Chapter 8.2
E–Learning with the Network:
The Importance of 'Always On' Connectivity

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the use of e-learning in various organizations. It highlights recent changes in e-learning paradigms such as the shift from an individual to a social event where the power of the network is fully exploited by immersing learners in an interconnected educational experience. The discussion also maintains that the path to an effective e-learning growth entails the use of "temporary virtual communities" which are convened for a specific amount of time to achieve the same educational objectives. While current programs are not yet aligned with learners' preferences, organizations are starting to understand emerging learning patterns and the new generations' need for continuous interactivity, communication and collaboration in an 'always on' connectivity model.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world of Web 2.0, social networking and distributed collaboration, e-learning cannot be limited any longer to individual and isolated experiences delivered through a whatever-media rich and portable medium. The "do it by yourself at your own time" model has not achieved the lasting motivational impacts that can be better attained leveraging the "power of the network," that is the larger community of learners and the opportunity to virtually interact with other humans from various countries and backgrounds (Craig, 2007).

In the occasion of the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Virtual Communities and Social Networking* (*IJVCSN*) we present e-learning in a new context. We review how the recent developments in interactivity, communication and collaboration opportunities on the

Internet are being leveraged by modern organizations. This discussion is based on a survey we conducted in early 2007 with the support of the Cutter Benchmark Consortium. About seventy organizations took part in the survey (55% based on North America, 23% in Asia/Pacific, 20% in Europe and the reminder in South America, Middle East and Africa). About thirty percent of the respondents were from organizations with less than one hundred employees, and the remaining 80% of the respondents belonged to large organizations (Passerini, 2007a).

In the Cutter study (Passerini, 2007a), we found that learners prefer "same-time from anyplace" connectivity to increase the perception of presence and connectedness. This is consistent with educational theories that posit that learning is a social experience (Bandura, 1977). Learners seem increasingly eager to control the space, place and content of instruction but they want to do so in an always-on-interconnected social network, giving up one of the key traditional benefits of e-learning: the asynchronicity. They are shifting the focus of e-learning from "anytime anyplace learning" to "all-the-time and everywhere casual *learning-with* (whoever is connected to the network)." We begin this review with an introduction to e-learning, its connection to virtual communities, and its success factors. Then we highlight some obstacles to e-learning success and present examples of the new *learning-with* the network trends.

THE WORLD OF E-LEARNING: DEFINITIONS, APPROACHES, AND TECHNOLOGIES

What is E-Learning

The term electronic learning (e-learning) is broadly used herein to encompass training and learning activities supported by the use of computing technology over interconnected communication networks. The key element of an e-learning environment is access to content, communication and collaboration through the use of electronic networks. In a few words, information and communication technologies are essential components of e-learning environments (DeSanctis, Fayard, Roach, & Jiang, 2003). E-learners may be connected from anywhere and at anytime (asynchronous learning) but the may also be simultaneously on-line (synchronous learning). For example, content can be delivered live through network technologies via streaming audio and video (podcasts and videocasts, also known as vodcasts). In today's organizations, e-learning is frequently associated with course delivery through a Web-based learning management system (LMS) or knowledge management and learning (KML) products, although new types of more flexible e-learning systems are emerging.

Informal and Formal E-Learning Approaches

Learning may occur in both formal and informal ways. Formal learning refers to *structured* learning and training finalized to increase employees' skills and knowledge in specific areas. Informal learning is mostly unstructured and occurs as a *by-product* of working in an organization and completing assigned tasks. Learning organizations promote informal e-learning by providing tools and environments for employees to share their experiences. Companies may grant employees release time to dedicate to casual discussions within a community of interest and may seek to capture the informal exchanges in knowledge repositories. However, outcomes from informal learning experiences are typically not assessed and difficult to measure (Liu, 2007).

While informal learning still plays a relevant part of organizational learning, other more structured approaches are on the rise. These instructional approaches include mobile learning (structured e-learning content made accessible anytime and anywhere through mobile or portable

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