Motivation and Effectiveness of Online Learning in Adults

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Background and Significance of Research

In recent years, online training has become increasingly popular in the corporate setting as a flexible way of providing both skills training and professional development. As many companies move to a fully remote workforce, or open offices all over the country or world, online training becomes an essential tool. While there are several studies on the motivation of adults to complete online learning in the academic setting, there is less research on the factors that motivation adults to seek out of complete online training in a corporate setting. This may be because it is assumed adult employees will complete online training simply because it is required of them. While this may be true for required, skills-based training, this mentality ignores the optional professional development courses that many corporations spend time and money to provide to their employees. In addition, looking into these motivating factors could have a significant impact on employee job satisfaction. If much of their training is online and they are not motivated to complete it, or they do not perceive it as effective, job satisfaction could take a hit to the point of an employee retention issue.

Further research on motivation and effectiveness of online training in corporate employees is not only significant for the bottom line of the corporation, but also for learning and development teams. Understanding the motivational factors, and perceived effectiveness, can inform the design and implementation of the company training programs. The improved design and implementation can ultimately lead to improved employee job performance and productivity. By identifying the motivation of adults, and exploring the relationship between motivation and effectiveness, companies can maximize the impact of their training programs.

Problem Statement

The problem to be address in this research study is the lack of understanding regarding what motivates adult employees to seek out and/or complete online training in a corporate environment. Research on the motivation of adult learners in the corporate environment specifically is limited, as most literature focuses on adult learners in an academic setting. It is important to understand what motivates adult employees to take and complete online training in the corporate workplace, as this knowledge can lead to more effective and efficient training programs that can positively impact employee retention and productivity.

This study also seeks to explore if there is any relationship between how motivated the employee is to complete online training, and their perceived effectiveness of that training. If employees are more motivated to complete training, do they feel it is more effective? Are adults more motivated to complete training if they feel it is effective? As more company training programs invest more into their online learning libraries, it is essential the thoughts and attitudes of the employees are explored and understood.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the factors that influence the motivation of adult employees to complete training online, as well as their perception of the effectiveness of the online training. In this study, volunteer participants from a mortgage company who have all completed online training within the past year will serve as the sample. Data will be collected through one-on-one interviews with participants across several different departments of the company. These responses will then be coded to analyze themes and patterns from their thoughts and experiences.

Literature Review

What promotes motivation to learn and effective online learning for adults in a corporate environment? Some suggest that motivation and engagement can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of online training. This then results in more knowledge transfer to workplace application, and a more efficient workplace. While this may sound simple, and may even seem obvious to some, strategies to tap into adult motivation to learn is a more complex issue.

Adult students enrolled in online academic courses may have different motivational factors to adults who are required to take online training in a corporate environment. One group enrolled themselves in classes for the purpose of learning new skills and information. However, the later group are trying to complete their workload for pay, and may be harder to motivate to take a "required" online course. Currently, a lot of corporations settle for the fear of punishment being a motivating factor for their employees to complete training. However, a better understanding of how to motivate learners could provide employees with higher job satisfaction, and the possibility of them seeking out their own learning opportunities.

The following review of literature identifies key themes that play a vital role in adult learner motivation. In the search for relevant literature, several different terminologies were used. "Adult motivation online learning" and "motivation to complete online courses" were used to explore motivating factors that help adult complete online courses. However, this search primarily brought up articles relating to adulting taking undergraduate or graduate level online courses hosted by universities. In order to find articles related specifically towards job training and the corporate environment, terminologies such as "eLearning," "online training", and "corporate online training" were used. Finally, to find articles that would help establish motivation's role in perceived training effectiveness, "effective online training" and "effective

eLearning" were used in the University of Missouri library database. This search resulted in several articles from peer-reviewed journals that explored the targeted ideas of the research.

Designing to Motivate

The subject of adults' motivation in learning have been viewed through the lens of several learning theories. Dobrovolny (2006) uses both constructivist theory and adult learning theory explore the importance of meaning, reflection, and experiences in adult learning. Using these theories as a framework, Dobrovolny looks to understand how corporate adults construct knowledge using self-paced online training. The researchers collected qualitative data through recorded interviews and written statements (using a journal) from participants after they completed a self-paced, online course. Participants were allowed to pick a coursed based on how relevant it was to their job, so that relevance could be appropriately studied. They found that effective online training relies on metacognition of the learner. Therefore, Dobrovolny writes, adult learners should be given a lot of opportunities for self-reflection and feedback.

Self-paced online courses can provide several opportunities to showcase what works, and what does not work, when designing online courses. These courses require a motivated learner who can relate to and connect with the content and how it is presented. One way to examine this importance is to examine literature on optional online courses, as they completely rely on learner motivation instead of a "due date". Janakiraman, Watson, and Watson (2018) studied adults who chose to enroll is Massive Open Online Courses. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are asynchronous online learning courses that can cover a large range of topics and are usually not mandatory. Learners enroll in these courses by choice to learn a new skill or out of curiosity. This qualitative study examined several adult students enrolled in MOOCs and examined the Self-Directed Learning (SDL) strategies they used to motivate themselves to complete the course

using interviews. This study found that the students felt motivated by the activities within the course, the different ways content was presented, and the quizzes presented at regular intervals. The authors present that these factors both motivated the students to continue, as well as gave them a sense of accomplishment. Today there are MOOCs available from a wide variety of website that cover almost any topic, but researchers have been examining motivation to complete online courses for several years. Kim (2009) examined the motivational factors of adults taking self-directed online courses and collected data through interviews. The participants of this study were a combination of undergraduate/graduate students and working professionals. Kim concluded that multiple factors, such as interactivity, the presence of an instructor, real-world application, and choice all play an important role in motivation. Kim presented that, generally, highly interactive online courses that allow learners to practice in a realistic setting were the most motivating.

When designing online courses for adults, it is important to keep in mind the important interactivity plays in engaging and motivating the learners. Kapp, Valtchanov, and Pastore (2020) took a quantitative approach to the topic of studying gaming in learning and its impact on effective learning. In this twelve-month study, employees at one retail store were given the option of participating in a game before learning, and the others were not given the option of any games within the same Learning Management System. The authors concluded that employees who played a short and non-complex game before learning answered more questions correctly and visiting the LMS for additional learning more often than employees who did not play a game. They also found these employees viewed their progress reports and reviewed incorrect answers more often than the non-gaming group.

Choice is Key

The importance of design choices in online learning play a critical role in not only learner motivation, but also the effectiveness. One specific design choice plays such a critical role, in fact, that it is consistently brought up in literature. The design choice that seems to play one of the most important roles in motivation and engagement is learner autonomy and choice. Salikhova, Lynch, and Salikhova, (2021) explored three psychological needs in a qualitative study about online learning in adult student population. These needs were for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Researchers had adult student who have completed online courses write an essay reflecting on their experience. The authors report that the results included more evidence for the dominating importance of autonomy in online learning. Following autonomy, they also note that competence played an important role, while relatedness had the smallest impact of the three.

One might wonder why choice tends to be the most important factor for adult learners. Something to consider is that adult learners are approaching new information and skills with different worldviews and experiences. These experiences could be educational, personal, occupational, or cultural. Conaway and Zorn-Arnold (2016) write that for adult learners, their past and current experiences are key to not only their ability to learn but also their motivation to learn. They emphasize that adults learn best when they can apply new information to what they have already experienced. This also means that they often walk away from online instructions with a unique view/understanding of the content. Conaway and Zorn-Arnold identify that one key factor in adults' motivation to is autonomy. When adults feel they have a choice in what they learn and how they learn it, they can apply the new information more easily to their past

experiences. The authors present that many adult learners often need to know "why" they are being taught something, and how that will impact their future experiences.

When online courses are well-designed with learner choice in mind, many barriers to motivation can be countered. McKay and Vilela (2011) studied academic literature to analyze possible barriers to e-learning, how to keep employees of all ages and skill levels engaged, and the overall effectiveness of e-learning in both the governmental and corporate sector. They found that organizational support and quality e-learning courses (well designed with opportunities for learner choice) had high impact on the engagement of employees and course effectiveness. McKay and Vilela point out that barriers are inevitable; however, it is important for instructional designers to be aware of possible barriers and ways to avoid their impact on knowledge transfer.

Organizational Support Empowers Learners

As was mentioned in the previous section, organizational support can play as much of a role in motivating adult learners as course design. Park and Hee Jun Choi. (2009) conducted a quantitative study to determine what individual traits and internal/external factors play a role in whether an individual chooses to drop out of an online course. The study, which was carried out through surveys and questionnaires where participants used a rating scale, concluded that the individual traits of the learners did not play any significant role in their decision. However, the authors write that the quality of the online course (or perceived quality) and family and/or organizational support played a large role in the decisions.

Organizational support is obviously important when the organization is a learning institution. However, it is sometimes overlooked in a corporate and/or business environment, where it holds just as much, if not more, value. Ju Joo, Yon Lim, and Yeong Park (2011) examined the relationships amongst organizational support, learning flow, learner satisfaction

and learning transfer in a corporate environment. The researchers had participants respond to a survey that contained a set rating scale and examined these numbers. Through this quantitative and qualitative data, they found that organizational support supports an effective learning flow and resulted in higher learning satisfaction and transfer. While learners recognize the support is important to them, how can companies go about providing this support? Some strategies were explored in Rabak, and Cleveland-Innes's (2006) qualitative study, which looked in to the attitudes toward online training of adult retail employees. Data was collected through questionnaires and interviews and found an overall positive attitude towards online training. They wrote that factors that employees claimed made the online training more enjoyable and engaging were having enough time at work to complete the training, recognition, and awards for completing training, and the relevance of the training to their jobs.

Conclusion

While motivation is often thought of as individual learner issue, there are several external factors that play a large role. In order to promote motivation of adult learners, instructional designers will need to design training with content relevancy and learner choice in mind. Giving the adult learner autonomy, and presenting information in a relevant way, has the potential to motivate their audience and increase the effectiveness of the course. Allowing interactivity, avoiding "information dumping", and designing practical scenarios are all engaging activities that can motivate the learner to not only finish the course, but to feel more satisfied with their learning. Organizations can provide support through providing support to the learners. Providing time during the work shift to complete training communicates to the learner that their knowledge and skill development are priorities to the company. Organizational recognition or compensation can also play a large role in learner motivation.

Methodology

A weakness discovered while reviewing literature was that there is a lack of study regarding motivation to complete online training in the corporate workplace. There is a large amount of literature regarding adult students taking online courses through an academic institution and school-aged children who are required to take classes online. One reason for this could be that since corporate online training is often "required", the learners will take the training because their job requires them to do so. Motivational factors in this situation usually involve avoiding punishment, so other motivational factors are not usually considered. However, as the opportunity for remote work expands, online training will continue to grow across several organizations. Tapping into what motivates adults to take training online could possibly increase job satisfaction, which can influence employee retention. It can also help corporate online training become more efficient and effective, reducing employee training time and increasing productivity. The opportunity to create more motivating and effective training could have major benefits to many different types of corporations.

Method and Rationale

This study will utilize a case study qualitative approach to collect data regarding what adult employees find motivating in the workplace. Using this method, researchers will be able to understand and analyze the feelings of employee participants, as well as the environment in which they take online training. Data will be collected via one-on-one interviews with employees across various departments conducted both in-person, or over Zoom if the participant is unable to meet in-person. Interviews will allow researchers an opportunity collect and analyze the participants thoughts and feelings regarding training, which is unable to simply be observed.

Participants will also be able to provide historical information (Creswell, 212) to fill in any gaps of knowledge.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions:

- What motivates the adult employees of a corporate organization to take and complete online training?

- What factors contribute to adult employees' perception of the effectiveness online training in the corporate environment?

This study aims to explore what factors motivate corporate employees to take and complete online training, both required and optional courses. While motivation is the primary focus of this study, researchers also hope to look at the relationship between employee motivation to complete courses, and their perceived effectiveness of online courses.

Population and Sample

The population who is the focus of this study are adult (anyone over the age of 18) employees of corporate organizations. To help represent this population, employees of a mortgage company who have enrolled in and completed online courses for professional development purposes will make up the sample. Participants should have completed at least one company online course within the past year. These participants will be recruited through the company's internal communication channels, such as email or a corporate learning management system (LMS). Researchers aim to collect their sample from a variety of departments across the company to account for a variety of experiences. The company has employees in loan processing departments, loan officers, information technology, human resources, maintenance, legal, and several other departments.

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Data Collection

Participants will take part in an interview over Zoom that explores their motivation and feelings regarding online training. Interview questions will be developed based upon the information discovered during the literature review. They will include questions exploring what factors influence their motivation, and the role motivation plays on their perception of training effectiveness. The interviews will be audio-recorded, and the interviewer will take notes throughout the interview.

The interview will follow standard interview protocol (Creswell, 212), beginning with an introduction consisting with basic information about the study. Participants will then be asked an opening question to describe their role at the company. 6 content questions relating to the research questions will follow, with the interviewing probing as needed to gather more information. Finally, the interview will conclude with the opportunity for the participant to ask any questions they may have regarding the interview or study.

Ethical Considerations

Participants will be fully informed of the study's purpose and procedures and will be given the opportunity to withdraw at any time. Participations will be informed on the timeline and purpose of the study. No compensation or added privileges will be given to those who chose to participate. Likewise, they will not gain any advantage regarding promotion or punishment in their workplace. All data will be kept confidential and anonymous and will only be used for research purposes.

Data Analysis Plan

The data collected from the interviews will be analyzed using a coding procedure to analyze themes following Tesch's (1990) eight steps in the coding process (Creswell, 212). All

notes and transcriptions of the audio recording will be reviewed to give a broad view of the data. Next, several interviews will be analyzed one-by-one while noting significant or reoccurring themes and words used. Once this data is gathered, it will them be sorted by themes and topics, will then be classified as codes. These codes will be grouped by types and categories.

Once the codes have been determined from the data, researchers will used a qualitative data analysis software. Using the codes determined earlier, all transcripts and notes from all the interviews will be run through the software. This will be used to determine themes and patterns that aid in answering the research questions.

Timeline

Week 1-2: Recruitment emails and/or LMS messages to all employees will be sent explaining the study's purpose and requesting their participation. The researchers will screen potential participants to ensure they qualify (have taken online training in the past 12 months) and attempt to gather participants from multiple departments across the company. Once participants are chosen the interviews will be scheduled.

Week 3-6: Researchers will conduct interviews with each participant. Each interview is expected to last approximately 30-45 minutes.

Week 7-10: Data collection from the interviews will be analyze by coding the responses and analyzing them to identifying patterns and themes.

Week 11-13: The researcher will organize the themes and patterns that emerge from the data analysis into a report that summarizes the findings of the study. A research report will be written and presented to the company's human resources department, all stakeholders, and to all participants.

Conclusion

This study aims explore and analyze what motivates the adult employees online training and employees' perception of effectiveness of training. While researching motivation is the main topic of the study, researchers are interested in the possible relationship between motivating online training, and employee attitudes regarding its effectiveness. The study will interview current employees at a mortgage company who have completed online training within the past year. They will be interviewed on their experience taking online training, their attitudes and motivations, and how effective they felt the online training was in regard to their everyday tasks. As job training and the positions themselves continue to shift to online-only, the researchers feels that data regarding these topics will play an important role in company decisions and increasing job satisfaction.

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