



5 Jan 2005

Workforce Development and Access to e-Learning

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Europe should build up the skills levels of its own workforce. This entails fulfilling several requirements, from identifying the relevant skills to providing individuals with the capability to acquire relevant knowledge.

The e-Europe 2005 agenda is now in the process of being revised and redefined and a new e-Europe 2010 agenda is being developed. In terms of workforce development there is a lot that still needs to be done. There needs to be more emphasis on defining ways in which the private sector can work with the education sector to ensure students leave education at all levels with the necessary skills required for e-Europe. We need to assess what has been achieved in workforce development in general and what still needs to be done and by when in order to give Europe the competitive advantage for which it strives. We also need to focus on the benefits of e-learning technologies and ensure that the tools and content being developed will address the performance gap that exists in developing a workforce that is responsive to the fundamental changes that are happening as we move increasingly from an industrial to a knowledge economy. Unless we focus more on these efforts we will not be able to achieve the objective of the Lisbon Strategy for Europe to become the world's leading knowledge economy by 2010.

It has been suggested that we must leave behind the concept of 'skills gap' and consider instead the concept of a 'performance gap'. For economic growth in a k-economy, a potential partnership must also find impact-laden, effective, and efficient ways to enable knowledge flow between industry and educational institutions. This overarching need, in turn, translates into requirements for:

- . defining what knowledge and skills are relevant for companies, for whole industries, and/or for industry clusters;
- . defining a mechanism for disseminating information regarding what knowledge and skills are relevant to firms, industries, and/or industry clusters;
- . providing individuals with the capability to acquire and/or signal the acquisition of the relevant knowledge and skills – regardless of how they were acquired; and
- . a coherent system to guide relevant individual professional development to meet the needs of employers and society .

The ICT industry has had little success in recruiting women into the sector, thus excluding around 50% of the potential workforce from becoming involved in a sector which is one of the key drivers for Europe to gain competitive advantage. If this trend continues, economic growth may not be maintained. (In 2003, market volume in Western Europe was €592 billion, which represented 3.1% of GDP. The sector employs 7% of the European business sector workforce. The ICT market in Europe will continue to grow in 2004 by roughly 12.3%, compared to an overall worldwide growth of 8.2%)

Europe has an aging population, most of whom will need to retire later. They lack ICT skills and need to be retrained. However there is low labour mobility and there is not yet a strong culture of lifelong learning; and there are multilingual and multicultural differences. Content is insufficiently targeted and is not focused on learners' real needs. More innovation is needed in effective e-learning/blended learning solutions. Workforce development needs to be made more effective.

The PWC Report *Rethinking the European ICT Agenda. Ten ICT Breakthroughs for Reaching Lisbon Goals* commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs during the Netherlands Presidency of the European Union, has as one of its breakthrough strategies the call to develop a strategic response to job migration from low-wage countries. The report suggests there are two elements which affect the job market in Europe – off-shoring and job migration. The consensus seems to be that off-shoring should be allowed to continue (and indeed it would be hard to curtail) as it can prepare the ground for European overseas investment. Europe should respond by building up the high level skills of its own workforce and re-skilling and up-skilling those whose jobs are made redundant because of low wage costs overseas. To counteract job migration, the report suggests that "Europe should jointly

formulate a strategy in this area. Europe is best served when making sure that job losses are not caused by unnecessary shortcomings of the European labour market and the business climate.” However, this requires an extensive training programme.

e-Learning in the workplace

Large corporations have found ways to blend training and development through a mix of instructor-led and e-learning solutions. However for small and medium businesses there are fewer opportunities and affordances to produce such targeted solutions so they have to rely on off the shelf products (see the article e-Learning and Small and Medium Enterprises by Graham Attwell, <http://www.elearningeuropa.info/doc.php?lng=1&id=4329&doclng=1&p1=1>) At the same time, people’s workloads are expanding, so time for training becomes increasingly limited. Training has to be targeted and focused. It needs to aim at both personal and product development and to be accessible on demand at the right time. Informal learning at work needs to be recognised and accredited and learner e-portfolios developed that are interoperable so that they can be transferred from employer to employer.

Colleges and universities need to come together increasingly with industry so that SMEs, medium and large organisations can make greater use of these institutions to train their staff, and students can be prepared for the workplace with more relevant skills. Part time study will become the norm as workers identify skills they need and educational institutions respond with relevant offerings that are flexible and targeted to individual needs. e-Learning permits personalisation and individualisation, and education needs to be more responsive in its demands on learners and aim its offerings towards a wider and less traditional population. Of course, this does not imply that all education has to be focused exclusively on the workplace, but educational institutions do need to refocus their objectives and provide for flexibility in the way they offer learning, the assessment tools they use and the demands they make on learners in ways that will increase participation and success. In this way, the performance gap can be reduced.

Overall, learning needs to be more attractive. The ability to use the multimedia capabilities of the Internet to produce engaging, interactive learning packages should be exploited more fully, and tools developed that will simplify access and tailor courses to individual needs. This is paramount to the provision of learning opportunities that people will want to access. Additionally, employees need rewards to motivate them to undertake training, which should also count in a worker’s performance management review and contribute to their career aspirations.

e-Learning implies a degree of digital literacy, and it is the duty of every employer to ensure that their employees have the necessary skills to undertake e-learning. Equally, the tools for e-learning should not necessarily require a high level of digital literacy before a learner can engage in an e-learning training module.

Finally trainers and tutors need to develop new skills that support autonomous, personalised e-learning that ensure that the learner does not feel isolated and can access the support of their peers and their teachers as easily as their learning.

This article represents Michelle Selinger’s personal views and not necessarily the views of the CISCO Systems Company.

To learn more about the possibilities and obstacles to the application of e-learning in small companies, see Graham Attwell's article [e-Learning and Small and Medium Enterprises](#).

See the papers presented at the [eSkills Summit in 2002](#).