Engaging Online Learners to Consider Virtual Business Entrepreneurship Through the Lens of e-Business

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Abstract. Traditionally, business and management subjects have been linked to what is known by one’s culture and business traditions in terms of how business dealings are operated and managed according to given and proven business and managerial theories, concepts, ideas, and overall best practices. However, as more and more technology has been introduced into today’s modern workplace, changes to the overall business landscape have gone from domestic to global to new virtual opportunities. As a result, what our predecessors may have considered as only a dream for the future, these are becoming reality. It was not that long along with the idea of a computer smaller than a large room might be created. Today, we are now offering not only business, but also educational opportunities on mobile technology, such as mobile phones and PDAs. Therefore, this paper will look through the lens of e-business to see how one can help encourage today’s learner to consider virtual business entrepreneurship, in particular, how each of the new and progressive (virtual) learners can learn a new way of conducting business virtually and manage it accordingly.

Introduction

As a result of the technology affecting all types of industry and the demands of today’s marketplace, adults are returning back for further education at a faster rate than anticipated. However, one of the bigger problems is the fact that many Baby Boomers are returning, which includes a growing number of retiring educators. [1] Knowles (1978) noted that “everyone [learners] should be able to participate and control their own learning process.” [2] As a result, many adults are starting to see flexibility in the field of education and training and want to compete even more in the fast-paced world of corporate mobility, as well as entrepreneurship, namely e-Business. Harris (2000) noted that the “new workplace requires a new type of employee, one who is highly skilled, flexible, creative, and attuned to working as a member of a team.” [3] He goes on to write the following: “Workplace education programs focus on the literacy and basic skills training workers need to gain new employment, retain present jobs, advance in their career, or increase productivity. Curricula are developed by educators, working with employers and employee groups, who assemble written materials used on the job and who analyze specific jobs to determine what reading, computation, speaking and reasoning skills are required to perform job tasks effectively. By their nature, successful efforts to institute workplace literacy programs require strong partnerships among educators, employers, and employees.” [4] Along with this line of thinking, adult learners who are seeking additional education and/or training must also work out a variety of schedules and logistics in order to pursue their future educational dreams and career pursuits.

There are several things about the workplace we have to keep in mind in terms of changes. According to Addleson (2011) stated that management today needs to be “re-created” in order to be better prepared and empowered for the 21st century knowledge (business/management) workers. [5] On the other hand, we can see another problem in the areas of education and training and development is in the areas of lack of interest in all of the theory and conceptual work, but there appears to be a deeper interested in learning more from the actual practical experience in the classroom or a work environment. Thus, more colleges and universities are working with other industries in the offering of practicums and internships. If we look back at the writing of Knowles, he wrote that adult learners have to be treated differently in the educational environment in order to regain their trust level in an
educational, which may have scared them away for so many years. Consequently, it would stand only to reason that they would also want to be self-directed in their view of continuing education. For the purposes of a business and educational discussions in relationship to today current Masters of Business Administration (MBA) students, one of the key problems is the adapting of a changing business environment to link with an educational system, which may not have caught up with business and technological changes. In terms of a current situation for online MBA students, these are some of the problems which may be encountered: 1) Learners may have limited business/management content knowledge; 2) Learning activities may require research and knowledge on both domestic and global companies; 3) Limited research skills in determining background and current statistics with certain business topics, such as tariffs, trading blocs, products/services, customs, culture, etc.; and 4). Adult learners may have little or no experience in developing a final portfolio is a compilation of previous writing segments (limited time to complete work). Basically, this eventually focuses on a need for learner to look at other educational opportunities ranging from freelance researching on the Internet to a more formal approach with in-class education or a new form of learning, known as online learning. The following section will explore the topic of online learning in more detail.

Impact of Online Education for Today’s Current and Future Learner

For many students, the transition from the traditional classroom of a physical presence of an instructor in a physical location to those of virtual ones has been a challenged, but not a complete barrier for many. In fact, one Babson (2015) study noted that one of three students are now taking online courses. As a result, teaching practices, techniques, and strategies are needed in order to improve and increase the quality of education, as well as meeting the technological and business needs of today’s adult learners. Consequently, many of these new and returning adult students have being do an exodus from the traditional Face-to-Face (F2F) live (physical classroom) learning environments to virtual ones for a variety of reasons ranging from course/time flexibility, work and family schedules, and need to obtain a more forward-thinking and technologically-based education to help better prepare them for today’s workplace. One of the key barriers that instructors (also known as facilitators in some virtual environments) face is the level of trust gained, lost and/or recaptured.

Trust versus Mistrust in Learning Environments

The transition from one form of learning to a virtual one has been slow in the making. While distance education has been around since the “1800s with the correspondence course of Pittman Shorthand, it has been evolving. It has grown from a correspondence course to a more technological evolution of recordings, ranging from records, VHS tapes, TV shows, and now online learning courses”. During this period time a new form of trust was started from a distance as part of the term used for many decades, known as distance education. However, as more and more technology was applied to the field of education and learning in general, the same was true with the application of technology in the business field. In both of these types of environment, managers and educators, as well as employees and learners needed to develop a special type of trust in order to fulfil their own work and/or educational pursuits. Uslaner (2001), noted that “Trust has a moral dimension—of ethically justifiable behavior as expectations. General trusters tend to have a higher ethical sensibility.” Another type of trust is called swift trust. “Swift trust” tends to be unstable, fragile. This is when people (like adult students) need to establish quick and transitional patterns of trust with instructors, especially on the platform of the online environment. Consequently, if we look on the business side of technological changes, we start to see a new lexicon of terms that are unique to the business field, such as virtual teams, virtual conferencing, virtual management, and virtual expectations. In fact, virtual team players need to establish and maintain trust with their virtual manager, as well as their virtual team members in order to build and maintain their own virtual community as they work towards accomplishment of organizational and group goals. On the other hand, while this trust may
not be easily achieved, and there may be a growing need for team building exercises and interpersonal communications skills if various team members are not able to establish and achieve a reasonable amount of virtual trust and communications flow. As a result, this paper will focus on the creation of potential learning applications to help assist the virtual manager and his or her virtual team. Therefore, as business changes in the marketplace increasingly evolved from the last century to the current time, many have seen a metamorphosis from what was the major emphasis on local or domestic business to now another level of business on a much larger and global scale. In fact, now companies are so moved with technological and global changes that today’s business and educator leaders have to think futuristic and look at the current marketplace—the virtual business side or e-Business arena. Before we can go further into the area of e-Business, we need to understand more of the global impact on learning and conducting business.

Moving from Beyond the Global to Virtual Plateau

Is the move from a global environment to a virtual one caused by technology, human interest, and/or a search for a change in branding? For example, when “a brand expands it reach around the globe, it achieves favored perceptions that are greater than the sum of its national parts.” [10] This type of branding, known as global branding, depends on the input of the various stakeholders and how their cultural differences can enhance the quality and acceptance of such a brand. In the field of business, this new type of branding (or re-branding) can make a bottom-line difference on the survival of a product or services, as well as help re-establish the company on a more positive and competitive playing field. Juxtapose to this end, in the field of education, educators and adult learners need to understand how these new virtual learning environment (or communities) have created and offered yet a new type of global branding of education in terms of connecting various stakeholders throughout the world into a stronger and more diversified learning environment. Contextually, we can see a new, global branding of course management systems (also known as learning management systems or LMS), which affects and supplements the needs of growing the various virtual learning communities. Therefore, as educators, we need to understand the historical changes in learning in order to better understand how technology can enhance learning, but more importantly, add value to the teaching profession in order to enhance the traditional “framework of teaching” into a more modern and culturally diversified way of teaching. From this perspective, we can see a duality in purposes between the interest of the business and academic communities in offering the best possible learning and working environments for today’s knowledge workers. In the next section, we will look at how business has changed in terms of competitiveness and desire for more employees with stronger skills sets and need to adapt to changing technology to help them obtain both personal and professional goals.

The Renaissance of Working in Today’s Workplace

While many people may associate the term renaissance to the Middle Ages, but it is still applicable today – especially in the fields of technology, business, and education. As a result of changing technology and economic times, many organizations are realizing the need to update, innovate, and rejuvenate. InCaS (2010) noted that “As a result of constant changes caused by globalisation, emerging technologies and shorter product life-cycles, knowledge and innovation have already become the main competitive advantages of many companies. Especially European small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) are highly dependent on the ability to identify changes in their global economic environment quickly and respond to these changes with suitable solutions.” [11] Thus, the key question is whether we are better off today than before in terms of developing our intellectual capital? This leads one to consider if the onset of technological advancements has really helped or hindered our learning and knowledge building process? In consideration of these questions, we will focus on the online (virtual) learning environment and reasons why they have to be constantly seeking improvement and new ways of working in order to remain viable, competitive, and
productive. As a result, many of these online organizations (both business and education) have been focused on what their human capital can bring to the table in order to achieve these goals. For example, human capital is explained as “the capabilities of the company’s employees necessary to provide solutions to customers, to innovate and to renew. In additional in individual capabilities, human capital includes the dynamics of an intelligent (learning) organization in a changing competitive environment, its creativity, and innovativeness.” [12] Consequently, there has been an increase in the focus as to how online learning providers are investing more money and time in developing their employees. Barbara Smith (2000), chief learning officer for Burson-Marsteller stated that “If we don’t have the best people creating the best product, we can’t compete. What I’m after is creating the best people in the industry. E-learning is an option that provides us with real competitive edge—it helps us maximize our intellectual capital.” [13]. Finally, there is a growing need for more investment and strategic development in the area of online learning training to help enhance the skills of online instructors.

**Overview of Movement of E-Learning Concepts to E-Business Creation**

Due to the brevity of this paper, limited coverage could be extended to this final portion of the paper to detail e-Business in any great detail. However, the researcher of this paper has taught both conceptual and theoretical course content in the areas of organizational consulting, training and development, global business/management, and other leading business and managerial courses which help the learners learn about the growing trends to move from the traditional form of business to a virtual realm to learn more by true academic and real world applications. For examples, listed below are several examples of changes made in various business courses to give the students opportunities to experience how to apply course concepts and theory in the realm of real work application.

- 4 papers are replaced with two activities to measure learning objectives, communications skills (written and oral presentations measurement), and use of technological skills.
- Students will prepare same research, but create it as one end of term research paper.
- Students will prepare a YouTube, Adobe Presenter, Power Point presentation or other presentation software formats to speak to their CEO (professor) about the formal report that they are presenting to him or her.
- Students will use software packages such as word processing, spreadsheet, presentation, and/or other type of technology to provide student with a more “realistic” real world effect of prepare a formal business proposal to a CEO.

This is only a summary, rather than a detailed account of the potential changes in the area of e-Business, but the literature is growing daily. However, the impact of today’s business and technology teachers will be everlasting if they continue their focus on looking forward, rather than stagnating on past concepts, theories, and principles, but instead focus on the unleashing of all of potential possibilities.

**Summary**

While technology has been increasingly changing over the decades in both the fields of business and education, a new form of business called e-Business has been surfacing and become a known term in the marketplace. Even in the past year, Bezos of Amazon admitted that he had no idea of the potential of Amazon when he started this business venture would be. Equally important, little did the creator of NetFlix realize that this service would grow at the given rate and demonstrate to the world that the technology created and controlled by cable would be the end all be all – but rather yet another industry that would be replaced by newer forms of technology, cloud based, and growing the ever-changing field of e-Business. The question is whether business and educator leaders can handle the current and upcoming changings in e-Business and be able to contribute to the field and help develop the human capital for today and tomorrow to make even more business, technological, and educational changes.
References


