Personal Learning Environments in the Workplace: An Exploratory Study into the Key Business Decision Factors

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ABSTRACT

Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) have emerged as a solution to the need of learners for open and easily customisable learning environments. PLEs essentially hand complete control over the learning process to the learner. However, this learning model is not fully compatible with learning in the workplace, which is influenced by certain business factors. These factors are being investigated in this paper through an exploratory study within a variety of private organisations in the UK. Based on the results of this study, 10 key factors affecting the adoption of PLEs in the workplace have been identified. The authors propose a framework for the adoption and diffusion of PLEs, aiming at informing decision makers within commercial organisations about the successful introduction of novel learning methodologies in their respective organisations.

Keywords: Adoption, Innovation Diffusion Theory, Personal Learning Environment (PLE), Technology Acceptance Model, Workplace Learning

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, learners are exposed to, if not overwhelmed by, a plethora of social software tools and services. These emergent technologies enable learners to generate contents as well as consume other-created ones. This, together with the recognition of the need for lifelong learning, has contributed to a shift from a centralised institutional teaching approach to a more learner-centred decentralised learning approach (Wilson, 2008). To address the issue of increasingly diverse backgrounds of learners and contexts where learning activities

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occur, new generation learning environments should thus be more responsive and open than prevailing ones. Specifically, it is deemed useful to create an individual world for learning with personalisation intelligence on the learner’s side, thereby enabling learners to easily construct and maintain their own Personal Learning Environment (PLE). Roughly speaking, a PLE consists of a mix of preferred learning tools, learning services and learning resources. Furthermore, the existing literature (Davis, 1989; Rogers, 1995; Venkatesh et al., 2003) indicates that different types of institution involve different sets of facilitating as well as hindering factors that result in the acceptance (or rejection) of a technological innovation. It is intriguing to identify such factors and subsequently develop appropriate strategies to deal with them. The number of studies investigating adoption factors in commercial organisations, which have become increasingly important players in the arena of new educational technologies, is dwarfed by that in their academic counterparts. To bridge this observed gap, the authors have conducted this study utilising a grounded theory approach. A number of participants from the commercial sector were invited for semi-structured interviews. Of particular interest was how they viewed the emerging notion of PLE. Qualitative data so collected have systematically been analysed with the grounded theory approach. Based on the findings, a conceptual model on the PLE adoption by commercial organisations has been proposed, which entail further refinement and validation. Nevertheless, the authors have achieved an initial but significant step towards an integrated view on the adoption of new learning technologies in non-academic settings.

BACKGROUND

Personal Learning Environments

The increased use of Web 2.0 has enabled an individual learner to build a unique and personal learning space (environment) and this experience is labelled under the umbrella term, Personal Learning Environment (PLE). The emergence of the PLE has greatly facilitated the use and sharing of open and reusable learning resources online. Learners can access, download, remix, and republish a wide variety of learning materials through open services provided on the cloud. The PLE supports learners in planning and controlling their learning journey by enabling them to set their learning goals and monitor their progress towards achieving these goals. Learners are able to aggregate learning resources and personalise their learning environment. They can also receive recommendations about resources or other learners, with whom they have common learning goals. The PLE offers a shared learning experience instead of a lone study, by fostering community building and collaborative learning activities. There is no consensus or single description of a PLE (Fiedler & Väljataga, 2011). The authors commonly understand it to have a primary objective, that being to enable learners to manage their own learning within a flexible and versatile environment. The PLE therefore follows a learner-centric approach, enabling the use of decentralised services and tools that belong to and are controlled by individual learners. Rather than integrating different services into a centralised system, the PLE provides the learner with a variety of services and hands over control to her to select and use these services the way she deems fit (Chatti, Jarke, & Frosch-Wilke, 2007). Learners are be able to combine formal and informal learning, to collaborate with others and to receive as well as create content that they may choose to share. For the purpose of this study, based on the various interpretations across the technology enhanced learning (TEL) community, the authors define PLE as “a pedagogy-driven environment that facilitates learners to integrate distributed contents, services, tools and contacts based on personal goals and preferences, thereby enabling them to control their own learning and connect different contexts with the support of communities”.

Pedagogically, self-regulated learning (SRL) seems to be the most potent approach supporting the concept of PLEs. SRL enables
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