Flexible Training's Intrusion
on Work/Life Balance

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Learning interventions should be aligned with the human learning system. To be effective, they have to support human learning, not work against it. Thalheimer, 2004

INTRODUCTION

Elearning often makes training easier, flexible and more efficient because it allows the learner to create his own learning pace and allows learning to happen anywhere, anytime. Technological advances have made learning more interactive and life-like without requiring extensive equipment. Companies are saving money by reducing the amount of production time it takes to complete training programs and eliminating travel costs. Additionally elearning permits employees to access training as needed. So, iun general, elearning has changed traditional instructional methods by taking learning outside the classroom.

Still, is it in the best interest of the employees? Work and family are two of the most central realms of adult life and, for many employed adults, balancing the demands made by these two areas is their most important daily task (Kinnunen & Gerris, 1996). Is moving the office to the individuals' homes causing employees undue stress and devaluing family and leisure time?

WHY ELEARNING

Learning has traditionally been administered by a teacher in a classroom setting. Rarely did one consider that learning could occur in ones home, directed by an inanimate object such as a computer. However, with the need for speed, the need for multitasking, and the desire for comfort, this has changed.

Economy
Regardless of whether the economy generally is healthy or not, companies have cut their workforce to the bone due to the rising costs of technology, benefits, and many other factors to be competitive within their industry. Elearning has often been a valuable solution for the barebones corporation to keep their profits up (Garfoot, 2004). Getting a new employee up to speed is costly and time consuming. Having existing employees carry the increasing workload can be stressful and teaching them in an efficient manner is a growing concern. It is important to find the work/life balance that will keep these employees while attracting others. This can be done not only with elearning, but with a work-from home flexible schedule, *if* a balance is struck.

Families
The e-worksite, including elearning, does allow for an employee to be geographically available for personal responsibilities. Daycare is expensive and with the traditional stay at home mom becoming more of a rarity, daycare is a very real expense for dual income families. Many people cannot afford to work if they have to pay for fifty plus hours of childcare a week. Elearning allows for parents to stay at home occasionally or most of the

time. It allows for a flexible schedule and a better home life – again, when not taken to the extreme.

Today's Elearning

Elearning is the delivery of material electronically with the added value of maintaining standards and quality across the board without the limitation of a specific location (Shoniregun & Gray, 2004). Elearning uses multimedia programs such as text, graphics, animations, and video conferencing, and usually strives to be interactive, with the learner navigating through the training program on a computer, learning new information and responding to questions using some form of assessment to later receive feedback. This can be done in a comfortable environment, (e.g., home) and during off-work hours. An employee can spend free time completing training at his or her own speed: such as an hour at lunch, a half hour before work starts in the morning; elearning is learning at all times.

One major reason the popularity for elearning has risen because it is easier to customize the programs to reach a broader audience with just the use of basic, common computer knowledge needed to navigate through such programs. It offers the ability to provide training for different types of learners by incorporating audio, visual and interaction for the kinesthetic learners (Kruse, 2004). Elearning also can be used to provide the learner with what he or she specifically needs, at the pace he or she needs to progress. In a classroom, the instructor usually can not tailor instruction to the same extent for each student's needs.

BENEFITS OF ELEARNING FOR THE ORGANIZATION

Whether it makes the organization look like its taking care of it employees, saving money on costs with setting up a traditional classroom, customized learning for the employee, or having the employee available on the company's clock 24/7, elearning is profitable for the organization.

Favorable Employer

As an employer, a key factor to a thriving company is employee satisfaction. If employee morale is low there is low innovation, development, or growth for a company. People do the same old, boring job day-in and day-out; as no much changes. Employers now are feeling the pressures to increase their value in their employees and the competition for qualified workers is keen. Recently, a growing numbers of employers are trying to incorporate a benefits package that includes an assortment of work-family benefits (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). Such packages include flexible hours and policies, child-care services, compressed work schedules, working from home, adoption benefits, etc.

Employers who provide such compensation packages generally gain favorable press within the industry as well as a reputation that is desirable within the community. A new standard is set within the industry. The employer now has a benefit for employees that helps in hiring and selecting the most qualified candidates for the company. A balance between work and family means that the company can secure a top position in recruiting and retaining employees.

Professional development opportunities are another area that employers are offering to their employees. Some companies boast the fact that they provide development opportunities to employees that are not work related. Ford Europe offers online programs to their employees including: maternity, how to return to work, and a class for new fathers (McCartney, 2003). Even work related programs can increase employee satisfaction by providing the employee opportunity to grow in their field, offering new challenges and by easing the stress of new responsibilities by providing the right training when the employee needs it. Some companies use certain training programs as a recognition or reward. Providing training for top or exemplatory employees can be a great motivator for their continued productivity.

Employee is Available 24/7
With elearning and use of the internet, the employee is available essentially at all times. An email can be sent at 12 in the afternoon or at midnight. With the increase in globalization this is important to note because people are awake and asleep at different times throughout the world. This means that the corporation itself never sleeps; that there is productivity at every second. Still, the "organization never sleeping" must not be confused with an individual never sleeping.

Decrease in Costs/Overhead
With employees having access to almost everything from home, there is no need for a classroom, office, desks, training materials, many full-time facilitators, utilities, etc. There is only a need for a computer, web access and the occasional use of a helpdesk. Employers appeal to the idea that employees do not need to be brought together for in-person training programs. These programs can be costly, especially for companies where employee turnover is high. However, elearning provides the ability for self-guided programs in the comfort of one's home!

Just-in-Time Learning
Elearning offers a way for organizations to train their employees faster and more consistently. As an employee is identified with a learning need, the elearning is immediately available for the employee. Once enrolled in the program, employees have the ability to work as fast or as slow as necessary. Elearning allows for the individual to only participate in the learning programs that are needed (custom learning). Typically, employees spend less time in an elearning course than in the classroom. Overall, without travel time the commitment is greatly reduced. Since the employee is most likely learning in or near his or her work environment, the time between learning and application of the newly acquired skills is also shorter, increasing the retention of the knowledge (Kruse, 2004).

CONSEQUENCES FOR THE ORGANIZATION

Elearning sounds like a winning solution for the organization. and probably for the employees, too. However, performance improvement managers in the organization may not be aware that training participants are not enjoying the distant social atmosphere that is more prevalent with elearning, or that they are intruding into the participants' personal/family time.

Dissatisfaction With the Results
In technology-based learning, the learner is in an environment that she is not use to, and that can cause stress. The home environment provides many distractions to the individual and at times it can be difficult to focus on elearning. Dropout rates can be high and ultimately cause a failure for the program.

Resentment
Encroaching on an employee's family and personal life can cause serious resentment by the employee toward the company, and also by the employee's family members toward the employee and company (Thalheimer, 2004).

WHAT IT ALL MEANS FOR THE EMPLOYEE

> *If I told you a neon-sign chain of shops was opening across the country offering training 24/7 you would probably say I was in desperate need of a reality check* **(Watts, 2004).**

The flexibility of distance training may come at a high price. *Training & Development Magazine* interviewed John V. Moran, president of GP Learning Technologies, concerning the top ten elearning myths. The number three myth on the list stated, "employees love to learn on their own time" (Allerton, 2000). Employees do not like anything that takes away from families, hobbies or personal time in general. Juggling elearning and a full day of business often does not work. Employees who are expected to complete a training program usually will postpone the training for more pressing, less flexible work-related tasks. Therefore, it often means taking the training home. For every benefit of elearning, a new dilemma is also created. While instructional designers and well-intentioned employers strive to create greater flexibility for employees, new sacrifices must be made by employees.
Stress/Frustration

Due to the competitive pressures from globalization, consolidation and new technologies workers feel the demands from particularly long hours. The working population has increased the amount of time worked in a week to approximately fifty or more hours (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). Checking one's e-mail or drafting a memo on a laptop at three in the morning while your children are asleep is becoming a normal way of life. One survey found that close to 85% of employees are doing some work at home in addition to their office work; often without the supervisor's knowledge (Harrar & Dollemore, 2003). Between 2001 and 2002, it is estimated that 13.5 million working days were lost due to work related stress (Williams, 2003). Obviously, careers are important and family and home life is important. Without allowing enough time for both, employees will become "stressed, angry and tired" (Andrica, 1997).

Inability To Separate Work And Home
Working form home sound like it would offer the employee the ultimate flexibility and self control. Many work at home employees suffer from the inability to "leave work at work" and to leave "home at home". Working with the laundry staring you down or the credit card bill unattended or vise versa, unwinding with the family with unanswered email becomes a real dilemma for many employees. That physical separation may be more important that people think. It makes it more difficult to switch in and out of work and home mode (Smith & Karavattuveetil, 2004). For organizations, this means that the great idea of elearning can actually backfire, causing the work and the family to suffer. If a work-from-home dad can't let go of work and completely focus on the time spent with his family, he will feel stress and the family will also suffer. On the flip side, if an employee is distracted by a lingering argument that happened this morning, the work will ultimately suffer.

CONSIDERING THE TYPES OF ELEARNING

When creating an elearning program, an organization must consider exactly what they want to accomplish, the advantages, and the disadvantages. Different types of elearning software accomplish different things. The three most common options are listed below.

Table: 1
Elearning programs advantages and disadvantages

Type	Advantage	Disadvantage
Purchasing off-the-shelf programs	• **Least costly option** • **Easiest to "develop"** • **Trial periods are often given before the software is purchased** • **Great for entry-level programs**	• **Not personalized for the company therefore it may not be as relevant** • **Poor quality—which will provide for a high dropout rate** • **Often a "boring" program with a lack of organizational relevance**
Materials produced by an outside developer.	• **Can focus on topics relevant to organization** • **No licensing fee** • **Easier to outsource due to lack of training expertise of the staff** • **Quick turnaround in creating the program with up-to-date technologies** • **Not on their payroll therefore during down periods they don't have to worry about firing**	• **May take a while for the developer to understand the organization's goals** • **Vendor must be reliable**
Developing materials in-house.	• **Full control over the product (including the copyright)** • **Less mistakes for the direction of the program** • **Totally customized for the company**	• **What to do with the developers during slow periods?** • **May not be able to generalize the program to a larger audience**

BUILDING ELEARNING FOR THE FUTURE

Elearning's role will be expanding and becoming more prevalent as technology improves (Craig, 1996). The emergence of the virtual world is just around the corner. However it is important to note that the purpose of elearning is not to eliminate traditional learning but to complement it. According to Masie (2001) in a few years there will not be a division between elearning and traditional learning, learning will naturally evolve to utilize technology to progress learning efficiency. This supports the theory that learners need a variety of different learning methods then just one to truly embody it. Currently most of academia and corporation are incorporating a blended learning forum as opposed to just traditional learning or just elearning. Elearning is best used in conjunction with traditional learning when used as an introductory class or to form a standard for a class in a classroom setting (Shoniregun & Gray, 2004). In preparation, there are some areas that need to be addressed:

1. Preparation for Trainers. Trainers need to stay involved in the virtual world as it develops. It is important that they understand the delivery tools and know how to best utilize them (Craig, 1996). Just 10 years ago you couldn't use DVDs on

computers but with large graphic and video files, elearning has evolved with technology. In ten years things will be dramatically different than they are now.   A lot can change and it will be almost impossible to catch-up with technological advances.

2. Preparation for Participants and their Managers. "Taking learning to staff at their desks will prove effective only if people are given time to make use of it (Hammond & Rana, 2001). Employees and managers need to agree that there is a time to learn and a time to work. Priorities need to be set around what would take priority. It's important to educate both the employee and manager about the time commitment that will be required of the trainee (Thalheimer, 2004).

3. Instructional Systems Design. Instructional design can still make or break a program. Creating training that is conducive to a fast paced work environment is important. When designing training, provide a detailed schedule of deadlines to employees can plan a head. It's also a good idea to modularize the training so it is easy to come and go (Thalheimer, 2004).

CONCLUSION

In a non-traditional classroom like elearning, employees may experience stress due to the feelings of isolation and because they may be subject to feelings of a lack of control. The learner may feel disconnected due to a perceived lack of support structure or the fact that feedback can be slow. The lack of social interaction can also lower motivation without the friendly camaraderie and competition that occurs naturally in a classroom. The learner may also feel that there is not enough structure with an elearning class due to the lack of a set schedule. But germane to this discussion is the possibility that learners may always feel they must "be available" for the class.   This may cut into the employee's personal time. Eventually, if the learner is not helped in feeling more comfortable about elearning, the employee will dropout of the program and resent the training.

Thus, there has never been a bigger responsibility bestowed on professional development departments. The professional development department must seek to play a critical role not only in helping new hires become productive quickly through formal training programs, but also in building a culture in which learning is viewed as an ongoing process that will enhance their life – both professional and personal. This must be done through proper preparation and education not only about the programs, but also about the administration of the programs, the support needed and the small costs that can come with the great reward of a happy, healthy, educated workforce.

When designed correctly elearning can accommodate a full, busy work schedule. It can bring a working father home earlier; allowing the training to be revisited after "bedtime" With the right conscious effort elearning can compliment a busy employee's professional development, providing the right information when needed. Elearning and the new flexible workplace offers many benefits to an organization, as long as employers can figure out how to maximize their investment, keep employees interested, and still keep a work-life balance in check (Watts, 2004).

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