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Challenges and Strategies for Sustaining eLearning in Small Organizations

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Abstract

The fact that small organizations have been slow to adopt elearning is not because of a lack of need – in fact elearning offers tremendous benefits for small organizations in the form of time savings, captured expertise, improved workflow and improved staff development – but rather because small organizations tend not to have the right components and working atmosphere in place that allow for the adoption of elearning. There are three main ingredients that will enable this to occur for even the smallest of organizations: a learning culture, a web savvy staff, and the presence of at least one good training professional. Economies of scale that often help justify elearning for larger corporations are not applicable for small organizations, therefore managers must therefore take a closer look at how elearning can solve multiple problems faced by the small, busy staff. By integrating elearning into an organization's strategic plan, and by combining e-learning with a knowledge management system, a virtual network, education partnerships, or other tools and strategies, smaller organizations can improve office efficiency and program effectiveness on a sustained basis with elearning.

Challenges and Strategies for Sustaining eLearning in Small Organizations

The United States and Europe each contain approximately 25 million small businesses, and in both regions these small businesses employ more than half of the entire workforce. Since the dawn of elearning, it has largely been designed for and marketed to larger organizations. Large organizations in just about every field are utilizing elearning through some of the latest and greatest technological advances. eLearning is helping them to fine-tune production, maximize sales and build the capacity of their workforces. They are gaining a competitive advantage that, in turn, encourages them to advance further along the elearning adoption curve.

What about small organizations? After all, it is small organizations which, through sheer numbers, pose the greatest untapped market for elearning developers, and yet the training industry is extremely slow in taking advantage of this opportunity. Is it true that elearning is simply not feasible for small businesses and organizations? The amount of information in cyberspace that discusses elearning for small nonprofit organizations is negligible, with the few published reports mostly coming from Europe. The need for this paper immediately stems from the sheer lack of academic analysis of elearning in small organizations.

The truth is that the small organization elearning market is a complicated market to access. Small businesses are as diverse as they are geographically dispersed around the globe, and they often do not have the funding available for investing in distance programs and elearning. Developing unique elearning solutions for their individual needs requires money and time, the two resources which small businesses lack the most.

There are, however, a number of possibilities for small organizations to take advantage of elearning and increase their own effectiveness and efficiency. This will not likely be done by an outside vendor or external contractor; the creation and implementation of elearning must come from the inside if it is to be sustained over time and replicated in the future. This paper focuses on starting small and integrating elearning into the fabric of small organizations from the inside.

Defining a Small Organization

The definition of a small organization varies by industry and country. It can be defined by the number of employees, the amount of production, or the annual income. Fitting the description is important because it can qualify businesses for certain grants and programs. For the purpose of this paper, a small business or nonprofit will be defined as having between 1 and 25 employees, being financially independent (i.e. not owned by a larger company) (SOLT, 2004) and having a small annual budget of less than \$USD400,000.00. This paper focuses on those organizations that have been in business for a number of years and which struggle year after year to slowly grow.

Approximately 93% of small businesses tend to have owners or managers who like to get their hands dirty working alongside the staff (SOLT, 2004). Often employees must fill a variety of roles depending on the needs of the day. Job descriptions are sometimes not clear and identifying training needs can be a challenge.

Included in the small organizations examined in this paper are the countless charities, nonprofits, and for-profit businesses. These can either be centralized in one single location or they can be scattered throughout a state, country, or around the world. Similar to businesses that may desire to market products to communities far away or draw on resources from a long distance, so too, these organizations, whose outreach and communities served can often be on a national or international scale.

To eLearn or Not to eLearn

Before trying to determine how to integrate elearning into the fabric of an organization, the organization's leaders must be able to answer several important, interrelated questions—the first of which is why does elearning make sense. Improving employee performance is an obvious, general answer, but the analysis should go much deeper. eLearning poses numerous benefits for small organizations. Just as it has helped automate and streamline processes and training in massive corporations, so can it contribute to small organizations; the bottleneck has been on the energy and money needed to design and create elearning for such a few number of people. Now the field and the technologies are changing, and elearning is becoming appropriate and feasible for addressing many challenges faced by small organizations. eLearning can help a manager address multiple issues at the same time.

There are numerous questions that small and large organizations alike must answer: which competencies do employees need to enable the organization to be successful; what knowledge is required; and what resources are accessible through the Internet or otherwise (SOLT, 2004). Answering these types of questions can often be challenging for the typical small organization, but the decision to use elearning and the method through which it will be delivered must be well-analyzed. “Technologies should only be bought when they are proven to be useful, not simply because they are available” (Berge, 2001, p.123). Most small organizations only need training in small pieces to satisfy immediate needs as problems arise (DG Education & Culture European Commission, 2005)—just enough, just-in-time.

Four Major Challenges Faced by Small Organizations

Small organizations present a number of challenges that can make the adoption of elearning difficult. Research has shown that there are four main reasons for their lack of elearning: managers are either too busy, unaware or

disinterested in elearning; there is a lack of appropriate infrastructure; they cannot justify the need; and/or they cannot identify their training needs (McCullough, 2005; Reich & Schumermann, 2003).

Challenges with Managers

There is often a total lack of training or learning in the small enterprise. Managers and employees are usually so busy working on a variety of projects and trying to keep up with the daily workload that training and preparing for future improvement is not an option. This is certainly the case with many small nonprofits who are more concerned with surviving year after year than preparing their small staffs for future expansion or new skills. Whereas larger corporations often have an entire department that focuses on in-house training, most small organizations do not even have one comparable individual assigned to the task of training. Training employees is the responsibility of a program manager who is often juggling many tasks and expects new employees to play active roles in the organization after a quick orientation and a short probationary period. Research has shown that most small organizations are “crisis-driven.” They are so consumed with putting out fires and trying to take advantage of opportunities when they are recognized, that they never actually are able to make a plan to strategically improve the human performance within the organization (PJB Associates, 2001; Reich & Schumermann, 2003).

Even more common in small organizations is the existence of informal coaching, experiential learning, and peer groups (SOLT, 2004) rather than formal training programs. Because of close proximities among employees and the hands-on role managers play in day-to-day activities, it is easiest to coach new employees when the need arises rather than taking the time and energy to create formal training programs. Furthermore, the training that is required is usually very specialized, and, while big businesses may benefit from standard elearning products on the market, small organizations tend to need very specialized content (Hamburg et al., 2005).

Managers’ lack of commitment for elearning is usually a challenge reported by small organizations. There is a wide array of issues involved with managers’ preferences, decision making, prioritizing and awareness. If they have a different learning characteristic or if they are accustomed to more traditional learning methods, the adoption of elearning receives more resistance. We also commonly see that while young employees have grown up with technology, many older managers prefer to avoid technological solutions. Reich and Schumermann (2003) interestingly make the point that many managers in small organizations have difficulty “to accept the added value of further qualification of employees to the company in general” (section 3.1, paragraph 2). Especially in small organizations struggling to maintain and financially support a workforce, making employees more valuable may lead to future salary disputes.

Lack of Infrastructure

Small organizations often believe they lack the appropriate infrastructure for elearning. This infrastructure can refer to things such as staff, computers and connectedness. Additionally, many small organizations can not afford to have their employees take time to focus on training because of the costs involved in implementing the training, and also the opportunity costs involved with losing that staff time when employees are away from their jobs. eLearning at home is an option, but not as a long term solution.

Justifying eLearning

Small organizations struggle to justify the need for elearning. The most common way to justify such need is by using a cost-benefit analysis and show a positive ROI. Many small organizations are unable to cost-justify elearning, or, even worse, the people who are trying to justify its costs are the vendors themselves who may stand to benefit the most through sales. Quantifiable improvements for elearning tend to be demonstrated with enhancements to larger work forces that maximize economies of scale; thus, larger organizations are the ones leading the implementation and development of elearning (DG Education & Culture European Commission,

2005). Small organizations need to find ways to substantiate elearning by using other justification methods. Maximizing unused resources or learning materials, saving time, allowing for further expansion, connecting geographically isolated resources, freeing up time in the future, and making replication of services or processes easier are plausible reasons to support the use of elearning. These justifications can be quantified in dollar figures, though the most important bottom line for workers is time saved; time that can be better spent putting out other fires.

Understanding Training Needs

The final common challenge for elearning is that small organizations often do not understand their training needs. This is because they do not have a training specialist or any other individual (or department) dedicated solely to analyzing businesses needs and performance gaps, and the manager or director who could be focusing on this is occupied with other tasks. Employees in small organizations usually must take on a variety of job responsibilities, their job description and primary responsibilities get lost in the crisis-driven working atmosphere. Often when conducting an in-house needs analysis, small organizations can easily create an unrealistic wish list. There are seldom examples where small organizations can identify single skills or sets of skills that directly address a defined performance gap; larger organizations can more easily do this with a training needs analysis. Every employee in small organization may have a completely different set of training needs.

The overall solution to the overworked staff, the crisis-driven working atmosphere, the lack of infrastructure, and the difficulty to justify elearning may be to integrate elearning into multipurpose tools that address as many of the challenges as possible. Small organizations must determine how elearning can best fit into their strategic goals, because even though there may not be an active plan for developing a learning culture or for training employees, the organization most certainly has a set of strategic goals and has a number of projects it is implementing to pursue those goals – elearning can contribute to them and simultaneously serve as a just-in-time training resources, a marketing piece and a knowledge management tool. For this to be possible, it is critical that managers of small organizations either know the realm of possibilities or have immediate access with someone who does.

Three Ingredients for Success

Besides seeing elearning as just a training method, and by recognizing elearning opportunities that integrate the capture, management, and presentation of useful information, smaller organizations can indeed find ways to sustain elearning. There are three important recommendations to help make this possible. In spite of the crisis-driven frenzy that small organizations often face, they should 1) combine elearning and learning culture with the strategic goals and activities of the organization, 2) encourage a web savvy staff, and 3) hire, maintain, or train a good training professional.

Aligning elearning with the shared vision and strategic plan of the organization is a critical first step. It requires that the organization's managers and staff find the time to determine where they are, where they want to go both collectively and individually, and how to proceed so that elearning is multipurpose and addresses as many challenges as possible. In today's marketplace, it is imperative to have a computer and web savvy staff for just about any industry. Similar to managers needing to understand the realm of possibilities with elearning in order to make an educated decision, so to do employees need to be somewhat web savvy so that they can be aware of the possibilities to improve communications, save time and somehow help the organization gain an edge. With a foundation of web savvy-ness, elearning and the solutions and strategies explained in the next section become more feasible and sustainable. Web savvy-ness entails more than just being able to intuitively navigate through a new program, it also entails understanding the new technologies that come out – including wikis, web conferencing, sharing screens, and content management systems.

The final need of a small organization is to have at least one good training professional (Rosenberg, 2001). Though most small organizations do not have a training department or even a training specialist, it is important that the staff has someone who can play the role of designated training professional, even if he or she is a subject matter expert on a completely different field. This designated individual would ideally receive training in both instructional systems design and educational technology applications, and in turn would be able to be responsible for things such as: identifying training needs that can be addressed via elearning, reviewing products and staying briefed on free training resources, constantly learning about elearning opportunities and promoting elearning wherever applicable (Rosenberg, 2001). If the organization's training professional desires to create online content or tests, there are authoring tools available that are simple to use. They often use templates and can even have a learning management system built into them – all are inexpensive alternatives to having modules designed for specific niche skills that small organizations often require (Tyler, 2001). Having one or two subject matter experts receive training in ISD and educational technology is enough to give any small organization the manpower it needs to begin integrating elearning without inflicting major costs.

Strategies for Small Organizations

Multipurpose elearning can be seen as elearning that solves a number of problems. It may serve as a training method, a communication network, a knowledge management system, an education system and other useful tools. By improving communication among employees, whether in the same office or around the world, by giving staff a portal through which they can trade information and develop projects, by creating a system through which the organization's memory can be maintained and managed through tools such as a contacts database, online bulletin board, shared address book, and shared folders, small organizations can find ways to integrate learning into their day-to-day activities and improve efficiency and effectiveness. The goal here is both to train fleets of people (people in projects, volunteers, etc) and also to use elearning to capture expertise of certain staff members, to give better accessibility to organizational memory, to improve the organization's knowledge management, and, of course, to train and improve the workforce.

This idea of elearning being *multipurpose* is an important one for small organizations. Whereas a large corporation could cost justify an elearning program that delivers skills training for one specific skill, a small organization might prefer to use elearning to create a web-based tool that can serve three functions simultaneously: a reservoir for expertise from an expert, a training aid for employees, and a marketing piece that will attract new business.

Virtual Networks and Knowledge Management

Combining elearning with virtual networks is a multipurpose way to address a number of challenges. Nearly every small organization in the world, no matter how financially restricted, owns and maintains a web page. Web pages have become the cornerstone of small businesses worldwide, and the same idea can be used to create an organization's intranet delivering just-in-time training. Informational resources, such as electronic filing cabinets, online reports, and important links, as well as PowerPoint presentations, discussion boards, bulletin boards, webcasts and conference rooms can all be easily made part of these virtual networks that are essentially glorified web portals for a select internal crowd. This type of integration of strategic planning, improved communications, and elearning can surely benefit a wide variety of small organizations. Partnerships can be critically important for assembling the resources to develop effective tools and portals (Bonk, 2002). Shared portals can meet the needs of multiple small organizations.

There are also types of software for online workgroups that allow real time collaboration and pose similar benefits, and costs for them can climb to \$1,500.00, but there are also many free or almost free constructivist learning tools, such as blogs, podcasts, Moodle and wikis. Seitzinger (2006) explains a number of new, very inexpensive ways to create an online learning system using these types of tools whereby multiple people can actively contribute, there is plenty of interaction among participants, and the content can reflect goals that the group is working toward.

Many of the tools and ideas explained with virtual networks can also be used to improve a small organization's knowledge management. While an in-depth exploration is out of the scope of this article, a knowledge management systems (KMS), though often a goal for larger corporations, can also be critically important for smaller organizations. A KMS is a computer database that manages an organization's knowledge; it allows for effective storage and distribution of expertise and knowledge. Much time is wasted just trying to find information and doing things like helping other employees become up-to-date on new technology, and tracking accounts—a KMS is necessary for just about any working atmosphere. It will assist with day-to-day work, it will also solidify the organizational memory, and make transition and new employee orientation easier. It also becomes easier to grow and extend staff into new geographic areas when this information can be accessed from a distance. A KM system is a necessary development for any organization's sustainable, long-term growth.

Recent ideas have also surfaced that show new application of elearning for knowledge management and organizational memory. The following examples come from the first author's past experience working at *Trees for the Future*, a small nonprofit that assists global reforestation projects. The organization suffers from many of the same challenges described earlier. The staff members are crisis-driven, they struggle to take advantage of opportunities as they arise, and they are unable to develop a learning culture when all staff members are working so feverishly just to accommodate the incoming workflow. Despite this atmosphere, there are many opportunities in which an investment in creating elearning can enable the staff to capture important information, processes, and levels of expertise, and make them available to other employees and partners in the future. The organization was able to capitalize on those opportunities because they had one good training professional who had a mastery of educational technology applications (mainly Macromedia). Two examples in clued capturing niche skills and process information:

Capturing niche skills with elearning : A staff technician had visited Africa and researched a hot new technology, biofuel production, which was obviously a growing field that would continue to raise much interest. Instead of creating a trip report or a research paper, the technician assembled an elearning module that was used to train other technicians in biofuels while also serving as a promotional tool. The elearning module has since been distributed to project leaders, partners, and other technicians in over 30 countries, and it has attracted attention to an extent far greater than any trip report or manual could ever have done. Ultimately, it has captured important technical information, it is being used to train staff and partners, and it is also serving as a great marketing tool. This is the type of multipurpose approach that small organizations can benefit so much from.

A small organization's training professional, as explained in this first example, can indeed create an elearning module or set of lessons without inflicting high costs. There are free and inexpensive resources that allow an individual to create an entire elearning lesson from start to finish. There are templates and applications available that do not require knowledge of advanced computer programs. Hedden (2006) gives a very detailed explanation of how she single handedly created a set of elearning lessons that were not just effective training tools but also marketing tools for themselves. Employees in small businesses and nonprofits often have niche skills that are not in demand by masses of large businesses but for which there is a significant audience. The Internet makes marketing elearning lessons for niche skills to people throughout the world very easy.

Capturing process info with elearning: The same organization often sends out packages to groups around the world. These packages hold seeds, informational booklets, posters, videos, books, CDs and other materials that will assist the group to carry out a tree planting project. Creating these packages is a long, tenuous job that entails preparing customs slips, selecting species, assembling contents, and entering all the information into a database. This job was usually done by staff technicians whose time is always in demand. Volunteers were available but were not familiar with this process and it was a gamble to invest the staff time to train each new volunteer who came in. The solution was to document the entire process from beginning to end with video and pictures, and the result was an instructional video. Now, technicians save an average of three days of staff time per month, every month, because of their new elearning tool.

This is a good example of showing that it is very suitable for small organizations to seek elearning for knowledge-based content, especially if the content will remain consistent over time or if the training must be reproduced often or occasionally. The ease at which video can now be captured and edited, and the effectiveness that is possible by including it into simple and familiar training mediums such as movies played on Flash Player or PowerPoint, all make this a very appropriate strategy for small organizations.

Fusion of Education and Business

A different strategy for helping small organizations to benefit from elearning is through formal education programs that will most likely be utilized through a partnership with an online university. This can be characterized as .com meets .edu (Olsen, 2000) or .org meets .edu. The success of small organizations in the future will depend highly on their ability to blend the mission of the organization with the missions and goals of the individual workers (Seufert, 2001). Most organizations seek to hire and maintain the most talented and dedicated staff possible. Along with experience, education is a major factor in today's workforce. Educational opportunities are often as good as cash for employees. Education and training can even be seen as an employment benefit that can offset the desire for high salaries. Larger organizations have corporate universities or education reimbursements. A strategy for small organizations is to partner with community colleges, online universities or other colleges that have certificate or graduate programs that complement the work performed by the employees. This helps the organization by having its staff receive a constant flow of useful information, it helps the employees who desire to increase their knowledge and education level, and this type of partnership also helps the colleges who benefit from both the publicity and tuition. The integration of business and education should be a goal for all small organizations.

Conclusion

eLearning in small organizations is a large, untapped market that should be tapped by the small organizations themselves, not by vendors. To overcome the challenge, small organizations need to have three main components in place: a clear organizational strategic plan, a web savvy staff, and one good training professional. Once in place, the combination of a motivated manager with the staff's designated training professional will be able to identify the just-in-time elearning opportunities and the ways in which multipurpose tools can help the struggling staff to promote multiple goals, whether they entail outreach and marketing, training new employees, capturing expertise or improving communication. The small organization's training professional must also continually work to update the web savvy staff on new technologies and capabilities.

Sustaining elearning in small organizations requires building the capacity of the organization and the capacity of individuals who comprise it. By instilling key employees with the skills they need to slowly advance small projects and promote elearning from within, and by starting small and finding ways to capture useful information and transmit it as an organized instructional system, any small organization can develop a set of useful elearning tools. It is important to start small and promote both elearning and a learning culture, both of which are missing in most small businesses (Hamburg et. al., 2005). As the small group of employees begins to see the individual and organizational growth that comes from the combination of business and sustained education, it is easier to see how elearning can be integrated into larger projects, such as virtual networks and knowledge management systems, for the benefit of everyone involved.

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