A new approach for employees training of organization by operational managements

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, the need for employee training and development is increasing. However, the time and money available in organizations for traditional forms of learning such as formal training courses has decreased. Training and development can be initiated for a variety of reasons such as performance improvement and professional development program. This paper considers a blended learning as the most current learning trend in education and training of employees in companies. The main objective of this research is implementation of blended learning-management perception. First, it sets the scientific background on the literatures. Then, it describes a detailed view on the used learning formats in a multinational corporation of companies.

Keywords: blended learning, implementation, e-learning, training, employee development, learning, learning programmed

INTRODUCTION

One of the major objectives of fruitful human resource management is to ensure that the company and its people will be ready to face current and future challenges in order to succeed in the market. Employee development and training is an area of human resource practice that directly focuses on this. It is a complementary part to efficient recruitment and selection of personnel - it enhances, develops and improves the skills, knowledge, behaviour and attitudes that employees bring with them when entering the company. In order to ensure the above mentioned, companies run various learning and development initiatives and programmes. Logically, efficient planning and design of these initiatives and programmes at the beginning is the pre-requisite for yielding the benefits and desired outcomes at the end. In my paper I am going to have a closer look on designing, implementing and evaluating a learning programme that corresponds with the most current trend in efficient education and training of employees-blended learning.

My research focuses on the management perception of implementation of a blended learning programme into the corporation-its main benefits and concerns. Further I conduct a detailed research on the time investment that is required from all parties involved in the learning initiative in order to transform the learning format of a presence event into a blended learning solution, its implementation and later running. Design and implementation of blended learning into real business settings and definition of the major success factors, pitfalls and learning points is a theme that intertwines the whole practical part. Besides the research contribution, in this paper I try to offer a detailed design and implementation guide for practitioners who intend to use blended learning in their organisations. Eventually I evaluate the implementation of the blended learning programme using theoretical methods. My major research focus is whether blended learning can or cannot offer a cost-friendly solution that would increase the efficiency of the knowledge transfer to the trainees as perceived by the managers and whether or not a purely virtual blended learning solution satisfactorily delivers networking of the trainees as a part of the learning initiative.

Literature review

Training and development of employees is one of the important parts of human resource management. Tomorrow’s most competitive organisations are working now to ensure they have available tomorrow and a decade from now employees who are eager and able to address competitive challenges. I have decided to focus on learning and development of employees because of the huge contribution it makes to achieve this goal (Allan, 2007).
On the other hand, Learning, according to him, is the means by which a person acquires and develops new knowledge, skills, capabilities, behaviours and attitudes. It is a continuous process. Training is a process that involves the application of formal processes to impart knowledge and help people to acquire the skills necessary for them to perform their jobs satisfactorily. Training is perceived as a formal act in time that facilitates learning (Armstrong, 2009, Geldermann, 2005).

Definition of learning, development and training covers a very broad portfolio of methods, techniques and approaches. In the practical part of my paper I am going to have a closer look on one learning programme and therefore I am going to define the theoretical framework to embed it in. Each individual and each organisation has its preferred specific ways of effective learning, development and training. Armstrong (2009) distinguishes between formal, informal and workplace learning:

Informal learning is an experiential learning. Most learning takes place on-the-job and not in formally organised training programmes. Armstrong (2009) claims that people can learn 70 per cent of what they know about their job informally.

Workplace learning also happens within the job, but it covers mainly coaching, mentoring, job rotation, job shadowing, bite-sized learning through e-learning, cross-functional or cross-site project work.

Formal learning is described as planned and systematic. Knowledge is transferred via structured training programmes consisting of instruction and practise and training takes place on- or off-the-job. Other group of current trends in training is direct active involvement of learner in the learning process. Noe et al. (2008) mentions these current methods:

- On-the-Job Training - peers or managers train new or inexperienced employees who learn the job by observation, understanding and imitation.
- Self-directed learning - a program in which employees take responsibility for all aspects of learning.
- Apprenticeship - a work-study method with both on-the-job and classroom training.
- Simulations - a training method that represents a real-life situation, allowing trainees to see the outcomes of their decisions in an artificial environment.
- Avatars - computer depictions of humans that can be used as imaginary coaches, co-workers and customers in simulations.
- Virtual reality - computer-based technology that provides trainees with a three-dimensional learning experience. Trainees operate in a simulated environment that responds to their behaviours and reactions.
- Schoenefeldt (2006) introduces learning weblogs - online diaries though which learners communicate. It is apparent that the use of new technologies and web became very popular in learning. Singh (2003) categorises the current learning formats according to how much synchronous the learning process is and whether it happens online or live. Synchronous physical formats - instructor-led classrooms, lectures, hands-on labs, workshops, field trips Synchronous live formats - online meetings, virtual classrooms, web seminars and broadcasts, coaching, instant messaging, conference calls

Self-paced asynchronous formats - documents and web pages, web/computer based training modules, assessments/tests/surveys, simulations, job aids, electronic performance support systems, recorded live events, online learning communities and discussion forums, mobile learning.

Kim, Bong and Teng (2009) come up with the list of technologies that are expected to be widely used in learning in the next few years: knowledge management tools, digital libraries and depositories (learning content management tools), online simulations, webcasting and video streaming, cell phones and other mobile and handheld technologies, wireless technologies, intelligent agents, pod casting and iPods, electronic books, weblogs and online diaries, massive multiplayer online gaming, wikis, language training and support tools. Noe et al. (2008) presents the most used instruction technologies and instruction methods in learning. Figure 1 displays them.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

For the practical part of my paper I set up the following main targets:
Research and analysis of current forms of training and development of employees in the Continental Corporation
Analysis of the current learning concept of HR Insight learning programme
Propose a redesign of the HR Insight learning concept into a blended learning concept
Implementation, realisation and evaluation of running of the proposed new concept

I start my research in Continental Corporation by analysing the currently used forms of training and development of employees. For this purpose I come up with research hypopaper number 1:
H1: Corporation is resistant to current trends in education and training of employees. As a research method I study internal company information sources and conduct in-depth interviews with 3 managers responsible for employee development on a global level.

I go deeper in my research and I direct my research efforts on a single learning programme called HR Insight. This programme is currently experiencing a fall-out in running due to reasons mentioned further in the paper. I set up research hypothesis number 2:

H2: Managers (tutors) consider the current learning concept of HR Insight as inefficient regarding the knowledge transfer to the trainees (participants).

I am going to conduct in-depth interviews with 13 managers who participate in the learning programme as tutors. Further details of the method and the interview guide are specified further in the paper.

Human Resources Corporate Functions Department (HR CF) is a centre of expertise for the corporation located in the corporate headquarters. It is where all corporate Human Resource (HR) policies are created and governed. Lead by the Head of HR CF, this department gathers subject matter experts (SME) in the following areas – Human Resources Development (HRD), Employer Branding and Recruiting, Travel Management, International Assignments, Compensation and Benefits, Corporate Health, Safety and Security and HR Services and Systems. Parallel to these centres of expertise is Human Resources Development Corporate Functions Department (HRD CF) that focuses on the development of HR employees in the headquarters and together with HRD also on the development of HR employees globally.

Continental ranks among the top 5 automotive suppliers worldwide and the second largest in Europe. Initially the production comprised of soft rubber products, rubberized fabrics and solid tires for carriages and bicycles. Nowadays the product portfolio includes tires, brake control systems, airbag electronics, driver assistance systems, sensors, systems and components for the powertrain and chassis, instrumentation, infotainment solutions, vehicle electronics and technical elastomer products (Continental Annual Report 2010, 28). Continental’s history is rich on mergers and acquisitions and features a trend of continuous company growth. Vision of the corporation states: „We make individual mobility safer, more comfortable and more sustainable. Performance is our passion. Creating value is our driving force (Continental Corporation 2010).”

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After further research among the HR representatives from the divisions, I found out that there are two learning initiatives that use e-learning or blended learning as a learning tool in the Rubber Group, another one comes from the former Siemens VDO and newly in 2009, an e-learning platform came in with the capital acquisition by the Schaeffler Group. These platforms are partly inter-connectable, but have not been integrated due to various reasons so far. To conclude, there is no central learning programme or curriculum within the Continental Corporation. All training and development initiatives run on an individual basis according to the needs of the divisions, locations or countries. However, in HRD there is a central development framework considering the content and the realisation of the learning, where a live interaction theme prevails. There are few independent e-learning platforms that have not been integrated so far, but apparently, Continental has resisted the e-learning hype and uses this learning form and other current trends in learning rather rarely. However, running separate platforms is not cost efficient and using homogenous means of training and development may not even be learner-friendly.

In a much closer look, I found out that concerns about costs and learner-friendliness of the learning programmes are perceived to be of high relevance among the HR managers. I targeted my efforts into a learning initiative called HR Insight to analyse the situation deeper.

HR Insight is an on-boarding tool that is used to introduce new HR professionals that are coming into the corporation into the main corporate HR process and policies. According to Armstrong’s learning approach it is a formal learning initiative. Main goals of this learning initiative are displayed in Figure 2.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Continental corporation has a very well developed framework of training and development of its employees. Specifically in the area of HR there is a clear and reasonable learning curriculum. The corporate HR managers are aware of what knowledge and know-how needs to be trained and have compiled high-class well targeted learning programmes to make it happen. However, the usage of the learning methods proves to
be monotonous and resistant to new trends in business education. Live interaction dominates the programmes and I see a lost benefit that a blended approach could bring.

Obviously there are some serious management issues connected to the current concept of the HR Insight learning initiative. In my opinion, it works well regarding the networking aspect, however there are considerable dysfunctions regarding the effectiveness of the know-how transfer in comparison to the time and money invested. Financial crisis caused a serious long term fall out in the running of the learning conference and I am highly concerned about the number of the new HR hires that need to be trained. On one hand, it is growing in time; on the other hand it is growing due to the growth of the corporation. I am convinced that a quick measure has to be taken to prevent any further negative consequences. Hypotheses number 1 and 2 are confirmed. Based on the general analysis of the current forms of training and development of employees in the Continental Corporation and detailed research about HR Insight I see a huge potential in the implementation of blended learning into the learning curriculum. I think that transformation into a blended learning format may considerably enhance the HR Insight programme and effectively tackle the main problems that are connected to the current concept, mainly its unfeasibility with the economic restrictions. Moreover I envision a potential global use of the blended learning among the entire multinational corporate HR community.

When developing the concept of the learning initiative I follow the step-by-step method of designing a training program by Armstrong (2009). HR Insight is already an established learning programme and therefore I can skip establishing the learning needs, defining the learning objectives, deciding on the content and who delivers the programme, because it has already been done when launching the programme. I am going to focus mainly on deciding on the methods of delivery, location, facilities and new budget. Further I am going to prepare information on the programme, be present during the delivery of the learning programme and ultimately I am going to evaluate separate parts of the newly proposed concept and the concept as a whole.

In order to best fit the current and future needs of the corporation and in order to effectively meet the targets of the HR Insight learning initiative I propose two alternatives of a blended learning approach - a virtual and a fully-featured blended learning alternative. I suggest using the virtual alternative immediately in order to satisfy the learning demand growing in 2009 when no HR Insight took place and in 2010 when the travel ban is expected to last. Due to the fact that professional networking is one of the main targets of this learning initiative, I recommend the virtual alternative only as a temporary solution, because of the absence of the personal aspect in the virtual approach (Figure 3).

Besides the massive involvement of new technologies in learning, I observe an interesting phenomenon in the literature on the employee development and learning. Hype about e-learning from the early years of this century fades drastically away and a new trend of blended learning is becoming a new buzzword in the circles of education and training practitioners (Hess, 2003).
In 2002 the ASTD State of the Industry Report from the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) published in Personalführung 7/2002 states that companies are spending more on employee training and e-learning has reached its highest level since 1997. Only a year later Reinmann-Rothmeier (2003, 28) reports from the first German Symposium on Blended Learning: In spite of the electronic learning, the academic audience was praising the ideal mixture of classic and new organisational forms, methods and media: face-to-face arrangements (such as seminars and conferences) are connected with synchronous and asynchronous media arrangements. Shortly: Everything is possible. Four years later Dr. Thomas Hartge opens the 2/2007 issue of Personalführung with the question: “Goodbye to e-learning?"
Figure 3. Proposed evolution of the HR Insight learning concept

A Virtual Blended Learning Alternative is implemented and run with a group of 34 participants and 11 presenters. Proposed timeline and time investments on average prove to correspond with reality. In order to get the data for Kirkpatrick’s Level 1 evaluation of reactions to training I conduct in-depth interviews with 6 presenters (interview guide in Appendix 10) and gather feedback from the participants (questionnaire in Appendix 11). When trying to evaluate the training programme with Kirkpatrick’s Level 2 and higher level, I am stopped by the unwillingness of management to test the participants. On one hand, to create and later evaluate the set of questions that test the knowledge of the participants requires a considerable time investment for the presenters and on the other hand, managers do not want to test the participants at all, because according to them that is not the goal of this learning initiative and should never be. Therefore, the Level 2 evaluation of gained knowledge of participants is not possible and thus any other level of evaluation. However, I see this as a good point for further research beyond this paper.

What I perceive to be the biggest success of the Virtual Blended Learning Alternative of HR Insight in praxis is the 2 weeks offline e-learning part. Presenters and the participants are both very satisfied with running of the Moodle platform. They claim that it is easy to handle, intuitive to use and clearly structured, what supports gaining the broad overview of the topics. A huge benefit perceived by the presenters is that due to the longer and challenging preparation phase they were forced to critically review and update their presentations and a high-quality up-to-date HR know-how database was put together. Moreover, the learning materials are very easily and quickly updatable, as the Adobe Presenter tool enables to change and re-record individual slides without having to re-record the whole narration again. The presenters are also forced to keep their materials up-to-date, because of the regular runs of the learning initiative.

CONCLUSION

This research guides developing and implementing a blended learning curriculum into a multinational corporation. We start with the analysis of the currently used learning forms in the Continental Corporation; continue with a detailed analysis of the current situation of HR Insight learning initiative. The main objectives of this initiative are to introduce newly hired HR professionals into the corporate main HR policies and processes, update, enlarge and discuss the participant’s corporate HR picture and building participants’ and professionals’ networks. In a much closer look on HR Insight learning programme I find out that there are significant issues connected to the learning format. Firstly, the current form of a live conference held for all international colleagues in Hannover is not executable in the times of an economic crisis, when a travel ban has been imposed on the corporation globally and therefore no HR Insight took place in 2009 and none is planned for 2010 either. Secondly, current learning format is not considered as efficient regarding the knowledge transfer as perceived by the managers/tutors (hypopaper H2 confirmed). Main objections of the managers are that a vast amount of content is transferred to the participants within a very condensed and tight agenda and that participants with lower level of English are overladen by a continuous stream of spoken presentations in English. Based on the theoretical background I come up with a concept redesign of HR Insight that features a blend of asynchronous e-learning module and a synchronous online collaboration module. After running a pilot run of the proposed concept I come up with a detailed analysis of the time investment of all parties involved in the programme. Expectedly the biggest time investment is required from the organisers of the programme.
On the grounds of the research and experience gained in the pilot run I propose two alternatives of a blended learning solution of HR Insight - Virtual blended learning alternative and a Fully-featured blended learning alternative. The Virtual blended learning alternative is run within the proposed technical means and budget. Therefore I recommend to use the Virtual blended learning alternative with adjustments only as a back-up solution and in the long-run use the Fully-featured blended learning alternative that blends an asynchronous e-learning module and a synchronous live learning and networking event. Blended learning proves to be easily adaptable to the trend of a growing global HR community (hypopaper H5 confirmed) as no considerable time of effort is needed to make the e-learning knowledge database globally accessible on a just-in-time basis and under running regional live events as described in the Fully-featured blended learning alternative, costs of travel can be optimised. When it comes to the implementation, compared with the three barriers of implementation of a blended learning by Sauter and Sauter, I did not come across a defect information sharing or communication, but I encountered an innovation adverse approach of some managers/tutors. Rigid organisational structure was represented mainly by the Works Council that possesses significant power.

**REFERENCE**


