

Implementing e-learning  
in a Multinational Beverage Company in  
Greece: A Qualitative Research Approach

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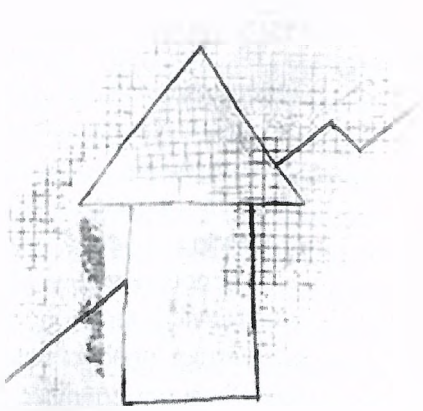
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# Implementing e-learning in a Multinational Beverage Company in Greece: A Qualitative Research Approach

Εφαρμογή της  
Ηλεκτρονικής Μάθησης  
σε μια Πολυεθνική  
Επιχείρηση στην Ελλάδα:  
Ποιοτική Προσέγγιση



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## Abstract

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is changing at an alarming pace creating new forms of learning, such as electronic learning, which seems to be very appeal nowadays across all the business sectors. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the existing and potential role and usefulness of e-learning as a corporate tool for supporting and improving organizational learning to business organizations. This is accomplished by showing how e-learning can support and enhance the management of organizations' existing knowledge and the development of a new learning culture with an implementation of a qualitative research in a multinational company in Greece. More specifically, we examine and explore the qualitative comments offered from learners and identify the major key factors influencing e-learning, by penetrating the findings derived from the research conducted in a multinational company in combination with an overview of the literature review about this new technology that is called e-learning.

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Τα τελευταία χρόνια, η τεχνολογία της Πληροφορικής και Τηλεπικοινωνιών (ICT) αλληλάζει με ταχείς ρυθμούς το περιβάλλον μέσα στο οποίο δραστηριοποιούνται οι οργανισμοί. Στα πλαίσια αυτού του παγκόσμιου και άκρως ευμετάβλητου και ανταγωνιστικού περιβάλλοντος νέες μορφές και εργαλεία μάθησης, όπως η ηλεκτρονική μάθηση (e-learning), εμφανίζονται σε όλους τους επιχειρηματικούς κλάδους.

Η παρούσα έρευνα εξετάζει τα χαρακτηριστικά της εφαρμογής της ηλεκτρονικής Μάθησης στους οργανισμούς υλοποιώντας την ποιοτική ερευνητική μεθοδολογία με την χρήση μελέτης περίπτωσης (case study) σε μία ελληνική πολυεθνική εταιρία. Ο σκοπός του άρθρου είναι να ερμηνεύσει τον ρόλο της ηλεκτρονικής μάθησης στην δημιουργία, υποστήριξη και βελτίωση των διαδικασιών οργανωσιακής μάθησης και των συστημάτων γνώσης στις επιχειρήσεις με σκοπό την ανάπτυξη μιας νέας μαθησιακής κοινότητας.

Συγκεκριμένα, στο παρόν άρθρο πραγματοποιείται μία επιλεκτική ανασκόπηση της υπάρχουσας βιβλιογραφίας και αρθρογραφίας της ηλεκτρονικής μάθησης σχετικά με τον ορισμό, τα οφέλη και μειονεκτήματα της και ερευνώνται τα ποιοτικά σχόλια και απαντήσεις των ερωτηθέντων σε συνδυασμό με την διεθνή και ελληνική βιβλιογραφία ώστε να προσδιοριστούν οι κύριοι παράγοντες επηρεασμού της διαδικασίας εφαρμογής της ηλεκτρονικής μάθησης.

## Introduction

In recent years, due to the transition from the industrial economy to the post-industrial (knowledge-based) economy, the companies are called to operate in a continuously changing and extremely competitive business environment by transforming their *modus operandi*. In this new environment, although Knowledge is now the raw material that fuels the economy, the rate at which new knowledge and skills appear and become obsolete is remarkable. Skills and knowledge acquired at school or at the beginning of a career are no longer sufficient during a worker's entire professional life (Levy, 2001) because they have a shorter lifetime than in the past, and that is why there is a need of constant refreshing to keep up with new technologies and trends.

The rapidly expanding use of Information and communication technologies (ICT), such as the use of Internet, exert a major impact on the learning environment because of its interactivity, widespread usage and cost-effectiveness characteristics. The challenge of the new century seems to be "to turn e-information into human knowledge" (Noe, 2002). Throughout the literature there seems to be agreement that ICT will most likely play a dominant role in facilitating or enabling knowledge management and changes many well-established ways of working and communicating of the work environment (Marquardt and Kearsley, 1999). One of the main uses of ICT to enable knowledge management is the e-learning. There are many who have seen the development of e-learning the last few years as the most efficient and effective method for rapidly distributing knowledge within the organization and as an answer to new trends and learning needs, such as shorter life span of knowledge, lifelong learning, knowledge management, technological advances. As Gunasekaran (2002) states the e-learning will succeed to provide faster learning at reduced costs, increased access to learning process and clear accountability for all participants in order to allow individuals and organizations to keep up with changes in the global economy and turn this change into competitive advantage.

The purpose of this research is to examine the nature and importance of e-learning in today's ever changing competitive landscape based not only in the literature available, but also by presenting important lessons derived from the case study in a multinational company about the implementation of e-learning. It is evident that the technology of e-learning as a training method is still very young but also very challenging for the future and that is why it has become a topic of keen interest to business practitioners and academics.

## **Literature Review**

### **Definitions of E-learning**

The last few years, e-learning has become a topic of keen interest to business practitioners as it is considered being a technology initiative that will transform the training and learning landscape in order to keep the organizations workforce current and competent.

Elliott Masie (1997) defines the e-learning as the use of network technology to design, deliver, select, administer, and extend learning.

Furthermore, as Broadbent (2002) states e-learning refers to "training, education, coaching and information that it is delivered digitally"

This definition implies learning that it is delivered by any mean which is

digital and this does not include only the Internet. Another definition given by Hall (1997) defines e-learning as "instruction that is delivered electronically, in part or wholly via a web browser, such as Netscape Navigator, through the internet or the intranet, or through multimedia platforms such as CD-ROM or DVD"

Finally, CEDEFOP<sup>1</sup> defines e-learning as:

"learning that is supported by information and communication technologies (ICT). E-learning is, therefore, not limited to 'digital literacy' (the acquisition of IT competence) but may encompass multiple formats and hybrid methodologies, in particular, the use of software, internet, CD-ROM, online learning, or any other electronic or interactive media"

According to all these definitions mentioned above training can be delivered via the internet, the intranet, the extranet, satellite, CD-ROM, DVD, it can include CBT (Computer-Based Training), WBT (Web-Based Training) and it can be supported by the telephone, multimedia and other forms of technology.

### **Advantages of E-learning**

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E-learning improves lifelong access to education and training for all employees by supporting and encouraging the acquisition of qualifications and competences that promote adaptability and innovation within the company. The main advantages and drivers of e-learning implementation derived from the literature review are the following:

- It allows convenient access to learning at any time, any place (Noe, 2002, Broadbent, 2002, Rossett, 2002).
- It can be delivered to geographically dispersed employees (Noe, 2002: 259, Broadbent, 2002, Rossett, 2002 Nisar, 2002, Young, 2002).
- It is cost-effective (Broadbent, 2002, Rossett, 2002).
- It can be delivered faster and more efficient to a greater amount of employees in a shorter period of time (Noe, 2002, Harrison, 2002, Nisar, 2002, Young, 2002).
- It fosters self-paced learning so learners can learn at their own rate. (Broadbent, 2002, Nisar, 2002).
- It is easy to be updated (Noe, 2002, Broadbent, 2002, Rossett, 2002).

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- It provides consistency to learning (Broadbent, 2002, Rossett, 2002,).
- It accommodates different learning styles and fosters learning through a variety of activities (Noe, 2002, Broadbent, 2002, 34, Roffe, 2002).
- It can build intellectual capital (Harrison, 2002, Rossett, 2002, Wild, 2002).
- It provides accountability for participants through automated continuous assessment and reporting of student participation and progress (Broadbent, 2002, Nisar, 2002 Young, 2002, Roffe, 2002).
- It supports company's business strategy and objectives (Noe, 2002: 259, Fry, 2002, Wild *et al*, 2002).
- It creates sustainable organizational performance in today's competitive environment (Mills and Friesen, 1992).

### **Disadvantages of E-learning**

E-learning is a new trend and the literature available seems to highlight mainly the advantages of this new technology rather than its disadvantages. However, there are some apparent pitfalls and barriers of e-learning identified.

- It can reduce personal contact between the trainer and the trainee and among the learners themselves and create isolation (Broadbent, 2002, Watson & Ahmed, 2004, Halkett, 2002, Nisar, 2002).
- It is confronted with resistance and lack of trust (Broadbent, 2002, Nisar, 2002, Young, 2002).
- There are bandwidth constraints and complaints about long download times (Broadbent, 2002, Honey, 2001, Fry, 2001).
- Not all e-learning courses are good courses (Rossett, 2002, Halkett, 2002, Honey, 2001).
- The e-learning programs are, usually, not customized easily and therefore, in some cases the company cannot make individual settings according to its own needs (Rossett, 2002, Prensky, 2003, Fry, 2001).
- Difficulty in determining and estimating the full cost of e-learning (Roffe, 2002, Broadbent, 2002, Wang, 2003).
- All training topics cannot be taught solely by e-learning (Pailing, 2002, Bose, 2003, Hall, 1997).

## **The Research Project**

### ***Methodology***

The purpose of this research is to provide rich, detailed and holistic description of e-learning as a new training method by exploring and presenting the various subjective perspectives and opinions of the

participants to the existing literature. Therefore, what is considered appropriate for the specific research is the qualitative research.

The three main sources of data that are associated with qualitative research and which we have implemented are:

- Unstructured and semi structured interviewing,
- Personal observation, and
- Examination of documents (Bryman, 1992).

It was considered essential that a close and detailed examination of a company implementing e-learning would be helpful in order to draw our conclusions for the implementation and effectiveness of this new trend. For this reason, a beverage company was chosen as a showcase, a very dominant multinational company that implements e-learning technology since 2002, that it provides to its employees 120 different curriculums on various subjects.

As Bryman (1992) supports "Case studies can be used to test theories" The case study can facilitate researcher, by focusing in a specific case, learn more things about the subject in question and provide an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and practice. In our case, the company that was chosen to be studied plays a supportive role in order to enhance our understanding for the implementation of e-learning. The type of case study that was implemented in the specific research is "intrinsic case study" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and the reason why the researchers chose to examine the specific company is because, it was one of the first companies implementing e-learning in Greece.

### ***The implementation of the e-learning project***

As the HR Director states "the training policy of the company is to create and enhance the skills and competences of the employees in line with the company's goals and objectives by provide them the learning solutions that individuals and organizations within the company need for success" The company started implementing e-learning in 2002 after a pilot group office that was conducted in Vienna. The decision was taken as the e-learning is consider to be a powerful learning solution and strategy that combines the information that the employee need to know to excel in his professional life with the use of audio, video and rich interactivity and is complying with the company's policy. The HR Specialist states that using multimedia technology (combination of Telecommunication and Information systems) like video, computers and the web and Internet chat capabilities, e-learning brings a world of content right to your office. Furthermore, the HR Specialist adds



"although a well designed e-learning can effectively simulate a number of work environments, giving you the opportunity to learn through experience, it can be used mainly in such areas as Soft Skills (team-building, management, coaching)"

The policy of the company includes that all employees have free access to all the courses available in the e-learning curriculum, but during their working hours they can only attend those that were included and approved by their manager in their development plan after the performance appraisal. Outside their working time they are free to attend any course they wish. At the present time the company offers to its employees 120 courses on topics such as Communication, Consulting Skills, Customer Service, E-business, E-learning, Finance and Accounting, Human Resources, Knowledge Management, Leadership, Management, Marketing, Operations, Personal Development, Project Management, Sales, Strategic Planning and Team Building. According to the company, one of the main reasons of e-learning implementation is to promote continuous and lifelong learning to employees.

The effective implementation of e-learning project presupposes that the following actions were taken in order to overcome and cope with the problems and challenges that revealed.

Firstly, the introduction of e-learning project, as Hr director mentions, has been supported and promoted continuously from the Top management of the company. The management team has to make e-learning visible and demonstrate through their behaviour that they consider it an important and worthwhile initiative.

Secondly, sometimes the biggest challenge is culture change. Organizations that are new to this approach sometimes find that their employees or customers are afraid. These problems must be overcome through careful change management, marketing, and technology standards. According to Bersin (2005) "You only have one chance to make a first impression and if the initial e-learning programs are hard to launch or hard to use, many learners will never comeback" The Hr director states, "it is very difficult to build the appropriate culture around e-learning" Before the company starts implementing e-learning two big presentations took place in order to introduce the new training method to the employees. These presentations had as a goal to explain to the employees what is e-learning and the reasons and ways it is used. What the HR specialist underlined is that during the presentation great emphasis was given on the fact that this training method is not going to replace the existed ones but is going to take supplementary

role for more training. Throughout all these years of the implementation of this new technology, the HR department stays close next to the employees and encourages them to use this alternative training method. To achieve this, the company gives a certificate of attendance for every course of e-learning that they complete. This is an extra motive for the employees since extra skills are added in their curriculum. Furthermore, continuous promotion has taken place along with workshop trainings that supports the knowledge acquired during the attendance of the sessions and newsletters are distributed every month from the HR department to all the employees with the news of the company in relation to e-learning program.

Thirdly, another difficulty is to set up feedback mechanisms. As the HR Specialist stated, the employee himself is encouraged to fill in an evaluation form of the program after the completion of a session. The HR department keeps track of the employees' and managers' responses, possible problems or reasons that prevent them from completing it. This is not something that can be achieved easily because there are still many cases where the employees when they face a problem, they abandon the program without reporting the problem encountered. Great effort is given from the HR department to emphasize to the users the importance of reporting any problems that they may face during the attendance of the training programs, but still there is a long way to go.

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Fourthly, another challenge that they have to overcome was the selection of the right infrastructure and content provider. There is a plethora of programs available in the market and the companies have to make a good research in order to choose this, which fulfil their business needs. The company choose a strategic content provider, Skillsoft, who can deliver a complete solution that can be deployed quickly and effectively.

Fifthly, the lack of trust and resistance to change was another issue that they have to cope. At the beginning of the program many employees were reluctant with e-learning. As the HR specialist states, effort must be made from all the agents, HR department in cooperation with managers, so that the attendance of the sessions to be reinforced continuously. The e-learning philosophy must be seen as part of a whole culture, which must be embodied to the general culture of the organization implementing it.

Finally, as stated by the HR Director, the implementation of e-learning, apart from other factors, very much depends on the personality of the employee. It has much to do with the learning style that expresses each employee, as well as the extent to which the employee is self-motivated

and can manage his own learning. However, e-learning accepts many learning styles, and this is apparent from the different features offered in the same program according to the preference of the learner.

### ***Research findings***

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate critical guidelines for practitioners from the case study, concerning the effective implementation of e-learning as a tool for promoting organizational learning. To accomplish this, we explore the qualitative comments offered by learners and identify the key factors influencing e-learning, by penetrating the findings derived from the research conducted in the company in conjunction with the literature review.

After the interview and the personal observation conducted in the company, specific advantages, disadvantages and implementation issues were identified concerning the technology of e-learning as a training method.

First of all, e-learning, within the company, is a method that can be delivered any time, any place, to anyone. Employees can access training when it is convenient for them, at home or in the office. In the company, all the employees have the opportunity to complete and attend any training program when they want during their working time, under the condition that it is assigned by their manager from their performance appraisal. In other case that the employee wants to conduct a training session without being assigned to him, he can do it, but not during the time he is at work, at home or in the office connecting to the corporate intranet.

Moreover, geographically dispersed employees can attend the same training program independent of their location. This is especially critical in the multinational company since even though employees of the same company are in different locations they can receive the same training content, which is, comply with the standards of the company and is in line with the company's goals and objectives. That is a fact that can enhance to the creation of a strong culture among the employees and within the company in general, since they all receive the same training independent of their location.

Furthermore, e-learning can be proven to be more cost-effective for the acquisition of soft skills than the traditional training because it reduces several variable costs (i.e. instructors and travel). As it was found by the research, e-learning reduces the variable cost associated with traditional training including the classrooms and training facilities as well as travel

costs, subsistence or accommodation associated with offsite training, and internal training costs.

E-learning offers to the company the opportunity to deliver training faster and to greater number of employees in a shorter period of time. As it was ascertained in company, there is no need any more to have the employees in long waiting lists in order to wait for an empty position or for the delivery of a specific course in order to attend a training session. All the employees can have access to a wider set of learning programs, self-study programs, and topics

Employees can learn at their own rate by proceeding through a course and convert information to knowledge on their own timetable. What was noticed is that the program provides learner with an estimated time for the completion of the session. This does not influence the pace of the learner, but it only gives an idea of the size of the session. Employees can log on and off the course as many times as they want, they can go back and navigate to the session again and again till they gain the mastery of the subject matter. The fact that employees are free to learn at their own pace remove the anxiety that may be caused by other learner and this without doubt advance learning and for sure the implementation of e-learning as a training method.

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Furthermore, training content can be easily and quickly updated and that is why product and procedural changes can be updated and delivered in real-time. This increases the rate at which skills and knowledge are acquired by the employees of the company in order to respond to the continuously changing and competitive environment.

An additional advantage of e-learning is that it provides consistency and uniformity to learning. What was found in the research is that the learning provided to the employees digitally, allows for consistency since the sessions are always the same, they follow the same standards and policies of the company, they are not influenced by any human frailties and therefore reducing the possibility for misinterpretations.

As it was also observed, the e-learning encourages employees to take responsibility of their own development. It is evident from our research that especially in the reported company employees have great responsibility over their development plans but as it was derived from the interviews, the attendance of e-learning very much depend on the personality of each employee and the extent to which e-learning has become part of the company's culture.

During the literature review section, what was mentioned is that through e-learning, a company can build intellectual capital and contributes

to the construction of knowledge management as it was supported by Harrison (2002). After the research that was conducted in the company, it was found that this can hold true since the technology of e-learning provides to the company a digital library to which all the employees have access to all the necessary information in order to enhance their skills and competences and increase their commitment ratio.

Furthermore, e-learning can support company's business strategy and objectives in the sense that it is based on the Performance Appraisal process of the employee. The employee along with his or her manager decides upon the training that is needed. This means that the training sessions that are offered in the company and are attended by the learners are in accordance and alignment with the business strategy in order to meet the specific company's needs.

In the literature review various disadvantages and constraints of this new training method and technology initiative were mentioned and an attempt will be made in order to compare the disadvantages identified by the academics in comparison with the implementation of e-learning in the company.

Academics such as Broadbent and Watson have supported that the technology of e-learning can reduce personal contact between the trainer and the trainee. From our research this cannot hold true, since as we have mentioned, e-learning is a supplementary training method, and therefore, interpersonal relations are apparent with the traditional training methods implemented by the company.

The second major disadvantage is that it can be confronted with reluctance and resistance. What was found is that the source of this reluctance is ignorance of what this method can offer. Employees were reluctant because they did not know what can offer to them and how to use it.

Moreover, another drawback of e-learning is the problems regarding the speed of the Internet connection, the bandwidth constraints (lack of broadband technology). In the company researched this appears to be the major problem that prevents employees from using it or from completing a course that they have started. Learners appear to be unwilling of waiting long in order to download a course, and the worst is that the malfunction of the internet connection that can disconnect them automatically and make them lose their work creating a negative attitude towards this method.

An additional disadvantage of e-learning is that there are many e-learning programs in the market (catalogue, or off-the-shelf), the accuracy of which can be under question. In the researched company this was never a problem, since the implementation of e-learning was a major project for

the company and a great investment, and therefore, a research was conducted from the company in order to find the best provider in the market. The company promotes continuous learning and gives emphasis to the development of its employees, and therefore, it would never provide to its employees a bad training program since they know that this would be eventually a problem for the company itself.

The next disadvantage is that the project of e-learning can take more time, money, resources and commitment than can be expected. In the company researched this was partly a problem. As the HR director and the HR specialist explained it is very difficult to build culture around e-learning and that e-learning is very easy to be forgotten and left aside. To overcome this problem the company has to launch promotional activities such as presentations and send newsletters to the employees in order to remind them and encourage them to use it.

Furthermore, another pitfall of e-learning is the lack of time. As it is identified by the company researched, when employees attend the program during their working time they cannot follow the program without interruptions. Even though the company provides employees with a stand saying "E-learning on Process" when they are attending a program to put on their desks for the information of the others, there are always interruptions from various sources. Moreover, headphones are also provided to the employees for the audio feature of the program and for helping them concentrate more on the program. However, the HR Specialist supported that when the other employees see their colleague in his office, they consider him as available and they interrupt him. This is because the e-learning technology is not yet fully absorbed by the company's culture.

Finally, another disadvantage encountered is that not all skills can be taught through e-learning. As it was found from the research, the company knew that this cannot be done and that is the rationale behind the blended learning, a mix of online learning with classroom, coaching, labs and other real world experiences, supported by the company. It recognizes that e-learning can be effective and efficient for some soft skills and it uses this training method not as a stand alone but as a supplementary one.

### ***Conclusion***

The e-learning is still in a very early stage of its life and this has as a result that its implementation is in general experimental stage. It is still confronted with ambiguity and maybe the lack of formality makes people not trusting it.

Nevertheless, as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is changing at an alarming pace and offering new possibilities as training tools, companies now start feeling familiar with it, implementing it and see it as a part of their learning strategy, moving learning from the classroom to the Web. Classroom training will be progressively reduced, especially for Soft Skill and some Customer Service functions, so if people want to learn they will be forced to turn to e-learning. Without doubt the technology of e-learning has a long way to go, but it can be seen as the way that carries the future of corporate training and learning and that is why it has an important role to play due to its cost-effectiveness, flexibility, convenience to learners, global reach, easy accessibility and consistency. However, it is apparent that further research of e-learning is required so that it can unfold its full potential. More specifically, future research needs to be conducted to measure and evaluate the impact and correlation that e-learning has on organizational performance and how it contributes to each level of learning in organizations.

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