When e-learning first hit the corporate scene, much fuss was made about the advantages of elearning; from improved learning, as employees were able to learn at their own pace and at times that are convenient to them, to lower training costs as there will not be a need for ‘live’ instructors.

Unfortunately, with many elearning courses, employees were left very much on their own to complete the learning. Participating in such a course requires a certain amount of discipline and determination on the part of the employees to go through the course materials. Furthermore, some companies fail to conduct a proper follow-up on the learning to see how what was learnt by the employees could be applied to their work and to the benefit of the company. All this has resulted in the dissatisfaction that some companies associate with elearning.

However, many of the problems with elearning can be addressed through the creative use of online or web-based learning. With greater bandwidth and better technologies available today, learners can access electronic information presented as text, pictures, animation and videos online. This also allows busy executives to learn despite their busy work and travel schedules.

Another advantage of online training is that it can help companies prepare for succession planning and globalisation. Online courses can be a tool for managers to develop skills, especially in cases where they participate with colleagues from around the world. Strategic knowledge about what works and does not for organisations change and people management and other critical issues can be generated during these sessions.

To generate useful and strategic knowledge, online learning must be designed with the following elements in mind:

A diverse audience
Enroll managers from different countries as they would bring diverse perspectives that reflect the unique opportunities and challenges of their local environment.

In one of our courses for a client company, 25 managers from different countries including Argentina, Australia, Canada, China, the Netherlands, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, South Africa, Ukraine and Vietnam were enrolled in a course. Each participant was familiar with the company’s global strategy, mission and values, as well as his or her own local market environment. Making use of the strategy concepts introduced in the course, the managers each developed proposals on how to utilise the company’s resources and competencies to exploit new business opportunities that make strategic sense for the company.

Participant discussion
Allow managers to learn concepts by participating in discussions based on their own schedules, providing them time to reflect and develop thoughtful comments.

Participants can make use of what they have learnt in the course to analyse others’ views and proposals. They can also make use of their personal work experience and knowledge of local markets to help refine the proposals of others. Furthermore, reading proposals from others could help spark ideas of how to apply them to their own unique situations to discover new business opportunities.

Expert instructor facilitation
Have an expert instructor who helps managers learn concepts through one-on-one coaching as well as facilitates discussion so that managers can share their own experiences and insights on how concepts are applied to specific situations.

The purpose of the instructor is to help participants improve the logic of their proposals as well as to facilitate collaboration among participants to generate ideas, refine proposals and share best practices. The instructor should have deep understanding of the subject matter and substantial business experience. The instructor would receive each proposal and provide individualised feedback based on his experience and understanding of the subject matter. The feedback could be in the form of observations combined with questions on how the proposal could be improved.

Idea management system
Enable managers to present unique solutions to their challenges at work based on what they have learnt from the course. Allow others in the course to comment on them and these ideas can be then refined. Summarise, format and store the ideas so that they can be retrieved by managers to be followed up and also used as a management resource.

An idea management system could be integrated to the course platform and this would allow participants to publish their ideas for innovation, search and review others’ ideas as well as to collaborate on ideas proposed. Proposals could also be tracked on the system by management to see that steps are taken to ensure they are successfully implemented.

Each of these factors contributes to the overall success of online learning for these companies. The learners not only acquire the necessary concepts from the course, but also generate strategic knowledge and ideas that can be implemented resulting in innovations that would impact the company’s bottom line.

Beyond just learning concepts, the next level of online learning is collaborating with others around ideas, then refining and implementing them. As Sam Palmisano, chairman and CEO of IBM said, “The nature of innovation has changed today from what it was in the past. It’s no longer individuals toiling in the laboratory, coming up with some great invention. It’s not an individual. It’s individuals. It’s multidisciplinary. It’s global. It’s collaborative.”

Chris Choi, CEO
Educasia
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Human Resources
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Case Study: Japanese MNC leverages on elearning to tap its global HR

One of our clients is a Japanese multinational company involved in diverse businesses with offices all over the world. They have been using online learning to ensure that their people in the far flung offices all over the globe have access to quality training as well as to encourage a cross fertilisation of ideas among their employees.

The company harnessed online learning through a course called Managerial Problem Solving which consisted of two parts. In the first part of the training, the participants spent a period of time online learning the concepts and processes related to problem solving. The participants did this by accessing their individual accounts online where they can review materials in the assigned module. These online materials consist of multimedia lessons, interactive practice exercises and case studies. At the end of the week, the participants had to complete assignments consisting of brief reports or analysis on the case study. On average, each participant would spend between two to three hours a week online reviewing the materials, contributing to the ongoing discussions and doing the assignments. For the first module of this course, the participants will define the key problems faced by the company stated in the case study. In the subsequent modules, the participants will learn to analyse the causes of the key problems, propose suitable solutions and implement them.

The second part of the training lasted two weeks, and it required participants to apply what they have learnt to their work. They each had to identify a problem in their area of work and come up with possible solutions. Their submissions were posted online and fellow participants were encouraged to review and provide feedback. This second part of the course made use of an online collaboration system known as Innovation Lab.

The cohort consisted of 20 mid-level managers from Algeria, Australia, Azerbaijan, Brazil, India, Italy, Kazakhstan, Russia and Venezuela. The asynchronous online learning system allowed these participants to log in at a time convenient to them, but yet be able to work with others who are not in the same time zone. Participants could read the course materials, respond to or post their questions in the discussion forums and submit assignments at a suitable time. The course follows a schedule and participants are expected to submit their assignments at the end of each week.

The participants were well aware of the challenges they were facing in their own offices and were, therefore, very interested to find out how their counterparts in other countries tackled similar situations. They were eager to share their experiences and learn from one another. A few of them expressed interest in the markets of their colleagues and took down each other’s contact information so that they could continue discussions after the course. Thus, the course not only provided training for the employees, but also acted as a means of networking within the large global company.

The instructor who facilitated the course was chosen for his qualifications and experience. He holds several degrees including an MBA and has many years of experience in business development and operations. He responded to questions raised by participants in the discussion forums and shared his experience with them. He also provided personal feedback to each of the participants for their assignments.

After the 4-week session, the participants moved on to the second part of their training. In the first week of the two-week period, the participants each identified a problem situation at their place of work, analysed the causes and provided possible solutions based on the concepts and techniques learnt earlier. Their submissions were posted on Innovation Lab. In the second week, the participants responded to their colleagues’ posts with comments on whether they agree with the analysis of the problems and the solutions provided. Suggestions were also given on how to refine the analysis or to improve the solutions.

Some of the iQubes (Innovation Lab postings) were on dealing with employee motivation and staff deployment while others were concerning how to better exploit business development opportunities in their countries. Many of the participants found that they faced similar problems and were quite supportive in encouraging the implementation of the suggested solutions.

The instructor provided feedback to all participants and helped them to refine their analysis of the causes of the problems. Based on his experience, he also made suggestions to other possible solutions to the problems raised.

Learning with others in a group, following a pre-determined schedule, having an instructor facilitating the course are some factors that help to ensure high completion among participants. However, the most important thing to note is that participants’ learning experience is enhanced when they get to apply what they have learnt in their workplace.