

Critical Issues in e-Learning

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Abstract

As the boundaries between local and global are disappearing everything is becoming borderless. Outcall centers in Southeast Asia are prime examples of how industry and services are becoming borderless. Even education, previously meant for a few elite is becoming accessible from anywhere anytime. Internet is creating an equal opportunity never seen before. This paper addresses critical factors that must be considered for a successful launch or continuation of e-Learning program. Factors are derived from author(s) extensive classroom and research experiences. In addition literature survey is used to consolidate these factors.

Introduction

e-learning is expected to grow by almost 24% per year. From many people perspective it is still in its infancy. Advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are making asynchronous communication a reality (Aggarwal 2004; Aggarwal 2000; Alavi et al 1995, Hiltz and Turoff 2002). Students and faculty are becoming portable and education is becoming borderless.

We are moving from initial stages of WBE (1999 – 2003) to second stage of WBE (2003+). WBE is becoming “student” oriented who is demanding seamless end-user learning experience. Focus within WBE is changing from “course” driven to “program” driven. Universities planning to enter the WBE market must learn from early adopters to avoid their mistakes and learn from their experiences. The next section describes the critical factors in WBE based on our experiences with WBE

Culture Change is needed

A complete culture change is required for e-learning to be successful. It includes changes at all levels:

- Organizational
- Individual
- Political

Universities planning to introduce e-Learning must understand that they may lose money initially and must plan for value-benefit and not cost-benefit analysis in the early years. Individuals planning to teach or train must understand the “virtual” nature of e-Learning. The biggest challenge is for the politicians who must look at e-Learning as a long term investment and not for short term political gain.

Committed Leadership

e-Learning can not advance without appropriate support and guidance from leadership with authority. They must provide direction for:

- Vision & Strategy
- Diffusion
- Plans & commitment for long term management

Senior management vision for a long term viable program is almost a pre requisite for any e-Learning initiatives. They should set directions and create a student-focused long term learning-oriented climate. The senior management clearly must define the objective and scope for developing WBE on campus. Many universities are making WBE as part of their long-term strategic plans (Sloan Management Report).

e-Learning is Challenging

Challenges come from all stakeholders in terms of economics (politicians & administrators), Quality (students & perspective employers) and 24x7 viability (IT staff) and Content preparations (faculty & IT staff). It is desirable to have a long term plan for diffusion and break even point. It is recommended that to meet long term challenges, a piecemeal approach should be used due to following concerns:

- Learning curve: time involved in understanding WBE
- Lack of stakeholders' interest
- Limited resources and/or expertise
- Too much competition

WBE is expensive, as it requires “new” investment in IT portals, administrative and technical staff and faculty. Technical staff is needed 24/7 to provide “help” and “technical” assistance to student and faculty and to ensure smooth content delivery. In fact, it is not common for universities to lose money for the first few years. Universities and colleges entering in the second stage of WBE must consider strategic partnerships and alliances for collaborative development and marketing with other academic institutions and/or outsourcing to the private sector.

IT Infrastructure

For third world countries, it is essential to have an appropriate infrastructure before joining e-Learning. Inappropriate infrastructure can create problems of content downloading, real time participation and in general create frustration. DSL, cable or as a minimum dial-up internet access facilities must be available. Many courses requires web casting which may require broadband capabilities. Reliability is another issue. Reliable land lines and electric supply are essential for launching and maintaining an e-Learning program.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a list of critical factors needed to provide a successful e-learning environment in a globalized context. The list will keep changing as new ideas emerge and existing one are solved. Colleges and universities of all sizes are facing many challenges and opportunities offered by this new technology-based concept. Like any emerging technology, WBE is not free of problems, controversies, and challenges. Higher education institutions considering e-Learning will likely need to reform conventional processes, policies and practices by creating new parallel structures.. Inadequate skills and/or lack of knowledge about e-Learning within the institution may be a major hurdle. The first wave of WBE concentrated on “what” of WBE and the next generation is focusing on ‘How” of WBE. New entrants can learn from old entrants.

References: Provided on request