

Managerial aspects of corporate e-Learning : insights from a study of four cases

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ANDREA BACK* & OLAF BURSIAN**

MANAGERIAL ASPECTS OF CORPORATE E-LEARNING: INSIGHTS FROM A STUDY OF FOUR CASES

In an empirical study we took a close look at the e-Learning strategies of four companies. The basic intention of this study was to learn about the explicit or implicit e-Learning strategies and how they interrelate with the characteristics of the individual e-Learning solutions and the managerial practices used in running and offering these solutions to the employees.

The results suggest that mostly the different personal understanding of e-Learning by the decision-makers accounts for specifics of the e-Learning solutions, and not the type of organisational structures, e-Learning target groups, or other non-personal-factors. E-Learning strategies are defined only by one or only a few stakeholders. These persons have the dominant influence in defining e-Learning processes. Also, the full potential of e-Learning tools are exploited only in cases where the training function is seen as a strategic partner to tackle business challenges.

Key Words: e-Learning strategy, case study, e-Learning reference model

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I. Introduction

Originator of the Study

From March through October 2002, the research group “Learning Center” at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland (*www.learningcenter.unisg.ch*) worked on the study “*Angebots- und Nutzungsstrukturen von E-Learning in Unternehmen*” (*engl.* How e-Learning solutions in companies are structured and used). The financial grant was given by the *Grundlagenforschungsfonds* of the University of St. Gallen. The general purpose of this fund is to give start-up support for basic research. We therefore thank both the fund and the participants of this study for their kind support of our research venture.

Common Status of Corporate e-Learning in Industry

E-Learning has attracted a lot of analysts’, consultants’, media, and companies’ attention during the last years (for Switzerland Back & Bursian 2001). Still, the optimistic market forecasts of analysts like IDC in the late 90ies did not materialise, and we regularly hear of breakdowns or mergers of e-Learning companies. This may lead to speaking about the end of the e-Learning hype, but e-Learning is alive in corporate minds and practice (Harhoff & Küpper 2002; Unicmind 2002). Companies are very open and positive about its potentials, such as workplace learning, integration of training and human resources processes, time and cost savings, new learning methodologies etc. An e-mail poll of July 2001 to CIOs yielded 1324 answers and shows that CIOs see the potential of e-Learning (CIO.com 2001). Therefore, most companies state that they plan to launch e-Learning projects and to increase their investments (see e.g. Harhoff, Küpper & Markart 2001). Yet, in most companies we find a discrepancy between the perceived potentials (Rosenberg 2001) and the actual implementation and advances of e-Learning investments. Studies (such as Unicmind 2001 or Unicmind 2002) with top German companies show that by and large e-Learning is still in its infancy, reaches only a few employees, and stands for only a few percent of the overall training budgets. The potentials (Bendel & Bursian et. all. 2001; Hohenstein & Wilbers 2001) are mostly not yet transferred into action. Among the many current reasons are the need of chief executives and educational managers to better understand the concept of e-Learning in general, the

processes of e-Learning projects and broader initiatives, and their contribution to business results. In many cases, firms are very unsure which form of e-Learning products to select and which processes to implement and to operate.

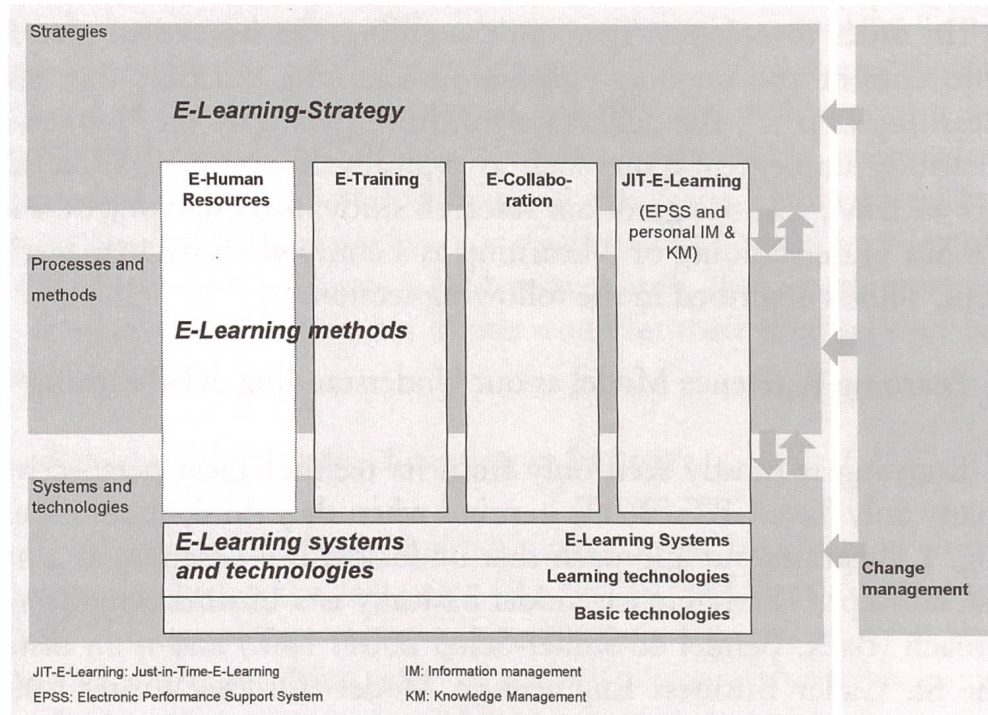
In order to enhance that understanding, we wanted to give insights into current and ongoing corporate e-Learning practices that reveal “e-Learning as it is”. We deliberately did not pick only the “pioneers” in e-Learning implementation, such as typically IT-companies like CISCO, HP or IBM. The design of our research study into these practices is based on our understanding of e-Learning as a comprehensive managerial concept. This is described in the following section.

E-Learning Reference Model as our Understanding of e-Learning

E-Learning is mostly seen only from its technological perspective; also, many only have CBTs/WBTs in mind when they think about e-Learning. Fig. 1 illustrates our approach that understands e-Learning as a managerial concept. The reference model basically is a business engineering approach (Back, Bendel & Stoller-Schai 2001: 18ff.) and is an instance of the St. Galler Business Engineering Model (Österle/Winter 2000: 12) with its four segments: Strategy, Processes, Technology & Systems, as well as Management. It states that new information and communication technologies (ICT) inspire new strategies on the one hand, and on the other hand strategic thrusts must be supported by and implemented on the technology level to be effective. Similar to general business processes, in this e-Learning reference model “learning and knowledge creation” (von Krogh, Ichijko & Nonaka 2000) are considered as business processes; the Process level shows the three main categories of methods for learning processes that incorporate e-elements: E-Training, E-Collaboration, and JIT-e-Learning which takes place at the workplace driven by ad-hoc performance needs. Horizontally to all three levels, the Management pillar stands for project management and change management issues. This holistic view of e-Learning postulates to consider all these aspects when designing or analysing e-Learning initiatives and solutions.

E-Learning reference model

Model levels



Institute of Information Management



University of St.Gallen

Fig. 1: The e-Learning reference model (Back, Bendel & Stoller-Schai 2001: 23)

Let us take a closer look at the Strategy level. Unicmind 2002 as well as our insights gained from previous projects and current work with companies show that rarely e-Learning is mentioned explicitly in corporate or training strategies or vision statements. Therefore our study is meant to especially focus onto that issue. When zooming into the Strategy level details, the context of an e-Learning strategy is important. The e-Learning strategy is related to the competitive and other functional strategies of the enterprise which is depicted in Fig. 2. The e-Learning strategy should be linked to the competitive strategy, e.g. in a software company, for new product-launches speed-to-market on a global level is decisive, and e-Learning is indispensable to achieve this. Further more, the e-Learning strategy has to interrelate with the personnel and the ICT-strategy. E.g.

when the IT-strategy is to build an always-on information infrastructure with a portal architecture, e-Learning can integrate with that approach; or when the training strategy is to build workforce competencies in the area of effectiveness in virtual teams, e-Learning can make its contributions.

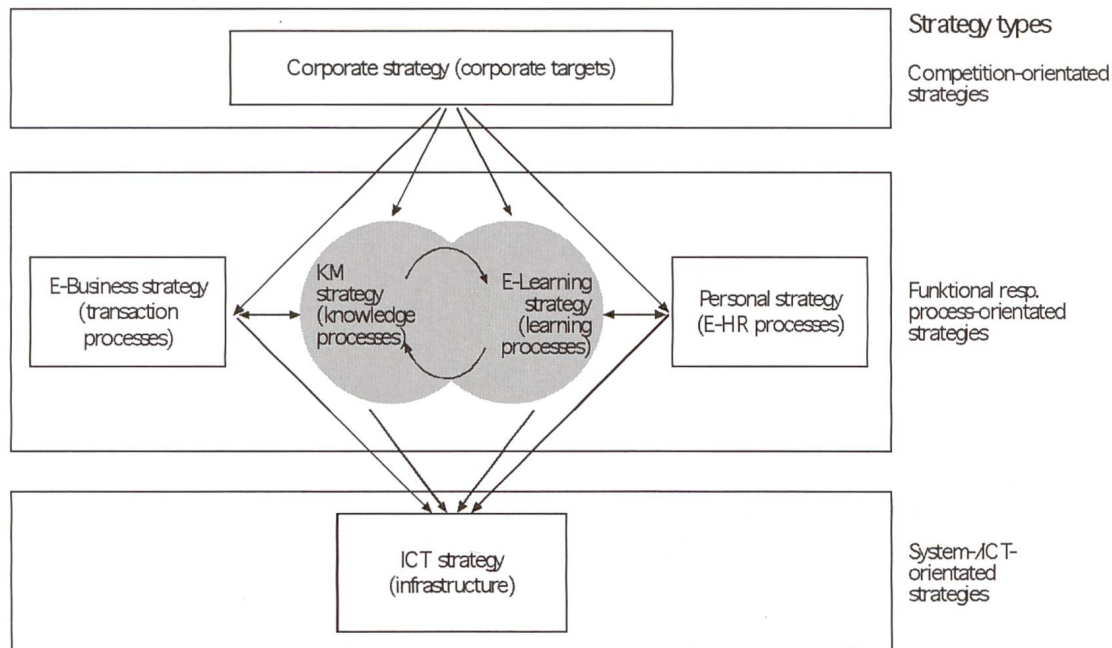


Fig. 2: Relationship between e-Learning-strategy to other corporate strategies (Back, Bendel & Stoller-Schai 2001: 76)

II. Goals of this study

Cases describing Corporate e-Learning practices can be found in many books and conference presentations. They are usually meant as showcases for the company so that they often include concepts and plans for their “next generation of e-Learning”. Our goal was to study ongoing e-Learning practices as they really currently are. Also, published cases are normally presented by those who personally initiated and drive the e-Learning projects; you can suspect that you might not get the “whole story” which reflects the interests and perceptions of several stakeholders, such as of the financial sponsors who make the decisions on the requests for e-Learning budgets, or of the learners themselves. Regarding the latter, many published empirical studies and studies in progress focus on user acceptance, esp. usage rates of e-Learning content offerings and factors

influencing the level of learners' acceptance. As stated before, our goal was to go beyond the aspect of user acceptance and shed light on the motives and goals that are the strategic thrust behind the e-Learning initiatives. Fig. 3 depicts how we approached this bigger picture.

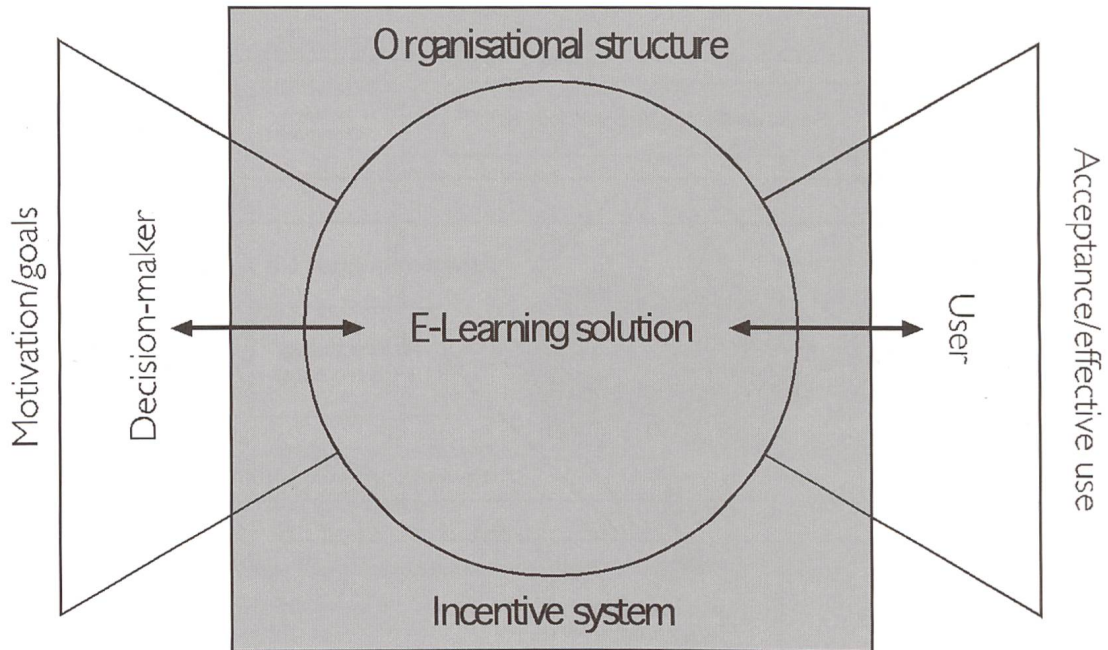


Fig. 3: Investigation Areas of the Study

Study objects are the existing and running e-Learning offerings. Regarding them we wanted to learn about three basic areas: a) the rationales of the decision makers that brought these offerings into existence in the first place and how these are embedded in the company's strategies b) the existing learning practices in training- and HR-departments and the forms, such as incentive structures, through which learners are motivated to get involved in e-Learning, and c) about the actual acceptance of the offerings.

Further goals of the study are to research and interpret the interviewees statements and other data (e.g. documents of requirements) yielded from our empirical investigation in the following respects:

1. The constellation and potential interrelationships of the statements from the different stakeholders in each case.
2. Drawing practical examples from the study to use them for "putting flesh" to our e-Learning reference model for teaching purposes and publications.

3. The chance to identify e-Learning “good-practices” that can serve as learning opportunities, especially with the focus on developing an e-Learning strategy.
4. The opportunity to gain insight into the challenges for successful e-Learning implementations which inspire further research directions and foci of the “Learning Center”.

III. Proceeding in research and empirical method

In the following, we will describe the research process more deeply, and the interviewing process in detail. Therefore we have to illustrate the process of identifying the interviewees in the different companies.

At the beginning, we opted for a study with a combined qualitative and quantitative methodology. We were convinced that the data about the strategy process and the development of an e-Learning solution were best acquired using qualitative interviews. We thought either, that the acceptance of the e-Learning system by the companies should be collected with a questionnaire and not in interviews. During the acquisition process we found that - due to time restrictions - we had to collect the data for this study in a few interviews. Therefore it became clear that a case based study with interviews would provide the best collection of data.

The research process was structured in three main phases:

1. The acquisition phase: We contacted 40 companies in Switzerland, Germany, and Austria in order to find partners for this specific research project. Many denied to participate; among the reasons given most commonly were: no spare time for such an activity; already involved in many other empirical studies about e-Learning; no interest; new launch of new phase in e-Learning strategy in progress and not yet finished. Finally, we attracted four partners from four countries as shown in Fig. 4.

Name	Sector	Nation	Experience with Learning Management Systems (LMS)
Company A	Bank	Switzerland	Since 11/2002
Company B	Bank	Austria	Not yet
Company C	Telecommunication	Canada	Since 1999
Company D	Telecommunication	Germany	Not yet

Fig. 4: Companies that served as study objects

The companies among peers and in public are “well known” for their e-Learning activities. They are engaged to meet the challenges of exploiting methodological potentials, of financial demands, and of integrating e-Learning into training and personnel development.

2. The research phase: We covered four companies from two industrial sectors. These are the banks Company A in Zürich, Switzerland, and Company B in Austria. Furthermore, the telecommunication firms Company C in Toronto, Canada, and Company D in Munich, Germany. In July, August, and October 2002, the interviews in the participating firms have been made. In one case, we were able to do the interviews only by telephone. In the other cases, we had face-to-face-interviews at the companies’ sites.

3. The analysis phase in which we collected and summarised the existing data and tried to find indicators that supported our assumptions.

The interview process corresponded to the following scheme: after the first contact with one key person in the personnel development department or the information management department, we moved on to find appropriate interviewees. We developed profiles containing the required attributes and competencies to enable our partners to find the right people to be interviewed. It was very important for us to find persons having different functions and perspectives on e-Learning inside the companies. Aside from the group of users, we described four types of desired interviewees:

- a) general manager 1 (head of training department, coordinator for overall project and overall process for e-Learning, responsible for consideration of HR-strategy, responsible for consideration of corporate strategy);
- b) general manager 2 (supporter for the development of a new e-Learning system, adept of planning and decision process of e-Learning system).
- c) line manager 1 (project manager in e-Learning implementation, adept of LMS development (costs, configuration, performance), adept of business model of the e-Learning system (integration in training process, personnel development, financials).
- d) line manager 2 (adept of actual LMS at work (contact with learner), adept of manager and employee / learner satisfaction with LMS).

Using these guidelines, the identification of competent interviewees had been done by our contacts inside the company. The risk of this procedure was to only get appointed to persons as interviewees who were in favour of the e-Learning initiative. Yet, after the research phase, we recognised that our guideline and the desire of our contacts to provide us with diverse views on e-Learning guaranteed a good and multifaceted inspection of their e-Learning ventures.

The interviews in the firms took twenty to fifty minutes (the telephone interviews for Company C, Canada, lasted only ten to twenty minutes) and were all done by Olaf Bursian. For this interviews we have developed an interview guideline (see Annex). This guide was more a clue and a help to structure the questions than a strict rule for any question. In all interviews, nearly the same questions about the same complexes of e-Learning were addressed. Thus general managers were asked about their satisfaction with the e-training programs and the users were asked about their impression of having an e-Learning strategy in their company.

IV. Results

As core results we found in summary:

1. E-Learning strategies are defined only by one or only a few stakeholders. These persons have the dominant influence in defining e-Learning processes and methods, learning systems and technology, as well as project and change management processes.
2. The full potential of e-Learning tools (e.g. innovative didactic and methodological possibilities that go beyond the classical CBT-approach, learning portals, and the combination of training with knowledge management) are exploited only in cases where

the training function is seen as a strategic partner to tackle business challenges. Where training is mostly seen as a self-contained service unit, e-elements are only used as an additional learning media or learning tool.

These results show that the e-Learning processes in companies are not integrated in corporate strategies. In two of the companies there are no corporate learning processes created or a corporate training structure established. Because of this, most new acquisitions of e-Training products run by the method “trial and error”. We found that pilot projects and several testing cycles are required to integrate e-Learning in the overall training concepts of the companies. The result that e-Training programmes today are mostly used as a methodological alternative to classroom training leads us to the conclusion that in firms e-Learning is less a personnel development project than an information management project. Thus project planning and the design of the strategy are more influenced by information managers than by personal managers.

Case studies

The following case studies of the four selected firms will underline the above mentioned results.

Case 1: Company A

Company and training structure

Company A is one of the leading financial institutes in the World and has its head office in Switzerland. Company A is a world-wide leader in the private banking sector and is one of the leading fund managers.

Training is decentralised (e.g. apprenticeship) with some corporate solutions (e.g. training organisation). To establish e-Learning, some groups were founded to co-ordinate the different needs and to harmonise and conceptualise the strategic beliefs. Additionally, a so called “Competence Center e-Learning” as an internal coordinator, driver, and consultant for e-Learning was established.

E-Learning solution

At the beginning of the e-Learning history of company A, CD-ROM-based training and “learning studios” were established. Due to the obvious potentials of platforms, the engagement for an e-Learning platform solution began. The concrete potentials for e-Learning (business and learning potentials) and the technical requirements of a platform have been evaluated in different pilot projects and have been communicated in a business case.

The leading goal to establish a platform was to improve the self-service or the self directed learning of the employees. Secondly, there was the need to increase the efficiency in training administration. And thirdly, the combination of a personal administration tool with this content management platform should lead to integrated personal tools (e.g. for skill- and skill-gap-management).

Strategy

At the beginning, a global e-Learning solution was planned, but the needs of the different international business units have been so different that the board decided to go further with a Company A Swiss solution.

The challenge was to integrate a new e-Learning platform (content management system with collaboration tools) into a personnel management tool (ERP-System). To formulate the strategy, to evaluate different software solutions, to define most of the new processes, and to communicate the whole process inside the company, a so-called “Competence Centre” was established. Aside from this, for different groups internal steering committees were built up to keep the requirements of all stakeholders in mind. The need to integrate all stakeholders was very important, because the financial engagement for a platform required financial resources of the business areas (BA).

User acceptance

To promote user acceptance, some features are integrated that the users are already familiar with (e.g. registration to all kind of seminars) and the quality of the e-Training elements is central. The acceptance of the platform and of e-Learning in general will also be supported with the possibility of self-learning and with creating a subjective learning history. This

process will be accompanied by learning and development goals. A new learning culture will be established.

Case 2: Company B Holding

Company and training structure

Company B is more like a network of eight banks in Austria with one common holding (called Company B Holding). This holding is only responsible for two common institutes, the corporate marketing and training & education. The different banks are in most ways autonomous (e.g. for their financial results, the business and their personnel management, and some parts of the training). For the most parts of training which is necessary for all banks, a department "Company B Education" exists which is part of the Company B Holding. In training organisation, a very heterogeneous structure exists: for training within banks, every bank is responsible on its own. Only some common training activities are organised and conceptualised by the Company B Holding.

E-Learning solution

E-Learning solution providing is one of the main tasks of „Company B Education“, but e-training is mostly limited to the support of seminars. But for each bank it is possible to ask for other programmes for individual needs (at this moment the exception).

The standing of traditional training methods is very strong in the different banks. Hence, e-Learning is always integrated in blended learning concepts. At this time, just about 5% of all training arrangements are accomplished with e-Learning.

The preparation for these seminars is often done with web-based training, while the training itself is done with common learning methods (hand-outs, tests etc.). In some cases, it is necessary to hire laptops from the personnel development team in the specific bank to learn with e-Learning tools.

In addition to these e-Learning solutions, the Holding has offered a knowledge management tool (called *Kompendium*) where information on banking themes are documented. Sometimes these information are linked with the WBTs. But the acceptance of this initiative is not really high, and most of the employees in the banks don't know anything about this knowledge management tool.

Strategy

At this time, there is no documented e-Learning strategy in Company B Holding. But in the interviews some decision makers spoke about an “implicit e-Learning strategy”, because the head of Company B Education pursues his e-Learning concepts so strong “that there must be a strategy”. In this case, the whole e-Learning concept and strategies are developed, improved, and implemented by this manager. He himself said: “There is an implicit e-Learning strategy in my head, but it is continuously proofed by reality” (*„Es gibt eine implizite E-Learning-Strategie, die in meinem Kopf ist, die aber durch die Realität immer wieder bestätigt wird.“*) His power is accepted by other decision makers, and his competence is not challenged. Somebody said: “We trust in the Holding, because they know our needs and do a good job. And if we don’t want their products, we are able to do the training on our own in seminars.”

To coordinate the training and to build and communicate a common understanding of e-Learning inside the Company B Holding, a committee exists which is build by all eight banks and is called “*Schulungsausschuss*”; it meets two times per year. In this committee, nearly all e-Learning decisions follow the perceptions of the Holding’s Education department.

User acceptance

The user acceptance for e-Learning is not very high. Some of the interviewees called some of the programmes even “not necessary” or “childish”. Because all the content which is provided through e-Training is repeated by the seminars, the need for e-Learning is sometimes vague.

The e-Training in general was sensed more or less as a methodological add-on. The contents in the e-Programs are also taught in normal training. In some places, and by some (high level) employees, the combination with the knowledge management initiative (“*Kompendium*”) was not known.

Case 3: Company C

Company and training structure

Company C Holding Canada officially launched Company C in Febru-

ary 1, 1999. The new company is designed to offer Company C Holding business customers, who operate nationally, a full range of Internet Protocol (IP) services over an advanced broadband network stretching from coast-to-coast in Canada and in the United States.

Company C is now a Canadian global solutions provider for both large private and public sector organisations. They empower businesses by delivering network-based, fully managed end-to-end solutions through an industry-leading product and service portfolio.

Company C gained 3.5 billion US\$ revenue with 2000 employees. It is inside Company C Holding Canada (with 45,000 employees) responsible for 50% of Data Services growth.

E-Learning solution

The implementation of e-Learning solutions in Company C began in 1997 with a pilot and the evaluation of the pilot project. In 1999, Company C launched its Learning Network with over 700 modules in the first year. The necessity for e-Learning was obvious, because in 1999 new products were introduced every 35 days and they had to train their sales people in an effective and cost saving way.

In 2000 followed the restructuring of their learning environment, and Company C provided e-Teaching modules to their customers. With all these, the company achieved efficiencies of 1.8 million US\$. In 2002 a company-wide content strategy and an in-house production were implemented, and the company drove revenue via learning asset sales and e-Learning consulting services.

All of the product training are now done with computers. There are two main types of training: One is called "sales on the run", which stands for short courses for sales people with a length of only 15 to 20 minutes. The other courses are technology essential training for products; they last for about 1 hour.

Feedback is collected through periodical surveys that are conducted for all internal Web communications. The other sort of feedback collection is through strong personal contact with the audiences of e-Learning, primarily the sales force.

Strategy

The initial investigations into e-Learning were conducted for the purpose

of creating an e-Learning service offering for Company C's corporate customers and to train the sales people. When the LMS was selected, the most important requirements were:

- something that could train the salespeople quickly on new products,
- something that was making sure that those products were quickly built into a training solution,
- a service model that required no up-front capital investment,
- a service model that minimised the role of corporate IT in the project,
- scalability to millions of users,
- customisable student interface,
- ability to manage all types of training activities in a unified way, and
- advanced, future-proof software architecture.

With those requirements, the company chose a learning platform which was hosted by a learning provider (in an ASP-model). The platform was developed and hosted by an e-Learning company in ownership of people with good connection to Company C and the head of the e-Learning department.

The original strategy for implementing e-Training at Company C (1999) was developed in Marketing, and was centred around the need to deliver new product education and new technical training to the sales force in a fast and cost-effective way. Since 2000, the strategy has been a constant and on-going concern for the “e-Learning & Development team” (and forced by the head of this team). This is due to a clearly recognised need to tie education very closely to business results. The strategy is extensive and all-pervasive, but it is not written down comprehensively in a single document.

The head of the e-Learning and development team said: “A true e-Learning strategy, with real executive support, began when I took over the project in December 1999. The team moved into the Sales Operations organisation and immediately began to tie e-Learning to larger revenue needs. The strategy was designed, implemented, revised, and communicated by the Vice President of Sales Operations and me.”

Both the Vice President and he were committed not to merely deliver e-Learning programs adequately within company C Holding, but to push the industry forward, and make Company C known publicly as an industry leader in using e-Training to meet core business needs. This desire was very important in several decisions they made.

User acceptance

The acceptance of the platform in this company seems to be very high. The length and frequency of user sessions on the platform vary with different user groups, but company C salespeople use the platform very often. In general, the same amount of log-ins takes place on evenings and weekends as well as during the business days. Approximately 50 people are logged into the system at any chosen time. Most users are very happy with the platform and are extremely confident about logging in and using it. Certainty about this positive feedback comes from regular reporting, but also personal contact with the user base.

Case 4: Company D Germany

Company and training structure

Company D, Germany, is one of the biggest mobile telecommunication provider in Germany and belongs to the Company D Holding with partners in Great Britain, and other european countries. In 2001, the company changed its name into the new European brand name.

The training department in Company D is divided into four independent training departments; each is responsible for its own business part. In the departments, different contents for different needs are trained.

E-Learning solution

Yet, Company D, Germany, does not have one common e-Learning solution, but each department develops e-Training programmes (mostly web-based-training (WBT)) to support a blended learning solution. In sum, WBTs are not yet often used because some employees do not even have access to CD-ROM drives or to the internet. One reason is that e-Learning is not the first priority of this company because they first have to achieve break-even in 2001.

In the company, traditional seminars are normally preferred. E-Teaching is mostly used as additional method. One interviewee said: "At the moment, e-Learning is used when there is a no-critical target and we have time and space to develop an electronic training solution." Mostly product information is provided through WBTs. Most of the e-Learning content is additionally trained in seminars.

Strategy

Two years ago, the implementation of a LMS was planned. But due to insufficient financial resources, the plan was abandoned. Because of this, some WBT-projects were launched. At the moment, a group of trainers try to conceptualise a process for developing e-Learning programs. Some decision makers in the information management and the training team prepare a Company D e-Learning strategy. Up to now, the processes were driven by one manager who is a team leader and responsible for computer training. Within the company, he is known as the e-Learning expert.

User acceptance

The user acceptance in this company is very high. Some people like e-Learning so much that they would do e-Learning even in their spare time. A general feedback process is not strictly implemented yet, but several feedbacks to some web-based trainings have been very positive.

VI. Conclusion and open questions

All four cases showed the interest of each company in implementing an e-Training solution in order to enhance their training activities. The common arguments: increasing effectiveness in training, cost-reduction, and learning independently from time and space are important, but mostly they were not the key arguments. In all four cases, specific business needs and/or the argumentation of some stakeholders drove the process of moving e-Learning ahead. In order to meet these learning needs, selected e-Learning solutions were planned and implemented. In the strategic plans, only the business needs for the current business situation were described. A more future-oriented perspective (e.g. to build a learning organisation, or to develop an integrated platform for meeting a number of needs all-in-one) didn't exist in the plans. One reason explaining this is: The decision makers in the companies knew about the potential of e-Learning for their current business needs, e.g. product training, or personnel development, or cost-cutting in training, but they were not really informed about other possibilities, such as building up an integrated personnel management system. Such a system would e.g. integrate knowledge management functionalities, recruiting, billing processes, customer

training, workflow management, and e-Collaboration. Because of this narrow focus on current business needs, several types of e-Teaching methods (possibility of learner oriented didactics; interactive multi-media-oriented didactics) weren't important for the e-Learning Strategy and implementation. In summary this means: Only the current short-term business needs, and not a training vision drive e-Learning initiatives.

This leads us to the generalising result: *The full potential of e-Learning tools (e.g. innovative didactic and methodical possibilities that go beyond the classical CBT-approach, learning portals, and the combination of training with knowledge management, customer relationship management, or others) are exploited only in cases where the training function is seen as a strategic partner to tackle business challenges. Where training is mostly seen as a self-contained service unit, e-elements are only used as an additional learning media or learning tool.*

The other result that became obvious was, that in all the cases we found singular persons or groups who were the drivers for a special form of e-Learning in each company. The ideas for using e-Learning as a proven solution for the companies' business needs could mostly be attributed to a single or very few persons in a HR department, Training department or IT department. The detailed configuration of the solution (e.g. the platform) was mostly influenced by these persons or inner circle. In order to overcome eventual prejudices against e-Learning solutions within the company, a common tactic was to get started with e-Learning through a specific pilot project. In the pilot projects, the e-Training business processes, the cost effects, and also the acceptance of the users were tested, and the results were communicated in a business case. In the four described cases we found four different solutions of e-Training and four different e-Learning concepts. Our interpretation is, that differences within the solutions exist not because of the organisational environment or structure and target groups, but because of the interpretation of the business needs by the decision maker and his/her personal understanding of e-Learning. We were led to this conclusion because there were different approaches on e-Learning in the companies, but only the approach which was supported by the decision maker was actually planned and implemented.

This leads us to summarise: *The results from the four cases suggest that mostly the different personal understanding of e-Learning by the decision-makers accounts for specifics of the e-Learning solutions, and not the type of organisational structures, e-Learning target groups, or other non-personal-factors.*

To prove these first results, we will have to do longitudinal studies with the focus on the (changing) interests of the different stakeholders and the effects on e-Learning strategies in the long term. In continuing studies we would like to collaborate with companies in the process of developing their individual e-Learning strategies.

Based on these four cases, we would like to add some tentative impressions that will have to be investigated in future studies:

- the rationales of the decision makers: they seem to solve actual business needs, without having an explicit vision of e-Learning at the beginning;
- the existing learning practices in training- and HR-departments didn't change through e-Learning. The incentive structures, the methodological and didactical possibilities to learn inside the company stayed pretty traditional and stable;
- the acceptance (compared to other studies' results) was, depending on the quality of the e-Teaching products, relatively high.

Our interest was to take a look behind corporate e-Learning initiatives. Important study area were the rationales of the decision makers and their influence on decisions within the e-Learning process, as well as the e-Learning acceptance in companies. We think that with this four cases we could give insights into actual e-Learning practices and problems. Our approach and our results could be a starting point for a more strategic based, longer-term e-Learning research focus.

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Annex

Interview guideline

E-Learning solution

Needs and requirements of your e-Learning platform

What were the requirements for a new platform to suite the needs in e-Learning?

Did you create a catalogue of needs and requirements?

Why did you choose this software vendor?

Can you explain the process of identifying the needs and requirements?

E-Training business process

How do you create content?

How do you realize

– log in?

– internal marketing for courses and the platform?

– feedback management?

– training of tutors and course designers?

– actualization of content?

– server installation and hosting?

Which kind of relationship between the platform and personnel development has been created?

Is there an integration between the platform and a knowledge management initiative?

Can you tell me about the internal structure of training (without e-Teaching)?

Can you tell me something about the process to integrate the platform in your corporate business models and existing corporate processes?

E-Learning platform

Is there any possibility to have a closer look on the platform?

Additionally, please tell me something about

– the structure

– the contents

– the participants

- the technical structure
- the didactical and methodical ideas?

Incentive system

What kind of incentives do you deploy today?

Why did you choose these incentives?

Did you develop new kinds of incentives for special needs?

Are these incentives in use only within the platform or do they also exist in regular training?

Can you tell me, which of these incentives are successful?

e-Learning strategy

Is there an e-Learning strategy (official or unofficial)?

What is the strategy about?

Which goals, requirements and needs were identified?

Which new structures were planned?

Which kind of support or opposition to this strategy did exist?

What kind of internal business model was preferred?

Can you tell me some development stages of the strategy?

Which decisions and opinions effected and changed the planned strategy?

Who was in charge of the strategy process?

By whom and why was the implemented strategy affected?

Which goals (business and probably private) were behind?

How was the implemented strategy affected by the software vendors?

Is this strategy embedded in other corporate strategies?

Use of the platform

How often and how long are the learners using the platform (in general by every user)?

How satisfied are the users with the platform? Do you have any data about that?