DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL TRAINING: A CASE OF JORDANIAN PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

Public sectors' employees in all over the world are required to go for some training as part of the organization's procedures towards improving employees' knowledge and skills. Currently, they attend training in a traditional mode or face to face training. Many challenges in attending traditional training have been reported by the public sector's employees in other countries. These include employees reside far away from training centre, and employees, especially women have family duties and have difficulties to leave home for training. These challenges need to be resolved as employees are expected to continually improving skills and knowledge from time to time. In solving problems of employees and organizations with the traditional training, organizations must apply an alternative method to train and retrain their employees. In Jordan, there is insufficient evidence regarding challenges with traditional training in the case of public sector organization. Thus, this study intended to understand more on the problems of attending traditional training and the challenges to meet in preparing for an alternative method such as through computer based distance training system.

Keywords

Distance learning; traditional training; challenges in distance learning

1. INTRODUCTION

With a development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) many organizations all over the world are using Computer-Based Distance Training System (CBDTS), to train and retrain their employees. Computer Based Distance training System had been defined as the use of computer and network to convey the training materials and resources to the remote employees (Chatzoglou et al., 2009). This method is reported to solve some of the employees' problems regarding face to face training and provides many benefits to employees and organizations. The method however needs supports from a particular electronic infrastructure to take place (Burgess and Russell, 2003).

A few studies have mentioned about issues that create limitation for employees to attend traditional or face to face training (Mashhour, 2007; Matsumoto, 2006; Barroca, 2006). These include issues related to distance to the training center, family responsibility, time of training, and contents. In Jordan, there is lack of empirical studies focused on these related issues among government employees. This paper presents a result of a study on employees of organizations regarding the obstacles they have faced in attending traditional training class room; the use of

computer based distance training system in public sector's organization in Jordan and the challenges faced by organization in applying the distance training system to the employees training. Thus, the objectives of this study are

- To determine the obstacles which prevent public sector's employees from attending traditional training
- To indentify the challenges that faced by the public sector's organizations in applying computer based distance training (CBDT) or computer based distance training system (CBDTS).

This paper proceeds with the review on the literatures related to distance learning or e-learning, the method used to conduct the study, the results of the study, through various data analysis and finally, the last section on discussions, limitations and directions for future research

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Distance learning

According to Florida Center for Instructional Technology (2009), distance learning is also termed as distance education, or distributed learning or remote education. Distance learning has been variously defined by researchers according to their field (Burgess and Russell, 2003). As far as distance learning in the educational context is concerned, it can be described as a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both (Honeyman and Miller, 1993). Distance learning is a flexible form of learning where a student can study from home, work, on the move or wherever else is convenient (Kaplan Open Learning, 2010). In such a context, there is a need for designing special methods and electronic tools to connect students with teachers and each other and other managerial and administrative arrangements (Angel et al., 2004). In the literature, e-learning has been widely used to refer to distance learning. The term of computer based training (CBT), web based training (WBT), internet based training (IBT), and others acronyms are a synonymous of e-learning. Further, e-learning was defined as using electronic device (usually computer) for the people learning (Liu and Hwang, 2009).

According to Brivkalns et al. (1999), two basic principles, the distance education philosophy is based on, are flexibility and openness. Flexibility means that students or trainees can access any learning materials from any place at any time. This accessibility is achieved by the adaptation of electronic media that may include other computer systems like satellite system, television, and radio. Openness, on the other hand, refers to the fact that education or training can be accessed by all people apart from their age.

2.2 Traditional training challenges In Jordan

Public sectors' employees in Jordan are required to go for some training as part of the organization's procedures towards improving employees' knowledge and skills. Currently, they attend training in a traditional mode or face to face training. Many challenges, however, have been encountered by the public sector's employees with this method. According to Mashhour (2007), two major obstacles in attending the traditional training methods in Jordan are (i) employees reside far away from the institutions learning and (ii) employees, especially women have family duties and have difficulties to leave home for training. These challenges need to be resolved as employees are expected to continually improving skills and knowledge from time to time. In solving problems of employees and organizations with the traditional training, the organizations must apply an alternative method to train and retrain their employees. According to Hsia and Tseng (2008); and Quinn et al. (2006), the best and successful way to solve those problems is applying distance learning system or computer based distance trainings system.

Distance learning or training system does not only provide the best way to solve employees' problems with traditional training methods, but also provide many benefits for the organizations and employees. It shall become an alternative or a complement to traditional training system in public sector organization in Jordan. The benefits include offering trainings to the employees without limitation of time and place; reducing training's money and time to exploit that to enhance organizations' productivity (Grant and Danziger, 2005); providing opportunity for the organizations to train and re-training their employees without any exception and a lot of others benefits for employees and organizations.

In Jordan, the International Computer Driving License (ICDL) has been implemented as standard for end user computer skills across the kingdom since 2001. Many ministries have adopted this program for their staff since 2003. For instance the Ministry of Education has been adopting ICDL program for its employees. Approximately 70000 employees of the Ministry must participate in this program (ICDL foundation, 2007). However, the Ministry of Education faces difficulties in completing ICDL training for its employees. The reason is the training time is continuously unfit or not suitable with their employees' scheduling. Furthermore many employees fail to pass the certificate exam because they have problems in the training itself.

As the use of distance learning system could be intensively applied in the Ministry of Education as well as other public sector organizations in Jordan, more information is needed to guide the system planning and implementation of it. More studies should be conducted to fill in this gap. This study therefore is performed with an intention to investigate the acceptance of distance learning system as a training mode by the employees of public sector's organizations.

3. METHODOLOGY

The survey on the public sector's organizations in Jordan was implemented during 2008 to 2009. These employees must attend ICDL traditional training to improve their skills in seven modules namely, Basic Concept of IT, Using and Managing Files, Spread Sheet, Databases, Presentation and Information and Communication. The questionnaire used for the survey was designed in two sections. The first section is about the demographic of the respondents such as their academic level, age and gender. The second section includes questions related to the topic to be studied including having PC, internet access, computer skills, email account, computer problems, preferable educational materials, preferable software material, user attitude toward courses over internet, and the problems with the traditional training. The purposes of the questionnaire are to gather data about problems which prevent organizations' employees for attending traditional training institutions, and identifying issues related to applying computer based distance learning system as an alternative for traditional training method.

About 100 questionnaires had been distributed to the public sector's employees in Jordan. Approximately 10 questions were omitted from the analysis since 25 % of their questions were not answered. According to Sekaran (2003), if 25% of the questionnaire items were not answered, it is recommended to not include them in the data analysis.

4. **RESULTS**

4.1 Respondents profile

From 100 questionnaires distributed, the study received 90 valid responses (90%). Table 1 shows the responses rate according to gender.

Gender	Number	percent
Male	56	62.2
Female	34	37.8
Total	90	100%

Table 1 Respondents distribution by gender

The averages of the respondents are between 26 to 35 years old. The youngest respondents are in the range between 19 and 25 years old, while the oldest is between 46 and 55 years old. In terms of education background, 84% of the respondents have high level education degree (bachelors, master and PHD), and only 16 % have diploma degree.

4.2 Analysis of the results

4.2.1 ICT and Internet Usage

In terms of ICT and Internet usage, the study shows that 82% of the respondents have personal computer at homes, while approximately 92% of them have regular computer access at work. Despite the high rate of the respondents who have regular computer access, this group has encountered many obstacles in the usage, such as 20% of them have out-dated devices and 38% of them do not obtain help when having problems using PC devices. In terms of network access, 67% of those who have personal computer and have access to regular computer, have accessed Internet through high and low speed network. Additionally, 81 % of the survey participants have used e-mail.

4.2.2 Obstacles faced with traditional training

The study has identified that approximately 82% of the respondents have faced some obstacles that prevent them from attending traditional training classroom. These include having family duties especially for the women (26%), having an irregular work (20%), reside away from a training institution (12%), and having working time coincide with training time (24%). Consequently, the vast majority of the respondents (94%) agree that they need for an alternative method such as distance learning system to solve their problem with the traditional training methods. Additionally, over half of respondents (55%) are looking forward to use computer based distance training system.

4.2.3 Using computer based distance training system (CBDTS)

As computer based distance training is recommended in replacing for traditional training, the study also identified the type of materials preferred for CBDTS. In this respect, less than half of the respondents (41%), prefer tutorial software, 30% choose simulation software, and the rest of the respondents favor for animation, diagnostic, and class room software.

The internet accessibility in organizations to provide distance training should also be taken into consideration. While 92% of the employees have computer regular access, the access to internet is not 100%. Only 67% have access to internet and this gives quite a big challenge in implementing CBDTS. Additionally, only 40% have high speed Internet network. Furthermore, the majority of participants (58%) have encountered problems during computer using in terms of technical aspects as well as supports. For those who have computer and Internet access, about 74% admit that they are willing to attend training using CBDTS.

5. CONCLUSION

With the technology development and the changing in the working place, public organizations' employees over the world need to improve skills and obtain new knowledge. Employees are required to attend training by training every year and most of the trainings are in traditional form. Many challenges are described in the literatures that prevent employees to attend traditional training or learning in improving their knowledge and skills.

It is evidenced from this study that the obstacles that prevent employees to attend the traditional training's institutions are related to having family duties especially among women, carrying some irregular works, staying away from the training institution, and working time coincides with training time. It is also shown in this study that employees need for an alternative way to have training. They are looking forward to use computer based distance training system or attending training through distance learning system.

As the interests are shown, organizations should plan to enhance the use of IT such as e-learning to support trainings to employees. Organizations which want to offer e-learning must consider the following challenges before implementing it; lack of the internet and computer access, attitude of the employees to use the distance learning system, out-date devices and their limitations, and the types of software to support training materials. Infrastructure and supports need to be highlighted in the planning before implementing CNBDTS.

In the future the factors that influence the acceptance of e-learning by organizations' employees must be further investigated. Such a study will provide meaningful information to improve an understanding on the acceptance of computer based distance training as this will assist organizations to effectively plan for the advancement of their employees' skills and knowledge.

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