

# How E-learning Drives Productivity in the Global Business Environment



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Today when we speak of American business, in many cases, we're talking about global business. Increasingly, American businesses have been tapping into markets around the world to create multinational corporations to find creative ways to produce goods and services, to market those goods and services, as well as take advantage of global supply networks. Often cited in American political campaigns to pit candidates against each other for the "sins" of outsourcing American jobs to foreign countries, research shows that American businesses involved in international trade and international investment are largely American enterprises that actually create millions of well-paying jobs in the U.S., as well as abroad.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the global operations of U.S.-based multinationals are highly concentrated in the United States, not in their foreign affiliates. From Amazon to Apple or Xerox to Yahoo, multinational corporations have argued that their very survival in a new global marketplace requires them to source goods, services, labor and materials overseas to seek new markets for remaining competitive.

As American business interests and the employees themselves are scattered throughout the world, workplace productivity issues also become global. The more than 78,000 employees of Apple Inc., for example, aren't concentrated in one building in one city, where senior management can easily draw them into a single room to discuss process improvement and productivity. In fact, the Cupertino, Calif.-based company has employees working in more than 400 retail locations in 15 countries.<sup>2</sup> In a global marketplace, technology becomes more important at all levels of the business – from the profit-center manufacturing and operations side to the management of people to drive business success. Technology, or e-learning, can keep workers connected and help them understand (1) the profitability goals and objectives of the company, (2) the "culture building" mission, vision and values of the company, as well as (3) critical business skills that will help drive business productivity and hence profitability. Often, the New Zealand Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's "seven drivers of productivity" have been cited in examining ways to increase productivity in businesses of all sizes, including global multinational corporations.<sup>3</sup> All of these productivity drivers can be addressed through the use of e-learning.

E-learning is the use of technology to drive education. Broadly, it might include multimedia learning, computer-based training, computer-aided instruction, web training or virtual education. E-learning can include the combined or singular use of computers, text, Internet, audio, images, animation, streaming video, TV, CD-ROM or other technology to deliver learning. Among the many often cited benefits of e-learning are: (1) decreased travel budgets and training costs, allowing workers to learn where they are; (2) the ability to convey information to a broad audience in a "one-message" standardized fashion across an organization; (3) the ability to meet increasing demands for training and education of today's workforce without

encumbering limited human resources to do so; (4) flexibility for workers to access training and progress at a pace that works for each individual. When used effectively within businesses, e-learning might be used for (1) compliance, such as safety training, (2) to improve worker knowledge and skills relative to sales processes or procedures, and also (3) to build culture, linking employees to the company's values during the orientation process, for example.

Because of these uses, businesses can effectively leverage e-learning to positively impact the seven drivers of workplace productivity. Following are the seven drivers and how e-learning can impact each.

### **The Seven Drivers of Workplace Productivity**

**1) Encouraging innovation and the use of technology** – Excellent organizations understand the importance of managing the “here and now,” while keeping their eyes on new products or ways of delivering services that distinguish them from the competition. These companies understand the importance of investing in research and development, and they understand how critical technology is to helping them achieve business goals. Obviously, e-learning impacts this driver of workplace productivity because e-learning is dependent upon the creative use of technology to drive learning and business results. Employees who need to understand new ways of doing things or process improvement can learn those skills through e-learning. Beyond driving understanding of the current skills necessary to get the job done, e-learning can give a business and its employees a competitive edge by introducing them to cutting-edge trends in an industry, sparking further service innovation or product creativity.

**2) Building leadership and management capability** – Transformational leadership is concerned with management that helps employees not only see the vision of the business, but also inspires employees to give their best in support of the mission. Contrary to the early writings of Greeks and Romans that stated “leaders are born, not made,” leadership behaviors can be encouraged and developed at all levels of an organization. An effective way to deliver leadership training for management is through e-learning. In any given company, small or large, e-learning management training might focus on helping managers understand how to encourage, assess, inspire and motivate employees. E-learning training modules also can be developed focusing on intrapersonal behaviors, such as communication, or interpersonal behaviors, like teambuilding, leading change or unleashing the power of work teams.

**3) Creating productive workplace cultures** – Interpersonal relationships are critical to organizational success, as ultimately people drive results. The sum total of those interactions – as well as an organization's symbols, values, traditions and beliefs – are what help define

culture. Simply stated, culture says: “This is how we do things here.” Companies with a strong culture have a personality that its employees and its external constituents can perceive. A study by Deloitte, for example, found that employee satisfaction is enhanced in organizations with a strong culture.<sup>4</sup> E-learning can be a critical driver of building culture, especially when employees are scattered around the world. Setting the expectation that all new employees review a culture and history video, or requiring all workers annually to review electronic modules about the company’s mission and vision can go a long way in cementing culture across workgroups worldwide.

**4) Investing in people and skills** – Obviously when workers feel valued, they are willing to go the extra mile for the company. Investing in people and skill enhancement means providing employees not only with the training to do their jobs today, but providing them with training opportunities that allow them to grow into other jobs or become leaders and experts in their field. E-learning can facilitate this process by providing computer-based training modules that help a junior-level worker, for example, become more skilled and confident in his or her day-to-day work, increasing chances for future promotion. Workers in one area of the company, public relations, for example, may have a desire to understand the full range of marketing skills necessary to become a better professional, such as advertising or social media. Computer-based e-learning can be the investment in employees that demonstrates their value to the organization beyond their day-to-day work tasks.

**5) Organizing work processes and structure** – Organizational structure is important for enhancing decision-making, communication, fair employee evaluations, and overall achievement of business goals. Understanding “chains of command” make the communication process easier and is critical in getting decisions made quickly at the right level of management. When organizational structure is in place, roles and responsibilities are clearly defined as to avoid operational overlap or frustration from “too many cooks.” E-learning can help reinforce organizational structure and procedure training of how work and decision-making flow through the organization in the day-to-day, and even in business crises. E-learning also can help in facilitating organizational change when “standard operating procedure” is in flux and employees need to be reminded about new process improvements.

**6) Networking and collaboration** – As stated earlier, successful business results are driven by individuals engaged in successful interpersonal interactions. Teams and employees who work well together often produce business synergy – where 1+1 always equals much more than 2, a key requirement for increased productivity. In some cases, e-learning, such as computer-supported collaborative learning can be used to encourage team members to work together on problem-solving that achieves learning outcomes and new ideas. Workers often find they

actually learn best practices from other employees who do what they do, rather than group-led training instructors who don't. In one such survey, for example, 53 percent of respondents said collaborative learning in their workgroup was the most "essential" way to learn, compared with only 14 percent who thought that mandatory training in general was most essential.<sup>5</sup> In short, e-learning can help cement the employee relationships that matter.

**7) Measuring what matters** – There's an axiom in business that states, "What gets measured, gets done." Obviously with the range of training needs required at all levels of business organizations – from compliance to leadership to process improvement – training is only effective if it's completed. E-learning allows to businesses to capture rich data in real time about which employees have completed training, how well they scored on knowledge assessments, and whether they need additional testing or training. Documentation of results is critical in cases involving compliance, such as in safety training, policy or procedure training or even in crisis management training, and e-learning is the perfect tool for data capture and documentation. Being able to track and measure results provides senior management with the information it needs to uncover and prevent potential breakdowns or gaps in knowledge that lead to decreased productivity and expose the company to risk.

In summary, as work becomes more global, productivity issues also become worldwide challenges that may be more difficult to solve as workers are scattered throughout the world. E-learning, however, can be the voice of consistency across the organization that can be aligned with each of the drivers of productivity to achieve long-term business success.

#### **SOURCES:**

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4 "Chairman's Survey Findings: Core Beliefs and Culture." Deloitte LLP. [www.deloitte.com/view/en\\_US/us/About/Leadership/1fe8be4ad25e7310VgnVCM1000001956f00aRCRD.htm](http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_US/us/About/Leadership/1fe8be4ad25e7310VgnVCM1000001956f00aRCRD.htm). Accessed March 10, 2014.

5 Jane Hart, "Social & Collaborative Learning in the Workplace," Workplace Learning at Centre for Learning and Performance Technologies (Aug 21, 2012), <http://www.slideshare.net/janehart/social-collaborative-learning-in-the-workplace>. Accessed March 10, 2014.