |
| Other | 12.0 % |

Total number of responses: 75 More than one selected response was possible.

Question # 3: Are foreign languages used in your company's communication?

| | |
|-----|--------|
| Yes | 86.5 % |
| No | 13.4 % |

Total number of responses: 82

Question # 4: Does your employer organize any language courses in the company's premises?

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| Yes | 42.1 % |
| No | 53.1 % |
| Not aware | 4.8 % |

Total number of responses: 83

Question # 5: What is the form of language courses in your company?

| | |
|------------------------------------|--------|
| Learning in groups, with a teacher | 64.4 % |
| Individual classes with a teacher | 27.1 % |
| Learning on the Internet | 11.8 % |
| Not aware | 23.7 % |

Total number of responses: 59

More than one selected response was possible.

Question # 6: What is the frequency of language courses in your company?

| | |
|---------------------------|--------|
| Less than 1 hour per week | 10 % |
| 1 hour per week | 21.6 % |
| 2 hours per week | 38.3 % |
| Not aware | 30.7 % |

Total number of responses: 60

Question # 7: Is participation in company language courses optional/obligatory?

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--------|
| Obligatory for selected employees | 13.3 % |
| Obligatory for all employees | 0 % |
| Optional | 58.6 % |
| Not aware | 28.0 % |

Total number of responses: 75

Question # 8: Do your company's managers monitor effectiveness of language courses in the company?

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| Yes | 16.4 % |
| No | 49.3 % |
| Not aware | 34.2 % |

Total number of responses: 73

Question # 9: Would you be interested in implementation of any of the following English language courses in your company?

| | |
|---------------------------------|--------|
| 6-week intensive online course | 25.4 % |
| 10-week intensive online course | 15.6 % |
| 10-week blended course | 58.8 % |

Total number of responses: 51 (57.9 % respondents expressed interest in online learning)
A blended course is combination of online learning and traditional classes led by a teacher.

5 Discussion

The online survey respondents represented a sample of 88 employees of various organizations in Slovakia, from a large variety of economic sectors, including banking, IT, hotel services, trade, automotive industry, education, audit, architecture, etc. A big number of respondents work in SMEs: at least 30.6 % of respondents work in the companies with up to 200 employees in Slovakia; at least 20.4 % of respondents work in organizations that have between 200 and 600 employees. Next, at least 11.3 % of respondents work in organizations with 600 – 5000 employees, while 37.5 % of respondents did not provide the answer regarding the size of the company they worked in.

As we expected, the survey results demonstrated very low level of experience with e-learning in companies in Slovakia. The two main factors contributing to this situation are motivational (54.6 %) and organizational (52 %) reasons. According to some of the verbal comments in the survey, in some companies either employees or managers do not feel the need to introduce learning in the workplace. In other companies, time constraint (busy working schedule) is an essential obstacle to e-learning. On the other hand, technical (20 %) and financial (26.6 %) aspects have relatively low impact on the lack of e-learning in companies in Slovakia.

Regarding the language learning focus of the survey, most surveyed companies (86.5 % respondents) use foreign languages in their daily operations. This fact proves the need to learn foreign languages for professional purposes. However, only about 42 % respondents are aware of language courses organized for company employees, and only about 11.8 % of those courses are organized in the e-learning format. Another issue is that according to about 49 % respondents, company managers do not monitor effectiveness of language courses for employees. Finally, an interesting fact is that if given a possibility, most respondents would select a blended language course – a mix of online learning and learning in the traditional class (58.8 % of those interested in online learning).

To sum up, our information survey shows very limited experience with e-learning programs specifically designed for employees in Slovak companies. Also, there is very low level of implementation of e-learning in language courses for employees. The main obstacles to implementing e-learning tools and methodology in the Slovak workplace supposedly are lack of motivation and organizational issues. Further study of these issues and a bigger sample of surveyed subjects might bring more light into the reasons of inefficiency or lack of e-learning programs in Slovak companies.

Also, it is necessary to consider specific needs of adult language learners and possibilities to implement online language courses in the workplace. As the survey shows, there is a large group of potential language learners interested in the online format of language courses in the workplace. That brings us to the conclusion that if online language courses are very carefully planned and properly developed, taking into account the needs of the organization as well as its employees, there is a high chance of success and future benefit for the organization.

6 Conclusion

In the globalized and dynamic economy of the 21st century, especially in the post-crisis era, we see an ever-increasing need to develop human resources, which can bring about economic growth in individual countries, as well as in the global market. This is, naturally applicable to human resource development in Slovakia, with a huge potential for implementing e-learning tools in employee education, including a focus on language skills development for the needs of the international labor market. Therefore, e-learning tools, which apply efficient knowledge management methodology, can support human resource development in Slovak companies. This goal can be reached if the concept of e-learning is correctly understood, motivation of all involved parties (mainly managers and employees) is achieved, and appropriate planning, organization, budgeting, course development, course instruction, and system control tools are involved in the process.

Literature

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