

Use of On–Line Discussion Forums for Training

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is evidence that corporations are currently using e-learning for corporate training. Discussion forums in academia, particularly higher ed, are known to be an effective learning strategy that is widely used across many universities. Adoption of using discussion forums in Corporate America has been slow. Collaboration and discussions are key for the learner's journey, yet not many training initiatives include the use of discussion forums. Why are companies not using discussion forums? What is the resistance behind why discussion forums are not incorporated into training? A study was conducted at Jones Company (pseudonym) to understand the resistance from three levels of employees: the executive, manager, and the employee.

WHY THIS CASE IS IMPORTANT

In a 2019 study conducted by Hanover Research (Jewell, 2019), 56% of participants in the study were interested in training or development to forward their careers in critical thinking, data-driven decision making and communication. These are topics that need more than a simple test to determine if the skill has been learned.

Research and market forecasts show triple the revenue of 2015, e-learning will grow into a \$325 Billion business by 2025. (McCue, 2018). As a result of this spending, corporations expect a return on investment, as well as do the employees. Companies want to know what the benefits and results of their spending are, and employees have a personal stake in wanting to further their knowledge and abilities not only for their current job, but for their careers in general. The results showed that business skilled professionals were most interested in developing were strategic planning, critical thinking, decision making using data (data driven decision making), communication, negotiation and conflict resolution. Working professionals consider electronic delivery of courses or e-courses, will allow them to obtain these skills due to these factors:

- Flexibility
- Being able to take the course when they have time to take it
- Convenience

This case provides insight to one method of training, discussion forums. While these are not often used in business but they are used effectively in academic settings. The success factors from the literature provided by academic institutions provide a bridge to justify their use in the business setting. Numerous studies suggest show students are more engaged in the learning process (Andresen, 2009; Clark, 2001; Guldberg & Pilkington, 2006; Hung & Chen, 2000; Palmer et al., 2008). Althaus (1997) found classroom learning blended with electronic learning provided superior learning compared to a traditional classroom. Hein and Irvine (1998) showed discussions were beneficial and useful in understanding physics and liked the role of the instructor to be giving constructive feedback to students allowing the students to go deeper into the topics. To recap those success factors:

- More engagement in the learning process
- Superior learning using classroom learning with electronic learning
- Reflective thinking for deeper understanding of the topic
- Collaborative learning

The case shows whether political patterns, those activities associated with the use of influence tactics to improve personal or organizational gains within an organization contribute to forms of resistance. Remember the managers who conspired against using the discussion forums because they did not understand? If the Learning and Development Director had known about this pattern up front, she could have acted before the e-courses were delivered to show them the value of using the discussion forums. This knowledge can help practitioners within an organization design discussion forum activity in their courses that meet the needs of the individual and the organization.

For all the reasons stated, this case may help change the way an organization thinks about using technology to deliver training.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Jones Company (pseudonym) is a 46-year-old distribution firm located in Northern California and employs approximately 200 people located across the southwestern United States. In 2012, Jones Company was recognized as the, largest private company in Silicon Valley by the Silicon Valley Business Journal and came in at #46 on the Industrial Distributions Big 50 list in 2018. Industrial Distribution is a journal that focuses on industrial distributors of all sizes, reaching out to facilities, operations, logistics, and supply chain professionals. Each year, Industrial Distribution recognizes 50 companies across the United States. This award is coveted by recipients as it acts as a marketing tool to potentially bring in new business.

Silicon Valley is just south of the San Francisco Bay Area in Northern California in the United States. This Valley was named Silicon Valley from the word silicon, a material that is needed to make semiconductor computer chips. During the late 1960's and the early 1970's, there were many semiconductor manufacturing companies and innovators such as Intel, Cisco, Advanced Micro Devices, and Fairchild Semiconductors to name a few, that made their headquarters in Northern California and the name Silicon

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