E-Learning in an International Executive Education Setting: Two Case Studies on E-learning in Executive Education in Asia, North America, South Africa and Europe

Karin Sixl-Daniell
*MCI Management Centre*
Austria

Amy Wong
*GlobalNxt University*
Malaysia
E-Learning in an International Executive Education Setting: Two Case Studies on E-learning in Executive Education in Asia, North America, South Africa and Europe

ABSTRACT

With e-learning and blended learning approaches becoming more prevalent in recent years, the authors present two case studies of highly interactive courses delivered online to students in Singapore, India, the USA, the UAE, Canada, the UK, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, The Netherlands and South Africa. This paper discusses two case studies; one referring to a program having predominantly male students (90%) and the other being a women-only program. Details of the programs as well as participants’ feedback on their learning approaches and outcomes are presented.

Keywords: E-learning, Executive Education, Leadership, International Business Education
INTRODUCTION

Technological advances in information and communication technologies have led to the emergence of e-learning systems that can be used effectively in the training and development of executives. A major advantage of e-learning is the elimination of face-to-face training and development costs (i.e., travel, lodging, meals), both in monetary terms as well as in terms of productivity loss, as employees spend time away from their jobs in order to participate in the face-to-face training sessions. E-learning courses are available 24/7, location independent, and provide effective and efficient training means for employees in geographically dispersed areas and across time zones. Such delivery allows for portability of the training (i.e., tablet/iPad, laptop, mobile phone that can be used for downloading files or assessing video and webinar links, etc.).

Research showed that companies saved 50 per cent to 70 per cent of their overall training cost by replacing traditional training with online delivery (Anderson and Woodill, 2004). In addition, time spent on learning is greatly reduced (Brandon, 1997), and retention of learning content and application of the learning to the job increased over traditional methods as learning of relevant content in the online classroom can be applied almost immediately to the workplace environment, given its simultaneous nature (Fletcher, 1991). Well designed and delivered online courses can also provide deep learning that is inclusive, meaningful, and authentic for its participants.

E-learning in corporations is as a type of online training that supports both an individual as well as the organization’s learning goals. Along with the trend towards globalization, organizations need to respond swiftly to rapid changes in their external environments (Coetzer 2008). In order to equip their employees to be change-ready, organizations can provide
ongoing training in a learning environment that facilitates professional progress as well as the acquisition of skills and competencies (Fan 2010).

In addition to creating a globally trained and competitive work force, organizations can use e-learning as an effective means of communicating, training, development, and enhancing employee value. E-learning, through the effective use of technology, can add to skill and competency acquisition as well as career development of employees (Pantazis 2002; Ong, Lai and Wang 2004). Given the estimate that half of the job skills and knowledge currently in use will be obsolete in three to five years’ time (Zhang and Nunamaker 2003), e-learning can be an efficient and effective way to update and enhance skill sets, competencies and knowledge within an organization’s workforce as it can cater to varying learning styles.

Due to an increasingly globalized labor market, companies tend to invest more and more in their employees so as to maintain the competitive advantage and to develop their organizations. This includes all organizational activities for the purpose of attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining the best employees in the most strategic roles on a global scale (Scullion and Collings 2011), leading to competitive advantages including increased employee job performance, satisfaction, engagement, and motivation, which leads to improved customer satisfaction and better employee retention, and finally increased organizational performance (Cheese et al. 2009).

The setting in which these programs are delivered is GlobalNxt University (formerly known as U21Global, or Universitas21Global), an online graduate school that delivers degree programs via a unique and engaging classroom pedagogy. Through a state-of-the-art online learning platform, the university offers students highly interactive learning anytime and from anywhere. The university’s globally diverse student population is represented by learners from over 70 different countries. In addition, through close industry partnerships, the
university has delivered talent development executive programs with over 100 multinational companies.

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1

The first example of e-learning applied in a global setting relates to a corporate e-learning initiative in an India-based multinational company in the IT sector. The company provides consulting, enterprise, and telecom solutions across various industries such as banking and finance, energy and utilities, healthcare and life sciences, manufacturing, public sector and government, retail, media and entertainment, travel, transportation and logistics, and telecommunications and information technology. It employs more than 95,000 employees across more than 50 countries and has an established talent management and development program in place. In recent years, the company has effectively incorporated e-learning in the training and development of a selected pool of talent that is being groomed to take up various leadership positions within the corporation. Talent employees are ranked in terms of performance and competencies via a careful process of internal nomination and screening, resulting in a selected pool of talents being groomed to take up various leadership positions within the corporation.

The company has recently implemented a customized corporate e-learning program for their “1,000 Leaders” training program. As corporate e-learning offers effective, low cost, immediate, consistent and concise training that allows employees to complete training conveniently at off-hours, from home locations, while traveling, at their own pace, in an interactive, comprehensive, and engaging manner (Kumar and Gulla 2011), it is a suitable learning tool for these global talent employees. A group of talent employees of this company participated in a customized Certificate in Global Business Leadership Program, an online...

The modules are delivered over a period of 5 months, with three weeks dedicated to each module (one week reading week and two weeks of asynchronous discussion board activities and synchronous webinars) and a final two weeks break at the end of the course for completion of the final integrative project. The program is delivered through a series of synchronous and asynchronous teaching tools such as webinars, discussion boards, chats, online interactive content, case studies, assignments, animations, self-assessment activities, and videos.

Participants are spread across the globe and are based in countries such as Singapore, India, the USA, the UAE, Canada, the UK, Germany, The Netherlands and South Africa. Feedback collected via an online survey (n=74) at the end of one of the programs suggests that participants value the flexibility of the program, both in time and location, as well as the interactivity one-on-one with professors and interaction with peers within the asynchronous discussion boards. The vast majority of participants stated that their analytical as well as problem solving skills improved through this program. They also stated that their research, time management and written communication skills have improved.

On average, about 75 percent of the participants attended the weekly synchronous webinar sessions, with the majority of them participating actively in the webinars and Q&A sessions, clarifying doubts that they encountered within the online discussion boards, and posing new questions. Several additional discussion board topics have been initiated by the participants, as they involve their peers in workplace matters of interest to them. In contrast to the
participants of the program detailed in the second case study, the participants in this program are 90% male.

**Case Study 2**

The second case study is concerned with an Executive Certificate of Leadership for Women. In terms of achieving growth and profitability, women play an important role in public and private organizations; however, they are highly underrepresented in managerial positions. Over the past decades, the number of women assuming corporate leadership roles has risen in most parts of the world; in 2013, women held 24% of senior management roles worldwide with numbers ranging from 21% in North America to 32% in ASEAN countries. In China and Poland, senior management positions were held by 51% and 48% of women respectively (Catalyst, 2013). Despite these figures, women still face a gender gap in senior leadership positions, even though women outnumber men in college graduation rates and form the majority of entry-level employees (Yee, 2015).

A 2008 McKinsey study of top European companies found that greater gender diversity resulted in higher than average stock performance (Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger and Meaney 2008). A recent study found that companies that perform best financially have the highest number of women in leadership roles (DDI 2015). Another study found that women are less likely to compromise ethics in leadership positions than their male counterparts, leading to ethically sounder decisions in a corporate environment (Kennedy and Kray 2012). Reasons cited for the underrepresentation of women in senior management roles include the absence of training and professional development opportunities for women globally (Davis 2012). As such, there is a need for the implementation of appropriate training and development initiatives within an organization that catered specifically to women, given their potentially important role. To this end, women-only e-learning courses can provide women
professionals with relevant development opportunities throughout their career, as these women-only programs allow women to freely discuss their particular issues and concerns in a supportive and safe climate. This provides an optimal learning environment for women to share and analyze the unique strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities facing women in the workplace.

A team of women faculty members designed, developed, and facilitated the Executive Certificate of Leadership for Women program in the online setting. The program brings international PhD qualified women faculty and students into the specially designed online community, thereby greatly reducing the need for women executives to have to leave their work venues and families to travel to participate in this program. As the program was designed by women for women, it acknowledges the specific issues that women face such as juggling family and work responsibilities and managing dual-career relationships associated with pursuing careers at the expense of family. The program covers a span of 22-weeks, although shorter time spans of sixteen weeks have been requested (and also conducted).

The program is delivered entirely online, and has synchronous as well as asynchronous elements. It consists of one week of student orientation, six modules at three weeks each (two weeks each for the shorter program), two weeks for a final reflective team project and one week for grading and moderation. Six out of the following modules are covered: People Leadership, Ethical Decision Making, Business Communication, Entrepreneurial Thinking, Managing Change, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Strategic Management for Innovative Businesses. Participants usually spend a minimum of seven hours per week of study time for the online component (up to ten hours per week for the program shorter in duration) and two hours for each webinar session conducted by the female professor or the industry guest speaker.
Feedback for an exploratory study was collected via an online survey (n=17) at the end of one of the program. Participants came from a number of countries ranging from Singapore, India, the USA, Canada, the UK, Belgium, Hungary, to South Africa.

About 75 percent of the participants felt that the various learning tools (e.g. discussion boards, self-assessment exercises, instant messenger) used in the program were effective. Most of the students stated that the women-only environment is conducive to learning. Further, they found the program intellectually challenging, as the highly customized content and assignments/projects are relevant to their work environments. Most of the participants felt that the peer interaction in the program contributed to their learning, and that the female professors in the program understood their needs better than male professors would.

**CONCLUSION**

Both case studies show the applicability of e-learning in a global executive education environment. With one program consisting of predominantly male students (90%) while the other being a women-only program, both cases show an overwhelming positive response to e-learning as a means of acquiring new skills and competencies, whilst continuing to work and not having to interrupt work for training. In both programs, students from countries such as Singapore, India, the USA, the UAE, Canada, the UK, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, The Netherlands and South Africa perceived that this way of learning is highly conducive as well as intellectually challenging. Students also find the customized online content and assignments/projects relevant to their work environments. In addition, the opportunity for peer interaction in the online discussion boards, chats, and webinars contributed to their learning. Participants value the programs’ flexibility, both in time and location, as well as the interactivity of the online synchronous tools. Finally, evidence from the cases reinforced the
positive outcome of such online executive programs, namely improvement in the participants’
analytical, problem solving, research, time management and written communication skills.
REFERENCES


