STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ONLINE LEARNING

By

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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning is a critical part of sustaining distance education. Through such planning, the organization can solve business problems that involve training and education in an effective and often cost savings manner compared to in-person training efforts. This paper examines the strategic planning process as it relates to sustaining distance education and training.

The information age is over and memorization and recall are no longer considered as dynamic strategies for learning. The age of communication, collaboration, and action are emerging. The arrival of the electronic highway and the creation of a worldwide classroom has accelerated the term "teleinformatics", which is the transfer of information via technology (Haché 1998). Along with changing technologies and business practices, some skills are changing so quickly that they're outdated within a few months of introduction. In addition, the number of range of skills required of an average employee is increasing. If the rate of change over the last five years continues, then at any time, most companies will have to retrain a large percentage of their employees.

The need for new and appropriate pedagogical strategies to facilitate knowledge transmission and skill enhancement via distance education is critical, as businesses will have to rely on distance education to re-skill and keep pace with the changing technological and business world. With the growth, diversification, and decrease in costs of interactive technologies, distance education is developing into it's own infrastructure to become the emerging educational network in the 21st century. Distance education is often an attractive solution to business problems and as a tool to foster effectiveness at a lower cost (Braun, 1990; Duning, Van Kekerix, & Zaborowski, 1993).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the importance of the strategic planning process in the establishment (assessment, design, implementation, evaluation, and sustaining) of a distance education program, or elearning, within a corporation. Additionally, this paper will identify the essentials of the strategic planning, the challenges, the process, the success, and how these essentials can and will affect organizational change.

Strategic Planning: The Challenge

Distance education approximately 4-5 years ago was the beginning of a transformation in training that demanded a whole new way of thinking. Industry experts talked confidently about the ability to deliver training anywhere at anytime to meet user needs. A huge amount of money and intellectual energy has been invested in heavily marketed competing systems, and a lot of analysis and argument has taken place. Market turbulence and learner or organizational resistance of new technology is viewed as short-term problems and the advancement of distance training continues.

The ambition and sophistication of learning technologies have improved enormously, and there's evidence of massive progress still to come. Connectivity of computers, databases, and networks is the future for learners, and distance education will be most effective when it's part of a considered strategy in support of the corporate goals and business objectives. When

knowledge development is aligned with the product cycle, so that the workforce receives skills that keep pace with the company's business objectives, education and training is most successful.

Implementing distance education can be challenging, and should not be considered as a universal solution. It is very complex and can lead to set backs or even failure. To succeed you must think critically about the ability of your organization to implement distance education successfully. Organizations will encounter several challenges in using distance learning or blended solutions. Most organizations tend to have internal competence in either instructor-led training or distance training, but seldom both, and to show the benefit of a true distance learning approach, a front-end analysis of distance education must be conducted. All successful learning is predicated and sustained a good analysis, which is part of the overall instructional systems design (ISD) process. This analysis also helps to determine the differences between the current and future states of the learning environment. The strategic planning process can provide the training and development function, the resource managers, senior leaders or managers, as well as, targeted audience with a shared understanding of the distance education concept and its benefit to the corporation. It brings together the stakeholders within the organization, and clearly shows how e-learning can/will support organizational objectives.

Strategic Planning: The Process

Successful implementation of technology-based learning requires a solid understanding of business drivers, learning cultures, and user needs. At the core of the most successful distance education programs lie gathering, analysis, and synthesis steps that will remain remarkably stable regardless of the technology or distance-learning era. The strategic planning process contributes to sound

decision-making and assist in the development and implementation of distance education programs that will withstand the vagaries of technology and optimize success. Organizations that engage in the a purposeful process of defining their vision and mission, anticipating the challenges they will face, describing questions they will have to answer (to include resources), and determining how they will gauge their progress are more likely to experience long-term success. Let's examine a few perspectives of the process:

Strategic planning for a distance learning program requires the development of an organization-wide plan, that once implemented, will help to assure a fully functioning Distance Education and Training program to meet business objectives. A planning team who is equipped and authorized to address important issues and make decisions is imperative to the process. These key decision makers will investigate the use of distance learning and create a high-level requirements document that will explore the organization's readiness (Chapnick, 2000). Are you ready for e-learning). Issues such as:

● Business Objectives - This factor looks closely at the business goals and objectives.

● Advantages and potential Obstacles - This factor considers the benefits and the barriers to implementing a distance education program.

● E-learning Configurations - This factor considers whether there's an infrastructure in place to support the distance education program

● Organizational Readiness (corporate culture) - This factor considers both the psychological and sociological readiness of the organization and the environment of which the program will be implemented.

● Technological Skill (aptitude) Readiness - This factor considers observable and measurable technical competencies.

● Human Resources Readiness - This factor considers the availability and design of the human support system.

● Financial Readiness - This factor considers the budget size and allocation process.

There are many strategic planning models that apply to business, to public, and to private sector organizations. The majority of the models adapted to education are much more flexible and democratic than those of the corporate world. However, the choice of model is less important than the commitment and conviction of those in charge of the project and the sincere acceptance of the strategic plan within everyday operations of the organization (Goodstein, Nolan, & Pfeiffer, 1992).

A model adapted especially for the specific characteristics of a distance education program can consist of a non-linear approach, illustrating interaction and dynamic between various elements and decision-making bodies. This model will be applied differently according to different organizational structures of distance education programs within an organization (Haché, 2000). Five main elements are outlined in such a process.

● Preparatory steps to planning - A period of exploration and discussion regarding the validity and necessity of the planning process. Here the leader communicates his/her vision of what the organization could or should be and how a distance education program might facilitate that process of moving towards the vision. Additionally, an explicit commitment an proposed high-level timeline should be proposed by the leader and other team members in order to arrive at a consensus for a common vision.

● Gathering of information, analysis and systemic diagnosis - When gathering information, the committee members must be able to reflect the vision the organizations shares describing future direction, and

clearly and concisely highlight the reason for the existence of a distance education program. The collection of information and the continual analysis of internal and external environments is an integral part of the planning and decision-making process.

● The strategic choice - The strategic "stakes " affect the fundamental aspects of the policies of the institution, such as the mission, the goals and objectives, the values, the clientele, the structure, and the management. At this stage the evaluation of the consequences for the organization takes place, and the stated needs and capabilities including the financial, technical, and human resources are examined.

● The implementation - Once the choice of strategies has been decided, the plan is written and preparation for implementation begins. The strategy should consist of all goals, policies, programs, actions and decisions, and the allocation of resources. The basis of the action pans should be the resulting objectives that put the strategies into measurable and qualitative terms. Action plans serves to determine the tasks, activities, responsibilities, and timelines.

● Evaluation and control of the implementation - The evaluation and control of the implementation requires a commitment from the beginning and continuous action by the institution to follow each step and to identify gaps between fixed objectives and current achievements. This facilitates the immediate recognition of deviations in situations, and gives the opportunity for corrective action.

● Finally, this comprehensive plan, should address issues at three critical levels within the corporation: organizational, process, and individual or job/performer level.

● Organizational level - At the organizational level the key performance variables are the organization's strategy and goals. Strategic planning must begin at the

organizational level, when an organization considers its mission, and identifies an unmet need or gap between where it is and where it wants to be (Berge, 2001). Researchers suggest that strategic planning is based on a theory and a preparation for the future separate from long-term planning. This approach is based on the belief that the future can be influenced and developed by present actions instead of taking it for granted that current trends will continue linearly into the future (Kaufman, 1988). An organization that plans strategically is not preparing for the future, but preparing the future itself.

● Process level - At the process level, the focus is on the relationship within the environment and internal structure, and essentially how work gets done and managed. Because of the potential to span individual work activities, organizational productivity, and sector growth, leaders must know the importance of the planning at the process level. Also included at the process level is the evaluation plan. The evaluation plan will to determine the program's outcomes in terms of costs and effectiveness.

● Individual/job performer level - Because organizational outputs are produced through processes, processes in turn are ultimately performed and managed by individuals and teams doing various jobs. A distance education framework must be created that will incorporate and connect learning to performance support systems. (Stolovich & Keeps, 1999).

Strategic Planning: The Success

The strategic planning process is defined as a disciplined effort to produce the decisions and actions that shape and guide the development of a true distance education program.

"The value of strategic planning is that it allows the organization to map out a program that benefits the organization's members and accomplishes the organization's goals" (Berge, 2001).

The move towards learning technologies generally begins when you seek a better way to deliver training. Some organizations begin the process by looking at the value of using technology. Normally, from there a number of pilots are conducted and evaluated. As each technology tool works, the pilot expands and key business leaders are exposed to the benefits of using technology to implement training. As a result, the planner may be asked to bring all of the pilots together as a part of a comprehensive learning plan; that rarely fits together seamlessly. The strategic planning process allows you successful align knowledge development with organizational needs, so that the workforce receives skills and keeps pace with the organizational needs to meet business objectives.

Key to success of this integrated approach is the support and decision making of top leaders. Going through such a time consuming process to create a framework, by exhibiting enthusiasm, allocating resources and championing the program, the leaders build credibility for the distance education and training, maintain organizational currency and relevancy in the field, and gather support and partners inside and outside the organization.

Conclusion

The technological intrusion and the social changes caused by globalization have underlined the potential of distance education and have called into question the effectiveness of traditional methods of knowledge transmission to meet just in time training needs. With the growth, diversification and decrease in costs of interactive technologies, distance education is developing its own infrastructure to become the emerging educational network of the 21st century. The emergence of this phenomenon is attractive as a solution to some of the problems of the millennium and as a tool for the current steps in seeking reforms that will foster effectiveness and excellence.

Many studies and evaluations confirm that well planned distance education programs can be as efficient as, if not more so, than a traditional face-to-face approach, often at a lower cost. Berge (2001) states, "In an organization that has distance education and training as part of its profile, the key to sustaining technology-based learning at a distance is strategic planning". However, some researchers suggest that strategic planning is not the miracle solution, since the failures of recent decades have highlighted the difficulties and weaknesses. Mintzberg (1994, cited in Haché, 1998) considers it necessary to re-conceptualize strategic planning as a practice he now call "strategic programming". This means that the organization involves a large number of people in a strategic thought rather than using only a few strategic planning specialists.

The strategic planning process requires a clear vision of the intention and future of the organization, the development of a mission filled with corresponding objectives, the gathering of extensive information, the analysis and diagnosis of internal and external environments, the study of alternatives, the development of strategies and action plans as well as the evaluation and control of implementation.

Strong leadership is also necessary, one with the vision and understanding of social trends and changes, and one that can ensure that the ideas generated by the strategic planning process gets the desired results. Strategic planning becomes an integral part of the leadership and the organizational climate, and leads to appropriate action steps for achieving organizational goals. The bottom line is straightforward. If the end goal is for people to apply newly acquired skills to the job, which will enhance performance and deliver the mission requirements and results that are desired, you must consider all factors that could benefit or create barriers to the implementation of a distance education program, and strategic planning strives to answer these questions.

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