

# E-Learning in Africa (and the rest of the world!) Part 2



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## Introduction

In part one of this two-part post, we discussed e-learning in Africa, and especially the hurdles of implementation. In this second part, we will delve more into practical advice for successful implementations in Africa, or anywhere else in the world!

In a broad sense, e-learning can be defined as *“any form of learning that makes use of a network for distribution, interaction and facilitation.”* There are plenty of demonstrable success stories and breathtaking ROIs. However, the other side of the coin is that in many cases, web-based investments turn out to be fiascoes and only lead to a waste of time.

Many e-learning initiatives are granted only a short life, because they have been developed with too strong a focus on technology or creativity (nice to do, but not goal-oriented), or insufficiently aligned with the specific work situation and the perspective of the target group. Often isolated, once-only hits are considered, which primarily were great fun for the developers. This leads to e-learning tools not being used or not contributing to a higher output.

In this article we expound our vision on the basis of starting points enabling to develop successful e-learning programmes in Africa or elsewhere.

### **1. Make sure to have a shared vision and starting points**

One of the common reasons for failing e-learning concepts is a rash development of the concept on the basis of traditional learning methods and traditional media. Before developing an e-learning programme, you should have the right vision, strategy and starting points. These should be shared by everyone who is involved in the development of e-learning programmes.

Without unambiguous and shared starting points, development of an intelligent, well thought-out and effective learning programme is doomed to fail. The fact of the matter is that vision, strategy and starting points are crucial for the way the learning path is actually taking shape. Once these points are clear, the path to an effective learning concept is self-evident. So the question is to create a solid foundation (see also one of our previous articles).

### **2. From content to context**

Developing modern e-learning programmes implies much more than digitizing books,

teachers and classrooms and making these interactive. For content is shifting to context: from subject matter to creating a learning environment and a learning culture. Learning = changing behaviour and improving performance. So a crucial question is: *how do we create an effective e-learning culture?* And how can we ensure that the required competencies are shown? Every step we make, every learning programme we develop should contribute to this.

### **3. Focus on learning processes and learning culture**

Nowadays, Africa is also part of the knowledge and information society. It is not so much a matter of possessing information as knowing to find proper information at the right moment. We'd have to gauge the value of knowledge and to transform it into application and changed behaviour. For the development of learning programmes this means the learning process should be the centre of attention. Therefore during the learning programmes, the following learning goals should be focused on:

- discovering, astonishing, learning to be open to new insights;
- learning (assess your optimal learning path);
- retrieving and selecting information (databases, I-net, literature, networks, files, colleagues);
- digesting information;
- applying information;
- using knowledge to attain the desired behaviour in specific work situations;
- creating: generating new insights on the basis of knowledge and own views;
- using the work situation (knowledge increase);
- sharing of knowledge, and making new insights and experience available for others (knowledge management).

### **4. The best educational tool is the learning person himself**

Because of all wonderful technological and creative possibilities we have nowadays, there is a real risk that too much confidence is being put in technology. The starting point in learning and programme development is that the most superior educational tool is individual and not the computer. You should only ask yourself in which way the computer can complement this superior educational tool.

### **5. Integrate theory with practice**

Establishing connections with daily practice is of fundamental importance for effective learning processes. Learning to bring about the right transfer to one's own (local) work situation stimulates active thinking.

- E-learning methods and models should therefore also provide a transfer to a specific situation. For example by comparing the actual situation (how do we do it now) with the "model situation" (how should it go according to the model).
- By asking questions (personally or by e-mail) you could find out why in practice things don't go according to the book. This way of learning will result, on one hand, in a situation in which the environment learns from the learner (we are going to do it in a different way) and, on the other hand, in which the learner

learns from practice (the reason why you better do it otherwise in practice). As a result, there is fruitful interaction between theory and daily practice.

## **6. E-learning is a social process**

Creating a learning culture is a social process. E-learning is not effective unless used in a broader context: that of a learning organisation with a learning culture. Often e-learning concepts stand remote from daily practice or are even totally isolated from it. By isolating the learner with his computer screen, not only the sense of urgency to learn will decrease or even become negative, but also the sense of usefulness (relevance). This will cause the learning efficiency to decrease as well.

Practice-oriented learning also means that the learner interacts with colleagues, with fellow learners who have the same learning experience as well as with experienced colleagues. Collaborative techniques like chat boxes and discussion groups, but also the telephone should be part of the e-learning process. By interacting with colleagues, identification and internalisation into one's own mental system of what has been learned will increase significantly. In this way the learning process contributes to imparting sense and significance.

Besides, these interactions stimulate the required daily learning behaviour and promote in this way the required learning culture intelligence.

## **7. Long live line led learning!**

Just like competency development, the learning process is and should be primarily a line responsibility. Without the active support from line management there is a risk that the daily, routine, activities take priority over the stimulation of a learning climate. Moreover, the involvement of the hierarchy will make the learning processes more practical. Consequently the learning process should be organised "from the sideline", from where the e-coach and the mentor stimulate and facilitate the learning process.

## **8. Make connections**

One of the major success factors in the development of e-learning is being connected to others. This means that during the development, implementation and anchoring of integral learning methods, the following connections should be brought about:

- the staff member's need to the organisational need;
- the practical situation in the organisation (vision & strategy, norms & values, culture);
- the learner's required attitude and performance;
- the actual work situation, the daily reality;
- the trainee's learning needs: job (level), what do you know? What is it that you don't know? What's in it for me? What is important for you?
- what questions do you have in daily practice ? what problems do you encounter ?
- what is your required learning and communication style ?
- the e-learning path (strong push);
- knowledge management (learning to retrieve, pull);

- competency programmes;
- daily practice;
- electronic media;
- traditional media: face-to-face (coach, classroom, print, manual and virtual, print and others).

### **9. Fully deploy your development competencies**

Developing e-learning programmes call for a unique combination of knowledge and experience. The lack of this is one of the main reasons why many e-learning programmes are not effective and get stuck in:

- a didactically justified concept, but making insufficiently use of the technical and creative possibilities offered by today's modern media, as a consequence of which the ROI turns out to be poor while costs are high;
- a sophisticated creative and/or technical programme, but of low functionality and insufficiently aligned to business objectives, let alone didactically justified.
- developers of e-learning programmes should possess more than knowledge and experience with development tools to make interactive programmes.
- developers should also have insight into didactics.
- developers should have a well-founded vision on the creation of an "effective e-learning environment" as well as insight into the way organisation (development) processes work.

So the effective development of e-learning programmes calls for the application of a complete and balanced set of knowledge and experience, larded with the necessary creativity to apply these in combination.

### **10. Focus on quality improvement instead of cost saving**

Learning during work involves a lot of time and money. The time spent when somebody is following a course represents not only non-productive hours, but what's more, at that moment no contribution is being made to the company's production (secondary costs).

Bad programmes which generate a low or negative ROI are extremely harmful to the image of e-learning and the marvelous opportunities e-learning-based programmes can offer to increase the power of organisations. Besides, they have, as said before, a negative effect on the learning culture. To put it briefly, let cost saving not be the hidden agenda when designing the e-learning programme! Which means that training officers and developers should not miss any opportunity to make the precious learning time as efficient as possible and to invest in quality instead of quantity.

### **11. Make competence-driven learning possible**

One of the basic rules in learning processes is that the subject matter should be geared to the learner. Not only to what he or she is doing (actual situation), but in particular to what he or she should do (WHAT) and the way in which he or she can realise performance (HOW).

The “how” or required competencies should be an integral part of the design and the content of the learning programme. During the learning process the learner should be stimulated to show the learning performance by way of the required behavioural competences. If for example “creativity” or “networking” is a core competence, this means that the learning programme should stimulate this. In this way this methodology can be used adequately for competence-oriented learning.

**Recapitulating: the way to go constitutes the goal.**

As you can gather from these eleven commandments, the learning process constitutes the starting point. This means that the monitoring of the learning results does not consist in measuring the “reproduction capacity”. Performance is the starting point. What matters first of all here, is that the learner “learns to learn” and “learns to apply” with regard to a specific subject, that he is made co-responsible for creating his own learning environment and that of others, by which a contribution is also made to the concept of a learning organisation. In addition, the input from the target group will automatically have the positive effect of making the learning path target-group-oriented.

One of the common points of criticism on traditional learning methods is that as soon as you are back on your feet again in daily practice, you have forgotten all that you have learned and that enthusiasm, if any, is soon dampened. Remarks like “just act normal” or “we have tried that already and that does not work here” emerge when the daily reality and the learning situation are insufficiently linked, and learning takes place in too isolated a manner. Besides, we see that the course structure of traditional e-learning methods is strongly focused on offering knowledge or instruction. Looking at the structure of the traditional Computer Based Training courses, we see that content is always the starting point.

If we regard e-learning more as a virtual journey, a learning process you go through and in which you are accompanied, then another principle emerges: a structure in which the learning context takes a central place, instead of theory.

The knowledge and learning objects no longer are part of the learning programme itself, but are offered via media which also in daily practice are playing a great role, like the knowledge management system. E-learning becomes much more practice-oriented this way and links up with the desired daily learning process!

Considering this approach, a learner does not take lessons, courses or programmes; rather, he or she follows a track or part(s) of it. In this way e-learning becomes a process in which you take steps in a virtually controlled learning process.

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