

This article was originally published in The Technology Source (<http://ts.mivu.org/>) as: Zane L. Berge, and Greg Kearsley "The Sustainability of Distance Training: Follow-up to Case Studies." The Technology Source, November/December 2003. Available online at <http://ts.mivu.org/default.asp?show=article&id=2027>. The article is reprinted here with permission of the publisher. ©2005 Michigan Virtual University. Access to this work was provided by the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) ScholarWorks@UMBC digital repository on the Maryland Shared Open Access (MD-SOAR) platform.

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The Sustainability of Distance Training: Follow-up to Case Studies

by [Zane L. Berge](#) and [Greg Kearsley](#)

Sustaining distance training within a professional organization is critical to building employee competency. An organization must create a solid link between its training function and its business or strategic planning goals to sustain a high-quality, cost-effective distance training program.

We define distance training or e-learning (within this article, we use the terms synonymously) as the use of a computer or other electronic information and communication technologies—such as videoconferencing, e-mail, telephone, interactive television, and the like—to provide training or educational programs. While many authors (e.g., Horton, 2000; Rosenberg, 2000) have defined the benefits of distance training, few have explained why it is important to sustain these programs. Certainly a primary factor is to foster innovation, but innovation cannot be regarded as an end in itself. Rather, distance training presents real economic opportunities to increase performance, maximize profitability, improve market share, reduce risks and liabilities, and enhance the corporate image and its public recognition.

It is clear that establishing a distance training program requires a tremendous amount of time and effort. Because it is innovative and often demands a culture change within the organization for success, there must be significant business reasons for creating and sustaining such a program. If not sustained, the investment is lost and the organization will not achieve the intended improvements, which could determine the long-term survival or financial health of the organization. The question therefore arises: What factors have a positive or negative impact on the continuous development of distance training programs?

In this article, we share the results of a recent distance training survey administered to representatives of a range of professional organizations. These results are not intended to provide a complete picture of the field, but they constitute a selective cross-section whereby certain trends related to distance training and its continued development may be isolated for discussion and proposed for future investigation.

The Survey

The survey was a follow-up to two published collections of case studies (Schreiber & Berge, 1998; Berge, 2001). The cases (15 in the first book and 16 in the second, respectively) were from corporate, nonprofit, and government organizations such as the American Red Cross, the Federal Aviation Administration, First Union, Hewlett-Packard, Home Depot, the



Internal Revenue Service, MCI, UAW-DaimlerChrysler, Unisys, and the United States Postal Service. Out of the original 31 case studies, the authors of 17 responded to the survey.

In the survey, we asked the following questions:

- A. How has the nature of e-learning in the organization changed?
- B. Are you still involved in e-learning and what is your current role?
- C. What are the biggest obstacles or issues associated with sustaining e-learning in your organization at present, and in the past if different?
- D. When you wrote your case study, at which stage of distance learning would you categorize your organization?
- E. At what stage would you categorize your organization now?
- F. Would you characterize your organization's leadership involving distance learning as bottom-up, top-down, or both?
- G. Other comments?

The concept of "stages of maturity," as referred to in questions D and E, was defined in both Schreiber & Berge (1998) and Berge (2001). Stage descriptions were provided with the survey questions, and they are repeated in the discussion below.

Results and Discussion

This section summarizes and interprets the responses we received (see [Exhibit 1](#) for the verbatim responses).

A. How has the nature of e-learning in the organization changed?

Most respondents indicated that they are more involved with e-learning, but from different sources and in different ways. The participants have increased the extent of their distance training offerings, but vendors or different parts of the organization are developing and/or delivering more of the material than in the past. The respondents noted that new applications, particularly multimedia (e.g., streaming video) and Web-based training, have replaced previous uses of television or video-based learning. Also, more organizations are using "blended" training that involves a mix of online and in-person classroom instruction.

B. Are you still involved in e-learning and what is your current role?

All but one of the respondents indicated that they were still involved in e-learning in some manner. Some have changed their roles significantly (e.g., managing instead of developing or training), and others have changed organizations. (This trend was apparent in the group of non-respondents as well. When solicited for participation in the survey, half indicated that they had changed jobs, had changed organizations, or were otherwise no longer involved with the business unit whose case study they contributed to the two books.) One major problem we observed is that the frequent departure or reassignment of e-learning "champions" can adversely affect the continued development of e-learning in an organization. This is particularly true when the distance training has not been fully institutionalized (i.e., is driven from the bottom up) and hence is very susceptible to

personnel turbulence. Further research is needed to explain to what extent stability and consistency of personnel contribute to the sustainability of distance education within an organization.

C. What are the biggest obstacles or issues associated with sustaining e-learning in your organization at present, and in the past if different?

We received a wide variety of [responses to this question](#), indicating that the obstacles and issues are extensive. Obstacles include:

- time and costs associated with the development of e-learning;
- demonstrating return on investment for e-learning;
- formalizing the processes associated with e-learning;
- keeping up with rapid changes in technology;
- finding and retaining e-learning staff;
- identifying what training needs can best be met by e-learning;
- creating and maintaining interest in e-learning;
- providing the technical support needed;
- misconceptions about e-learning that result in underuse or overuse;
- budget and/or resource limitations;
- inadequate bandwidth for complex applications;
- need for instructor acceptance of e-learning;
- getting employees to make time for e-learning;
- too much time spent on developing the technology and not enough on the instruction; and
- lack of consistent direction, support, or involvement from management or senior management.

D. When you wrote your case study, at which stage of distance learning would you categorize your organization?

This question and the next refer to a four-stage model of technological maturity as outlined in Schreiber and Berge (1998) and described here:

- Stage 1: The organization supports sporadic distance learning events.
- Stage 2: The organization has sufficient technological capability to support distance learning events. When these events occur, they are replicated through an interdisciplinary team that responds to different staff/management inquiries and recommendations about distance learning.
- Stage 3: The organization has established a distance learning policy, such that a stable and predictable process is in place to facilitate the identification and selection of technology to deliver distance training.
- Stage 4: Distance learning has been institutionalized in the organization. Distance learning policy, communication, and practice are all aligned in such a way that business objectives are being addressed. The organization has established a distance learning identity, and it conducts systematic assessment of distance training events within an organizational perspective.

The majority of respondents (10) indicated that their organizations were in Stage 1 when their case studies were originally written. The other respondents judged their organizations to be in Stage 2 (2), Stage 3 (4), or Stage 4 (1).

E. At what stage would you categorize your organization now?

Of those who still work for the same organization, a few (4) placed their organizations in Stage 2, or between Stages 2 and 3. One person placed his/her organization in Stage 1, and one person said that different parts of his/her organization were in different stages. Most respondents (8), however, believe that their organizations are in Stage 3 or 4, or somewhere in between. It is clear that over the past few years, the organizations represented by the respondents have moved toward the institutionalization of distance education.

F. Would you characterize your organization's leadership involving distance learning as bottom-up, top-down, or both?

We hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between the stage of organizational maturity and the amount of top-down leadership exhibited within the organization. However, the respondents indicated that most leadership for distance learning is either bottom-up (7) or from both directions (7). Only 2 respondents indicated that leadership was primarily top-down; one respondent did not provide an answer. Based on this feedback, it seems that it is more common for distance learning to be driven by the training or business units than by senior management.

G. Other comments?

The respondents identified several perceptions and factors that they believe are critical to sustaining distance training. They also noted that success may depend on the organizational culture and the trust in technology within a particular organization.

Conclusions

It may be that distance education has grown more slowly than predicted over the past decade because it has not been sustained in many organizations—that is, it keeps getting "reintroduced." While it is not possible to reach any definitive conclusions based on the limited qualitative data provided by our survey, the results do suggest some insights about the evolution and sustainability of distance training.

Since 1998, e-learning has noticeably grown in most of the organizations studied—as measured by stages of organizational maturity in distance education—and has developed into a broader base of applications. However, respondents report that their organizations are still confronting a variety of obstacles and issues associated with e-learning, which suggests that even after distance training has been successfully implemented, sustaining it remains a struggle.

Sustaining a process new to the enterprise, such as distance training and education, calls for a systematic approach to change that challenges deeply-held assumptions within the organization and that is also sensitive to fundamental shifts in customers' expectations, mindsets, and behaviors. Being systematic means generating an innovation roadmap that will include budgeting or funding support, infrastructure, communication, human

development, and policies and procedures (Berge, 2001). It means being entrepreneurial and not just gambling with a creative idea.

The survey demonstrated that there is much to be learned about how distance training evolves over time and as organizations and technology change. Particularly interesting questions for further investigation include the following: What roles might emerging technology, increasing resource support, and support from various levels of leadership play in the development of such programs? What impact do mergers and reorganizations have on sustaining e-learning within an organization? Is distance training more sustainable when implemented from the top-down versus bottom-up? Finally, how does the philosophy of education/learning in an organization affect the development of distance training? Such factors merit closer attention if we are to discover how successful distance learning programs can be sustained within educational and professional organizations.



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