Chapter 13

Using E-Simulations in Retail Sales Training: Benefits of Blended Learning Design

Virpi Slotte
AAC Global, Finland

Anne Herbert
Aalto University School of Economics, Finland

ABSTRACT

This chapter concentrates on e-simulation training programs used as part of workplace learning when socially situated interaction and blended learning are specifically included in the instructional design. In this research project, the responses of more than 750 learners were studied in order to answer the questions: How did the learners experience learning from e-simulation? And what were the structural features of the e-simulation sales training programs that promoted the learning of the participants? The e-simulations were an engaging and fun way of learning, reported the learners, but there were other benefits. The authentic dialogue exercises with socially-situated interaction, both online and face-to-face, improved the learners’ awareness and understanding of various practical ways to handle challenging situations. The results are attributable to the proper opportunity to supplement learning with practice, achieved through the design features of the program. Suggestions are made for the design of future programs.

INTRODUCTION

Simulations have a long history as a teaching method. Today these techniques have reached a state where considerable empirical data, in relation to performance gains, have been collected and analysed even though some authors ask for further research mainly for investigating effects from a broader perspective. Longhitano and Testa (2006) argue that a simulation tool itself does not provide positive or negative effects on organisations, but rather, how the tool is used in conjunction with complementary human resources. Simulations can have noteworthy impact upon learning when
properly implemented in the workplace. Simply making e-simulation courses available to even highly motivated employees does not mean that the employees can, and will, use them. How do we engage a classroom of both younger and older learners in ways that will increase their skill base, their abstract knowledge, and reinforce and strengthen the retention of their work-based learning experiences?

This chapter provides evidence that socially situated blended learning design and delivery are effective ways to motivate personnel to use an e-simulation program as part of workplace learning. Our research project focused on two organisation-specific, tailor-made e-simulation packages that were developed for improving the sales and customer service skills of staff at (a) Suomalainen Kirjakauppa (Finnish Bookstore), a national retail chain store selling books and stationery, and (b) Alko, a national retail chain store selling alcoholic beverages (Slotte & Herbert, 2008; Slotte, 2010). The professional development program was put online applying the ideas of blended learning design in other companies (Slotte & Herbert, 2006; Slotte & Tynjälä, 2003; 2005; Slotte, Tynjälä, Hytönen, 2004). The purpose of the e-simulation packages was to engage workers in learning improved sales, security, and customer service skills needed in their daily work. The packages include integrated elements of face-to-face and off-line activities as well as the online simulation. This mode of delivery is called ‘blended’ because the participants practised (a) using a business process e-simulation together with (b) a live coach who provides the opportunity to share and negotiate the content of the online course. The project, including putting the professional development online, had the following goals:

- To develop a new and engaging way to learn sales and customer service skills through the design features to increase the socially situated interaction;
- To reduce overall costs for software to enhance the reusability of the general content; and
- To conduct follow-up studies in order to see how consistent the results are in different sales domains.

In this chapter, we concentrate on the experiences of the e-simulation programs in a blended learning design. The voices of sales personnel and sales directors are analysed based on several survey questionnaires and interviews. During the project, we studied the responses of more than 750 learners in order to answer the questions: How did the learners experience learning from the e-simulation? And what were the structural features of the e-simulation sales training programs that promoted the learning of the participants? By learning from the user experiences we can better develop course design and delivery modes that not only motivate employees to develop the competencies they need at work, but also help their organisations to improve their return on training investments.

**E-SIMULATIONS AND SITUATED SOCIAL INTERACTION**

The current theories of learning emphasise the situational nature and social aspects of learning. Learning at work, at its best, is based on the learners’ experience and authentic problem-solving situations. It involves the learner in a reflective process and in social processes, and is organised in flexible ways (e.g., Hutchins & Hutchison, 2008; Tynjälä, 2008). To benefit both personal development and organisational learning processes, e-simulation solutions should include features such as:

- Integration of theoretical knowledge with participants’ practical experience,