

An Examination of Human Resources Professionals' Perceptions about the Integration of E-learning in the Workplace

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Abstract: Organizations in all sectors, private or public, innovate to operate efficiently and perform effectively. Technologies are adopted by organizations to gain competitive advantages over their competitors and are considered to be a source of competitive advantage and economic growth and a key determinant of corporate success, and thus worthy of study in both academic and practitioner communities. The competition and performance perspectives of technological tools is critical in business strategy, global business and strategic entrepreneurship. As the competitiveness of corporations relies on the effectiveness and productivity of the employees, it is important that employees' skills and knowledge are kept up-to-date and remain relevant to today's global business environment. As the role that Human Resources professionals play seems to be salient in providing effective workplace e-learning opportunities, the purpose of this qualitative study is to gain insights as to how Human Resources professionals choose to adopt e-learning opportunities in the workplace in the hospitality industry in Hawaii. Although the ultimate purpose of workplace e-learning is to generate positive business results and changes in job performance, some authors claim the lack of relevance and instructional effectiveness of e-learning systems in the workplace may be hindering improvement in work performance as the employees do not feel that knowledge learned through e-learning may be helpful. Furthermore, analysis of available publications in the area of adoption of workplace e-learning with individual learning needs and organizational objectives has indicated that studies in this field are limited. As such, the findings of this study would be important to the overall development of the field of workplace e-learning and benefit the stakeholders of organizations including Human Resources professionals and management in the hospitality industry in Hawaii. In order to understand these issues, this presentation will make introductory discussions to the research.

Keywords: e-learning, workplace learning, online learning, organizational adoption of technology, adult education

INTRODUCTION

The business environment is increasingly challenged under the conditions of global competition by such factors as rapid technological change, fast-changing market situations, constrained resources, and continuous demand for quality services (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012b). Technology is considered to be a source of competitive advantage and economic growth and a key determinant of corporate success, and thus worthy of study in both academic and practitioner communities (Damanpour, 2017). Kimiloglu, Ozturan & Kutlu, (2017) stated that corporate training is one of the main business functions in most organizations and the penetration of technology into the world of education is not prevalent only in an organizational context. As distance-learning programs are gaining popularity to a great extent in various areas such as high schools, universities, adult education and lifelong learning programs, companies and organizations are expected to give serious consideration to the way they design

and deliver training programs for their employees. (Kimiloglu et al., 2017)

As organizations are struggling to provide adequate e-learning opportunities to their workforce (Jia et al., 2011; Payne et. al., 2009), e-learning provides a mechanism for training independent from time or place that might help serve that need (Dawley & Dede, 2014; Oliver & Carr, 2009). In this light, organizations are attempting to provide effective workplace e-learning environments to address the challenge of providing training for large numbers of employees (Jia et al., 2011; Payne, et al., 2009) and e-learning has been considered to be an opportunity for effective competency-based learning, independent from place or time (Dawley & Dede, 2014; Oliver & Carr, 2009). However, there are still limited workforce e-learning opportunities offered (Jia et al., 2011).

In particular, the complex nature of the hospitality industry presents unique challenges for training and education providers in terms of access, deliverability, time, and need (Kalbaska, Lee, Cantoni & Law, 2013). Likewise, the hospitality industry in Hawaii has its

particular challenges as the industry is in operation 24 hours a day. In addition, as constant change and uncertainty in the business environment of the hospitality industry creates a situation that requires all employees to learn continuously (Kalbaska et al., 2013), it has become more challenging for the employees to have professional development opportunities as the corporate trainers would not be able to conduct face-to-face training sessions.

This is making it more challenging for the employees in the hospitality industry in Hawaii to be abreast with updated skills, knowledge and technological skills (Jia et al., 2011; Payne et al., 2009) as the success of tourism enterprises depends largely on employees in terms of how they are recruited, managed, trained and educated through a process of continuing learning and career development (Kalbaska et al., 2013). Although e-learning has been widely adopted in the hospitality industry (as well as other methods of training delivery) (European Commission, 2001) as a means of increasing skills and providing knowledge, the levels of adoption differ significantly (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Additionally, as the workforce today is becoming more diverse in terms of gender, culture and generations, it is posing new challenges in human resources development in the hospitality industry (Gratton & Scott, 2016; Oh & Reeves, 2014; Ogawa, 2015). Since the competitiveness of organizations depends on the effectiveness and productivity of the employees, it is critical to keep employees' skills and knowledge up-to-date and relevant to today's global business environment (Chen, & Kao, 2012; Wang et al., 2011). In this environment, the role that Human Resources professionals play has become critical in determining and adopting learning opportunities in organizations. Thus, this study seeks to explore how Human Resources professionals think about e-learning as a strategy to meet the training needs of their employees in the hospitality industry in Hawaii.

Therefore, this qualitative study will seek to explore how Human Resources professionals think about e-learning as a strategy to meet training needs. Also, it will investigate the various factors of workplace e-learning to gain insights into corporate decision making from the perspective of human resources professionals. Specifically, this study will investigate the role that Human Resources professionals play in making decisions to adopt e-learning in terms of (1) how they decide to adopt e-learning; (2) what factors influence their decisions; and (3) how they perceive the effectiveness of e-learning. In particular, this study seeks to understand what factors Human Resources professionals may think important when making decisions for adoption of e-learning through four major variables, which are individual, strategic, structural and organizational.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Corporate training is one of the main business functions in most organizations and the penetration of technology into the world of education is not prevalent only in an organizational context. At the same time, traditional methods of professional development such as conferences, workshops, and seminars have been found to deter working professionals from participating due to financial and time constraints, lack of support from supervisors, peers, and organizations, and geographical factors (Chong et al., 2016). In this learning environment, e-learning has been found to be an alternative to face-to-face education as it facilitates lifelong learning to increase the accessibility of professional development (Chong et al., 2016). The continuing development of information and communication technology has facilitated e-learning to become a new method of employee e-learning in the workplace as well as to provide employees with different learning opportunities regardless of time and place. Additionally, the learner-centered approach makes e-learning an effective e-learning method for employees that could also influence them to change their learning behaviors in their work environments (Yoo, Han & Huang, 2012a). Such changes in the training contexts of organizations have also developed the need for organizations to understand e-learning in order to facilitate adoption (Yoo, Boland Jr, Lyytinen, & Majchrzak, 2012b).

Although global corporate e-learning market is growing rapidly, there are a variety of issues and challenges involving online training and its application to workplace e-learning (Kimiloglu et al., 2017) and Human Resources professionals appear to play an important role in providing workplace e-learning opportunities for their employees (Wang, 2011; Wang et al., 2011). There are a variety of issues and challenges involving workplace e-learning and its application to workforce development (Jia et al., 2011). Lagging skills and knowledge may be impairing task performance in the workplace due to lack of effective workforce e-learning opportunities (Cheng et al., 2011). This is especially true since corporations are facing a constantly changing environment due to globalization, economic pressure, and the changing nature of work in the 21st century (Jia et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2011).

The organizational structure impacts decision making about adoption of technologies and in general organizational adoptions of technologies are conceptualized as the "development and use of new approaches for performing the work of management, new organizational strategy and structure, and new processes that produces changes in the organization's managerial procedures and administrative systems" (Damanpour, 2014, p. 1269). The factors involving technological adoption for employee training in

organizations has two facets. One is that it may improve work efficiency with technological tools and opportunities that can enhance the effectiveness of training and achieve the desired educational objectives at a wider scope with fewer resources. The other facet is that transforming established training programs and practices may require much investment and face possible employee and management resistance (Kimiloglu et al., 2017).

Currently, technology is one of the major driving forces in Human Resources management (Stone et al., 2015) and e-learning represents an important juncture in Human Resources Development and the impact of such changes at an organizational level is not negligible if we consider how technology affects learning and sharing dynamics, knowledge management and continuous training. ASTD 2009 report stated that in 2009 almost a third of all training in the EU was conducted by means of technology and it is expected that e-learning will soon play an overwhelming role in the training industry (Pineda-Herrero, Quesada, & Stoian, 2011). According to another industrial report focusing more specifically on corporate e-learning, the entire e-learning market was expected to grow by over 20% annually up through 2017. Specifically, corporate e-learning showed most notable growth segments in the education industry with an expected growth rate of 13% up through 2017 (Kimiloglu et al., 2017). Thus, it seems apparent that e-learning is gaining its popularity (Moore & Kearsley, 2011) and corporate training or professional development in the hospitality industry are also part of this trend. Because of the drastic growth of e-learning, it seems salient to discuss the quality and the efficacy of e-learning in organizational settings.

As it is commonly perceived that organizations must adopt technological innovations to be effective (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012a) research can guide the management to find out what organizational processes facilitate the adoption of technology and why some organizations are able to adopt more technologies than others (Damanpour, 2014). However, despite the growing interest from the industry, little academic research has been done in the area of workplace e-learning and therefore, little is understood about the status of e-learning courses in the hospitality industry (Chen & Kao, 2012; Damanpour, 2014, Kalbaska et al., 2013)

Kalbaska et al., (2013) suggested in his study that future empirical studies evaluate additional aspects of e-learning such as the motivational drivers for going through e-learning courses, evaluation of the quality of online training materials and whether these courses give agencies any competitive advantage. It was also implied that these further insights would help researchers and employees in the hospitality industry to understand more about the trend and rationales for adoption of e-learning in the hospitality industry (Kalbaska et al., 2013).

In order to understand these issues, this qualitative study will explore the perceptions and decision making aspects of Human Resources professionals involving adoption of e-learning in the hospitality industry in Hawaii. The hospitality industry is selected for this study as the industry is the key industry in Hawaii and it needs to be in operation twenty-four hours a day seven days a week and providing continuous training for all the employees for different shifts within the organizations, which would make the training environment particularly challenging and effective selection and implementation of e-learning more critical (Kalbaska et al., 2013).

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate to understand what factors Human Resources professionals may think important when making decisions for adoption of e-learning. Specifically, this study will explore (1) how Human Resources professionals in the organizations make decisions regarding workplace e-learning for their employees; (2) what factors they consider; and (3) how they perceive the effectiveness of e-learning for their employees.

Research Questions

This qualitative study will utilize research questions to investigate how Human Resources professionals perceive and make decisions regarding various aspects of workplace e-learning for their employees. There are four overarching research questions and these four questions fall within the conceptual framework of the study.

RQ1: How do Human Resources professionals think about individual variables?

RQ2: Human Resources professionals think about strategic variables?

RQ3: How do Human Resources professionals think about structural variables?

RQ4: How do Human Resources professionals think about organizational variables?

Significance of Study

Today's hospitality industry has created increasingly complex nature of how organizations are structured. This change has developed the continuous state of change and uncertainty in all sectors of the hospitality industry and created the needs that require constant learning for the employees (Cho & Schmelzer, 2000). Providing more effective and relevant workplace e-learning is critical for corporations and e-learning may play a significant role in today's business environment (Jia et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2011).

However, research studies on adoption of technologies within organization have been relatively scarce (Damanpour, 2014) and analysis of available publications in the area of workplace e-learning with

individual learning needs and organizational objectives has indicated that studies in this field are limited (Chen & Kao, 2012). For instance, Damanpour stated that from a sample of 524 articles published in ten leading business and economic publications from 1981 to 2008, only 3% focused on management innovations. In another systematic review of the innovation literature from a strategic management perspective, out of 342 articles, only 25 articles included management innovations (Damanpour, 2014). Furthermore, it is unclear as to why research on management innovation continue to lag behind product and process innovations (Damanpour, 2014).

As the competitiveness of corporations relies on the effectiveness and productivity of the employees, it is important that employees' skills and knowledge are kept up-to-date and remain relevant to today's global business environment (Chen & Kao, 2012; Wang et al., 2011). Furthermore, lagging skills and knowledge may be impairing task performance in the workplace due to lack of effective workforce e-learning opportunities (Cheng et al., 2011). The influence of Human Resources professionals has been found to be a significant organizational factor in affecting employees' learning environment (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006). Therefore, understanding the perspectives of Human Resources professionals as they make decisions about workplace training could help in better designing e-learning to meet workplace e-learning needs. Kimiloglu et al (2017) argue that companies producing e-learning solutions should pay special attention to customizable and flexible programs that organizations can adopt according to their needs and requirements as well as to personal factors and importance of sociability and interactivity in the e-learning environments.

Thus, e-learning is a potential solution for meeting training needs and understanding the perspectives of Human Resources professionals as they make decisions on workplace e-learning could help better meet the needs of workplace e-learning and provide more effective and relevant workplace e-learning. This study will investigate the factors that are influencing the Human Resources professionals in terms of e-learning in the workplace. Furthermore, this study is significant as Human Resources professionals can affect workers' motivation and create a work environment to encourage innovation (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006).

Overall, this explorative study with Human Resources professionals would contribute the hospitality industry in Hawaii by bringing out a clearer picture of the current environment of workplace e-learning within organizations. The findings would be able to provide a guidance as to the nature and kind of workplace e-learning that would be preferred or needed in organizations, which would help to provide more effective workplace e-learning

opportunities to their employees. More importantly, the study findings would be able to give us some ideas as to how e-learning is perceived by the Human Resources professionals in the corporations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this research is to conduct a qualitative study to understand the behavioral factors of organizational adoption of e-learning in the hospitality industry in Hawaii. This qualitative study employs the version of Organizational Adoption of Technology Theory developed by Toufaily in 2004 as the conceptual framework. Based on the literature review, the Organizational Adoption of Technology Theory is a widely utilized research model used to explain and predict the organizational behavior of adoption of technological innovations (Sfar, 2013). The theory has a flexible structure with adapting variables depending on the needs of a study. The theory is considered to be appropriate and applicable for the study of adoption of e-learning in the hospitality industry in Hawaii. Thus, it was adopted for this research in an attempt to address the guiding research questions.

For this study, Toufaily's conceptual framework is to be used in an attempt to answer the guiding research questions focusing on various characteristics of workplace e-learning in terms of (1) individual variables, (2) strategic variables, (3) structural variables and (4) organizational variables. Specifically, individual variables pertain to specific personal factors in the organization such as the perceived need, the age, the attitude to technologies, and the need for stimulation. Strategic variables refer to the factors that explain the strategic choices of an organization, marketing conditions and business environment. Structural variables refer to competitive situation, the technological environment, the estimated costs following the adoption of technology, and the potential added value generated by technological tool. And lastly, organizational variables are related to the experience of the business, its size, its financial strength, the type of decision, and the full control of technological tools. See Figure 1.

These variables are deemed to be appropriate and able to provide the valuable insights to answer guiding research questions, which are (1) how Human Resources professionals in the organizations make decisions regarding workplace e-learning for their employees; (2) what factors they consider; and (3) how they perceive the effectiveness of e-learning for their employees.

As this study is a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews, any of the questions might relate to any or all of the research questions during the interview process. In order to ensure the validity of the questions, they will be tested through expert review. A semi-structured interview was developed

in alignment to the research purpose statement, research questions and research design as recommended by Bryman, (2012). The interview protocol includes questions that seek insights to the research questions involving (1) individual variables, (2) strategic variables, (3) structural variables and (4) organizational. In order to answer to the guiding research questions, first the interview questions were developed and tested through expert review. Interviews will be conducted with the selected sample population. Typically, semi-structured interview questions will be employed to gain insights to the core of the research questions (Yin, 2008). The Human Resources professionals' participants will be asked open-ended questions to discuss what factors they may think important when making decisions for adoption of e-learning.

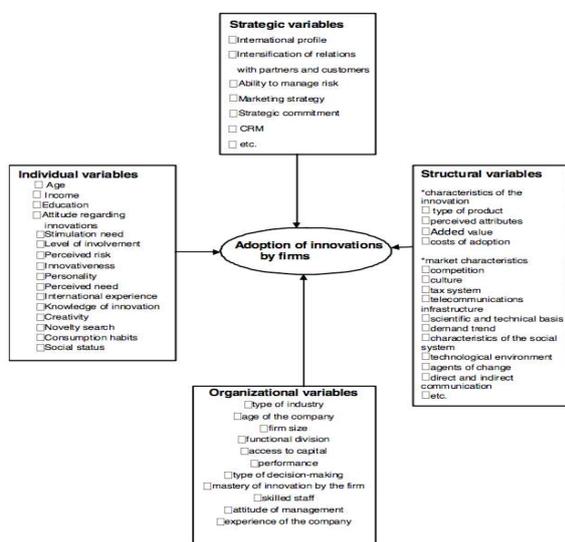


Figure 1. Toufaily's General Conceptual Framework of Adoption of Innovation by Firms. Reprinted from Sfar, W. J. (2013). Determinants of Organizational Adoption of Technological Innovations: Case of Electronic-Banking. Communications of the IBIMA, 2013, 1.

Summary of Methodology

This study will attempt to find insights to answer the guiding research questions through (a) qualitative methods using semi-structured interviewing; (b) open coding and thematic analysis; and (c) qualitative descriptive techniques (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014; Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2008). The qualitative study will explore the perceptions of Human Resources professionals in relation to decision making about workplace e-learning.

Utilizing a qualitative study employing interpretive methods is deemed to be appropriate to describe and interpret a phenomenon or process (Ary et al., 2014).

This study examines Human Resources professionals' understanding of and perceptions about e-learning within the organizations. In general, an interpretive approach is considered to be appropriate for this qualitative study as it attempts to understand events, processes, and activities from the perceptions of the participants and identity recurrent patterns or themes (Ary et al., 2011).

Summary of Methodology

One of the limitations to this research study is my positionality. As I have been in the LTEC PhD program for the past several years, I have developed certain assumptions and perspectives about e-learning and its applications to the workplace. Also, I have experience working as a Workforce Development specialist in the Office of Continuing Education and Training at Kapiolani Community College, therefore, I have certain preconceived ideas and expectations for professional development courses in the workplace. Neyland (2008) considers this a research limitation because the participant observer may affect the situation being observed in unknown ways. Thus, my positionality may unconsciously affect the situation, analysis and interpretation of my findings.

Another limitation is the nature of self-reporting, which may bring out the bias of the interviewee for the study (Neyland, 2008; Bryman, 2012). Finally, there is a possibility of decreased generalizability of findings as the sample procedures would make use of criterion and snowball sampling procedure of this study (Neyland, 2008; Bryman, 2012). Finally, geographic and industry type limitations should be mentioned as the study will be conducted in organizations in the hospitality industry in Hawaii.

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