Chapter 3.15
Change Management and Distance Education

Parviz Partow-Navid
California State University – Los Angeles, USA

Ludwig Slusky
California State University – Los Angeles, USA

INTRODUCTION

E-learning is defined as the transmission of knowledge whereby the instructor and/or the student participate in the learning process from different places and/or different times (Henry, 2001). Many organizations have adopted e-learning as a way to make the learning process faster and better (Roshan, 2002). However, recent studies have revealed that about 85% of students participating in e-learning and distance education fall short of completing their program. Low completion leads to low retention, which leads to low performance (Land, 2002). The problem, exacerbated by rapid changes in information technology (IT), lies on the shoulder of the universities and the students. For universities, e-learning often is such a giant technological and managerial change that the faculty attempts to deal with it by scaling instructions down to merely automated text lectures with a primary focus on the delivery of instructional materials, rather than addressing the students'

needs. For students, e-learning is usually a short experience coupled with little-known technologies for which they need extra guidance and support that is more persistent. However, the challenge is how to employ this new technology and bring students the help they need when they need it (Gordon, 2003; Roberts, 2001).

With constant changes in IT, higher education institutions are experiencing volatility and uncertainty in instructional methods. E-learning is the first to encounter these changes in IT. Rather than becoming overwhelmed and defensive, universities and colleges must implement strategies to aggressively respond to and sustain these changes. In reality, however, higher education institutions are often ill-prepared for proactive management of changes and are resorting to reactive, defensive responses to the IT changes, focusing on the situational procedural objectives rather than on the strategic educational goals (Austin, 2003). Introducing e-learning involves a shift in culture and requires a change in management (Faden, 2000).

Resistance to technology originates mainly from a fear of risk. IT impact is most obvious in e-learning. This chapter discusses how to overcome this resistance, principally in distance learning.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Change is the driving force of progress, but peoples' reactions to change are often irrational and defensive. Thus, change management is an essential part of business evolution and advancement. According to Fred Nickols (2004), change management should focus on three issues:

1. The task of managing change is internal but usually triggered by external factors. Changes prompted by implementation of e-learning practices must be anticipated in advance. However, universities often do not have any planned responses.
2. E-learning is a highly specialized customer-oriented business that requires methodological support; one important aspect of such support is to have a planned change management.
3. A body of knowledge needs to have content and process. It is one thing, for instance, to introduce e-learning courses for professional advancement or continuing education in a corporate center or at a Continuing Education division. It is quite another to introduce a linked set of e-learning courses with prerequisites in an online university. It is yet again a different one to introduce a blended e-learning and traditional curriculum with prerequisite courses being either online or of the traditional type.

Generally, the scope of organizational change may vary from organization-wide to a narrow departmental or group level. Examples of organization-wide changes include modification of the organization's mission, restructuring of operations, and introduction of new technologies and programs. E-learning should be viewed as an organization-wide transformation.

Change should not be introduced for the sake of change—it is crucial to plan to achieve some overall goal. Usually, the most significant change in the way a higher education institution operates is motivation factors, such as substantial cuts or infusion of funding, technological innovations, actions by competitors and the need for dramatic increases in services.

Change in curriculum will inevitably demand from the faculty a different style of instruction. Faculty training will be needed to overcome a lack of technical skills. Student services must be expanded to support e-learning as an experience equivalent to on-campus courses. Due to e-learning's heavy dependency on technology, organized IT training and support for students are extremely important. Off-loading such support from the university IT help desk to instructors is a major deterrent for instructors who consider teaching online classes. The issues of copyright of one's work and fair use of published materials that belong to others are challenging to online instructors, and may require updating of university policies and procedures. Above all, a change in the organizational culture is required when a vision and plan for the implementation of e-learning is realized. The all-too-familiar attributes of this process include a systematic approach to planning of organizational changes, faculty involvement, learning and adaptation to the new technologies, and shift of resources.

As we mentioned earlier, introduction of change is typically met with strong resistance. Many of the faculty and staff may believe that the current situation is just fine and do not identify with the need for change. Others are intrinsically skeptical about change. Some doubt that there are sufficient resources to accomplish major organizational change. Often, there are conflicting goals in the institutions; for example, increasing resources to deal with the change, yet concurrently cutting

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