

E-Learning in Africa? – Part 1

June 2, 2010 ·



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A growing number of African Countries are now connected to high-speed internet connections, and with increasing competition in the global economy, organizations are forced to look for more efficient and effective ways to create, spread and to apply functional and managerial knowledge.

E-learning and knowledge management have become key words in organizational learning processes in the Africa as well. Many organizations invest in managing the knowledge within the organization and e-Learning, as a supporting tool, is used more and more.

Organizations often wish to realize the advantages of e-learning, but encounter problems when setting-up these tools. In this article, we provide an overview of the most common hurdles, and some best practice solutions for e-Learning.

E-Learning a Hype?

E-Learning is older than you might think: Julia Child presented her instructional cooking sessions “The French Chef” on the television in 1963. Even earlier, in the 1950s, language labs started in Europe with the use of tapes and later, cassettes.

In the African economy, knowledge has become also a volatile commodity. Knowledge and skills which used to serve for a lifetime now have a useful life of roughly two to five years! It is important to keep existing knowledge up to date and to gather, when necessary, new knowledge in a short as possible period of time.

For management development, formal trainings plays a smaller role, due to costs and availability of time. Instead, informal learning is becoming more popular, including collaborative learning, peer-to-peer coaching and the implementation of communities of practice.

In these recent developments, knowledge management and e-Learning become a trend. But will they last? Experience in western economies and according to literature and several articles, the answer is yes.

In the West, the ever increasing use of e-learning has been driven by the developments in the field of availability of good internet connections. Internet has specific advantages above other electronic mediums like courses on television and through cassette tapes, particularly related to communication and interactivity.

It is now possible to have high-speed internet access in most African countries, providing instant access to online training, learning communities, knowledge forums and information. With the constant need for more knowledge and information, e-Learning certainly has a future in Africa.

However, at the moment, we have not yet seen that e-Learning already 'lives' within organizations, either private or public, in Africa. We will explain the reasons hereafter.

Some Hurdles

Through rapidly changing technology, it has become possible to acquire knowledge more cost-effectively and efficiently than before. However, in spite of all of the technological improvements, e-Learning can be a source of irritation.

Sometimes applications do not work properly because of technical problems. This can be due to low bandwidth, poor design or complexity (either technical or design). Generally, hurdles can occur in the following areas:

- Technical
- Cultural;
- and Strategic.

1. Technology

The first hurdle is technology. The integration of education systems in existing company systems often causes problems. This problem occurs mostly because IT departments are not involved in the development of the business case from the start. Also, there is still not really a standard in the field of e-learning. This hampers both the integration and the compatibility with other (learning) systems. Secondly the programs frequently are so sophisticated that they cannot function in older computer systems or internet connections with a restricted bandwidth. This must be taken into account in the development phase properly, or when purchasing e-learning applications.

2. Cultural

Another hurdle are cultural problems which express themselves especially in acceptance; in this case, we talk about e-Learning through internet.

In an earlier article in this series we already mentioned that an open learning culture is essential for a successful public or private company. Acceptance problems have several possible causes.

The African manager of today has a nearly always overflowing agenda and possibly considers an online course as an inefficient way to spend time.

Learning Styles and Experience

To make learning modules as efficient and effective as possible, the modules must be developed attractively, e.g., by adapting the program to the learning style of the employee.

Secondly, the applied program is not always pleasant and easy to use. In principle, e-Learning should be suitable for everyone, but learning programs are sometimes not adapted to people who have little computer experience.

Employees with little computer experience would have to be trained in the use of computers first. We could wonder if the employees are prepared for that and if the learning benefit is worth the investments and efforts.

People must adapt also to complete new ways of working and learning. In Africa, the responsibility for learning has been gradually moved from the organization to the employee. The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) together with the Masie Center have research to the acceptance of e-Learning. From that research it appears that there are 3 critical success factors for the acceptance of e-learning:

1. There must be a good internal marketing. Experience shows that employees support the idea of e-Learning if it is internally promoted in the organization and if they are well prepared to use e-Learning.
2. Adequate support plays an important factor for the acceptance of e-Learning. Employees attach much value to good support in the field of the use of the technique and content. We also mean that support for e-Learning must be promoted by senior management.
3. Reward is a distinctive factor in the acceptance process of e-Learning. It is clear employees will accept e-Learning, and it is clear what added value e-Learning is to their learning process. Reward is in this acceptance process mostly underestimated.

3. Strategy

The most important factor, however, is that an e-Learning project must be started from with a long-term vision and an associated strategy.

If an organization wants to start with any form of electronic learning they:

- Must examine what the targets and objectives of the organization are,
- Determine what the learning targets and learning objectives are,

- Anticipate how these learning targets must be reached,
- Identify the target group,
- and finally, make sure e-Learning has an added value in this anyhow.

Without a clear strategy supported by top management the e-Learning project will not become a success

In Part 2, we'll discuss how to use e-Learning in various (African) organizations, the various components of e-Learning to be used in specific situations, and a step by step implementation guide.

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