e-Learning, Lifelong Learning and Innovation in the working world

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1 Introduction

While in the year 2000 e-learning was perceived as a single mega-trend for education systems and the corporate world, experience has shown that the purpose, pedagogical models (or rather learning heritage), organisation and economic assumption of e-learning were extremely diverse, not only according to the learning sub-system (school, higher education, vocational training, corporate professional development and adult learning), but also according to the visions of the world that those in charge of promoting and designing e-learning systems had in mind.

Such diversity in what HELIOS calls “e-learning territories” (HELIOS 2006) has resulted in a perceived loss of meaning of the term, too broad to represent realities that have very little in common, except the use of technology.

This article provides an in-depth analysis of the relationship between e-learning, lifelong learning and innovation in the working world, as a result of the comparative analysis of three e-learning territories, which are developing within and around the world of work and combining features of formal, non-formal and informal learning, i.e.: inter-organisational learning, e-learning in the workplace and professional learning networks. A short description of these territories is provided below:

1. e-learning in the workplace: use of ICT for learning in the corporate sector and public administration/agencies. Differences in the scope and delivery schemes of e-learning between the public and corporate sector prevail mainly due to the organisation structures and practices and the related human resource policies. In general, e-learning may take the form of structured training programmes fully online or blended schemes (complemented with seminar/classroom-based training), e-learning chunks on demand/on the job. The driving concerns related to most of these e-learning offers are the return on investment (emerging also in the public sector), the increased access and flexibility in training delivery, and the contribution of e-learning to achieving organisational change and fostering knowledge management practices. In this territory, the slow emergence of communities of practice approaches can also be observed in the most sophisticated organisations.

2. Inter-organisational development through e-learning: inter-organisational development can be described as a cooperative relationship between organisations that does not rely on the market or hierarchical mechanism of control, but is instead negotiated in an ongoing communicative process. Cooperation between organisations has come into focus in recent years with the recognition that success in a global economy comes from innovation and sharing ideas. The more change there is in its environment, the more connections an organisation needs with the outside world. e-learning, given the networking possibilities that it enables, is increasingly used for the purpose of inter-organisational development.

3. Professional learning networks: a professionally oriented virtual community is geared towards professionals and/or facilitates dialogue on professional issues. Professionals participate in these types of community in order to network with peers and exchange/share/build information and knowledge. In these communities, learning is intentionally enhanced in order to achieve professional development goals (although non-professionally related learning may be a side effect).

2 Changing relationships between working and learning

As seen from the Learnovation Cluster report, “Changing Relationships between Learning and Working” (Learnovation Consortium 2008), the relationship between working, learning and innovation in the territories analysed can be dealt with in two complementary ways, i.e.:
In relation to the first point, several authors underline the fact that, whatever the e-learning territory, the more the introduction of e-learning is accompanied by an e-learning strategy supported by the management and the entire organisation/network, the more beneficial and relevant it can be to organisational needs. In this respect, a widely accepted change management model is that known as ADKAR (Laura Overton 2004). This is based on a five-stage process: awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement. The figure below illustrates how this model works.

![Figure 1: The Adkar Model](image)

The awareness stage determines the need for change and the desire stage focuses on generating a desire to participate and support the change. Knowledge is concerned with determining how to change, which results in the ability to implement the requirements of such change, be these new skills and behaviours or procedures and processes. The reinforcement phase is critical to sustaining the change post-implementation and, in e-learning terms, would relate to the provision of support and personal satisfaction, for instance.

In a perpetual state of transformation, the enterprise is constantly reviewing and analysing its business needs to ensure that it is always aware of any need for change. The assumption of this model is that a change management strategy (involving e-learning or not) can be more effective if all of these steps are followed.

Other authors have devoted more attention to the specific issue of introducing e-learning into organisations and fostering networks or inter-organisational relations.

According to the guide entitled “Leadership and management of e-learning projects”, developed in the framework of the eTTnet project, “By far the biggest requirement is ongoing support from management.”(eTTnet 2003) Other authors suggest that (although crucial) this is only the first step.

For instance, Pam Pervenanze (2008) illustrates an approach for the successful incorporation of e-learning into the organisational/inter-organisational strategy, based on the following steps:

- “Link e-learning goals with business goals;
- Ensure support from top management;
- Work with your IT Department to develop an understanding of your baseline technologies;
- Work with your IT Department to establish standards for working together;
- Create a plan to help your training department handle the change;
- Determine e-learning specifications;
- Determine how you will measure the results;
- Prepare a rollout plan”.

But developing a shared strategy on e-learning requires, as underlined by a Headlines PR report (2003), many intertwined change management actions. These could relate, for instance, to:

- “Marketing: A major part of the implementation plan should accommodate a detailed marketing strategy. This strategy should not differ from the overall company culture and business marketing initiatives.
Employees should “feel” the effort made by management to embrace them as valuable contributors to the bottom line.

- **Training**: Teaching new skills is critical to keeping employees motivated and productive and, ideally, companies must be introduced to a learning mechanism that allows learners to study in a way best suited to their needs, whether that is facilitated by a mentor or self-paced.

- **Return on investment**: This is just one very important component to consider when determining the success of a learning programme.

- **Culture of the organisation**: For e-learning to have a chance for long-term success, companies need to look at their employees’ current learning culture. In other words, can learners pace themselves or do they need tutors? They also need to look at how training was done in the past - was it instructor-led or self-paced training? Based on this, companies can address the process of how, in a new learning environment, workers and customers will learn, and must define how the organisation will invite, instruct, assess, stimulate, certify and enhance the performance of workers through this new learning process.”

When it comes to the issue of the innovation that e-learning helps to achieve, there is not quite as much literature available. This is explained by Leslie Mackenzie-Robb, who argues that, “In reality, e-learning projects seek and get no more than a top level sanction (mainly because of the budgets involved), and are not seen by senior management as tools for enterprise change. They are seen as tools for enterprise cost-cutting and pragmatism.” (Mackenzie Robb 2004)

This is due to the fact that companies associate innovation with products, services and processes, but not often with learning. Rather than being used to shape innovation, e-learning is used to accompany and, more frequently, follow it.

However, the participants in the Helios survey (2006) on e-learning and organisational change seemed to be much more open about the innovation that e-learning can foster or contribute to fostering.

Over 80% of the respondents taking part in the survey agreed that e-learning changes the way training and learning is organised. Around 60% of the respondents agreed that the introduction of e-learning also has an impact on changing the vision or strategy of organisations, the organisational culture, the way in which the organisation operates and social relations within the organisation. On the other hand, only around one-third of respondents agreed that e-learning could actually affect the way in which the organisation is structured.

Public policies as well as public and private initiatives and pilot initiatives supporting innovation in this field have to tackle three kinds of frustration in relation to unrealistic/naïve expectations:

**The frustration of large companies**: convergence between e-learning and knowledge management did not take place: e-learning has become common practice in large organisations, but has not matched the knowledge management challenge. It has not gone into the area of tacit knowledge, but has simply been associated with explicit and “packaged” knowledge. e-learning is used to do what was done in the classroom for less money, but it is not used for innovation or change management. The connection between learning and innovation is missing.

**The frustration of SMEs**: e-learning was regarded, especially in the early days, as the solution to all SME training problems. The building up of social capital among SMEs and their service providers is a challenge that was frequently lost in past years. Increased competition, often reduced public funding, over-managed and under-led public initiatives: all these factors partially explain some of the failures, but the basic cultural problem that was not properly addressed when formulating the expectations was the lack of collaborative attitudes within SMEs when an immaterial and badly managed phenomenon such as learning is concerned. It is likely that there was no sense of urgency to learn together and/or there was not sufficient stimulation on the part of most of the initiatives. The proposed e-learning supply may have offered cost-effective solutions to ordinary problems but often did not match the emotional side of the motivation to invest in learning. It was probably not sufficiently associated to what SME leaders considered really valuable for their development or critical to their survival. This area of e-learning has not been studied in depth, so it is difficult to determine whether awareness of the problems is widespread and whether other diagnostic approaches and conclusions are available.

**The frustration of professional networks**: individuals do not always learn and share their experiences in innovative ways through e-learning. Moreover, collaborative learning is not growing as quickly as expected. Some experiences exist but are reserved for high-profile professionals, whereas relatively flat e-learning models are predominant, distributing the knowledge of more experienced and research-oriented professionals to other members of the professional community.

Other issues to be taken into consideration and dealt with are:
− Institutional hierarchies matter greatly in the diffusion and introduction of innovation in companies.
− Age and gender are also very important. A diversity management issue is also emerging. Recognising the value of difference must be seen as a way of fostering innovation and HRD.
− The role of trainers and learning facilitators must be considered: in this cluster, trainers have evolved faster than in formal education, from a role of transmission to a supporting role. It is more natural for them to adapt to change, since they are often employees of the company, borrowed for use as trainers.
− “Camouflage innovation”: a lot depends on how innovation is labelled. There are several “hidden innovation rivers”, not led by the organisation hierarchy, that produce conditions for future change and already practice innovative working and learning processes. One example is the increasing use of social networking platforms by employees during working hours: is this a real danger for the productivity of the workforce or could it be used as a learning resource with the adoption of new and innovative organisational and learning strategies?

3 Recommendations
In order to tackle the aforementioned frustrations, a number of actions can be suggested:
− Convey the message that participating in e-learning can provide leverage for organisational change and innovation in companies, since companies associate innovation with products, services and processes, but not often with learning or e-learning.
− Consider the specificities of public administrations (PAs). The lazy adoption of e-learning in PAs (more often than not introduced with a top-down approach and resulting mainly in IT or procedure-related courses) is an issue, as well as the very low motivation on the part of the learners and poor investment choices on the part of the PAs. The introduction of e-learning in the public sector should be associated with a reward system for improved performance.
− Recognising the value of prior learning in companies is fundamental and should be further promoted with a European dimension.
− The ageing society is an important factor to be considered when estimating the extent to which ICT can support learning and innovation within and among organisations.
− Training of trainers and learning facilitators should also be promoted in relation to their activity as peer mentors in professional networks, or as catalysts of inter-organisational relations, and their training experiences should be valued.
− Bottom-up innovation should be closely monitored to enhance its positive impact and the challenges that it implies should be anticipated/faced. For instance, the issue of how and to what extent social networking can be exploited for learning purposes within the working context should be investigated to transform a potential organisational danger (in terms of productivity) into a key learning asset.

References