

e-learning Census

Viv Cole has completed the “e-learning Census”, the second annual tracking study benchmarking e-learning usage amongst the top twelve accountancy firms. Here are some of the key trends that the survey revealed.

Accountants left behind by prudent approach to e-learning adoption

Marketeers at e-learning suppliers in the early part of this century were entitled to think that there were rich pickings to be had in the accountancy sector. Here is a profession with a track record of high per capita training spend, self-motivated learners, needing large volumes of technical/ compliance knowledge and client pressures meaning that synchronous learning events are challenging to attend. However e-learning adoption has been slow.

The culture of face to face training

Face to face training is well-embedded as the dominant channel for learning. Firms reported that e-learning accounts for an average of 4.7% of training budgets. This is low compared to the share of training budgets of 10.8% for e-learning and 10.6% for blended learning in 2004 in a survey of large companies from all industries.¹

There was consensus that e-learning is not an effective substitute for face to face learning and that on average the culture of the firms was not supportive of e-learning. Despite the success of several firms in the recent Sunday Times Surveys of “Best Companies to Work For”², on average e-learning was not seen as making a positive contribution to firms’ efforts to be considered Employers of Choice.

It was only for technical topics that e-learning was marginally preferred to face to face learning (whereas last year face to face learning was still preferred). We see this as a tipping point and all being equal a predictor that an increasing share of technical learning needs will be met by e-learning.

Early adopters burned

Where UK firms are part of a global network they have accrued the benefits and drawbacks of international e-learning spend. Typically the US firms have borne the brunt of the spend and given the UK firms relatively cheap opportunities to implement Learning Management Systems (LMSs) and libraries of off the shelf content. However the UK firms have seldom found that these technologies meet their needs or culture. Many UK firms have subsequently ended up implementing their own LMSs.

Meanwhile the Census showed that the firms that have access to off the shelf e-learning were generally displeased with the return they derived from it. This was attributed to a lack of relevant context and dated production values. Indeed the firm that reported the culture most supportive of e-learning has not used off the shelf

learning at all. Learners in accountancy firms are more receptive to bespoke e-learning.

What business case?

One of the key factors that will help shift the culture of firms to becoming more supportive of e-learning is if there is a good business case for deploying it. Currently the business case for e-learning has predominantly been restricted to technical e-learning. It's a straightforward business case; e-learning is usually the most cost effective way to evidence completion of mandatory learning for large numbers of learners. Firms have rarely invested in bespoke e-learning that has a business case that links to the business strategy e.g. quantifying how investing to cover a learning need would result in an improvement in business performance.

One key element of building a business case is having a process to measure return on investment. Respondents felt on average that they did n't measure return from e-learning accurately. The lack of linkage to business results partly reflects that partnerships' financial results are typically more difficult to access and understand than those of companies.

Ironically the accuracy of measuring return on face to face training was only marginally higher. Anecdotally, when a learner has a bad experience in face to face training they will blame it on an individual course, whereas with the newer method of e-learning a learner will blame the bad experience on e-learning as a whole.

Reasons to be cheerful

Whilst usage of e-learning in the accountancy sector lags behind other sectors there are reasons to think that e-learning will become more widespread:

- Staff: the number of staff with e-learning in their job title is set to increase by 55% in 2006 (from one per 5,300 employees to one per 3,400 employees).
- Budgets: most firms expect their e-learning budgets to increase from the current level of approximately £68 per employee
- Suppliers: firms reported an increased level of satisfaction with the service they were receiving from e-learning suppliers
- Technology: authoring tools are becoming cheaper and more user-friendly meaning that firms will produce more chunks of e-learning for rapid deployment

We'll see in next year's Census just how much progress has been made.

For the "e-learning Census Datasheet", which shows average results from the Census in more detail, please contact Viv Cole via viv.cole@academyinternet.com

¹ The Transatlantic Blended Learning Survey 2004 (Balance Learning)

² www.bestcompanies.co.uk