ICT AS AN EFFECTIVE EDUCATION VEHICLE FOR SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE CULTURE IN THE OFFICE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of Australian organisations are paying greater attention to motivating and effectively utilising the skills of their employees. *Employer of Choice* (EOC) programs are one way of achieving these goals. EOC reflects the value and importance organisations place on their key stakeholders — their staff. Many organisations are working hard to acquire EOC status. This paper suggests *Computer Assisted Learning* (CAL), which embraces the constructivists' principles of adult learning can provide the ideal platform for educating a large office-based staff about an organisation's EOC program. CAL also enables individually-tailored learning along with additional opportunities to reflect an organisation's branding and culture.

Introduction

Herman and Gioia (2004) have observed that Employer of Choice (EOC) has gained popularity since the year 2000, representing a whole new design of corporate culture and human capital management. Their observation is supported by research which demonstrates that gaining EOC status is an emerging and critical part of successful businesses in terms of external reputation and employee satisfaction (see, for example, EPA Victoria, 2005; Fracaro, 2005; Herman & Gioia, 2000; Human Resources, 2005; IBM, 2005; Kahler, 2005; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002).

In Australia, workers are demanding enhanced employee opportunities, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental awareness from their employers. Such demands are influenced by factors such as: (a) global business trends towards accountable and transparent behaviour, (b) Australian government legislation and regulation, and (c) a workforce with the capacity to exercise greater choice in employment. Increasingly, organisations have to find meaningful ways of responding to such employee demands along with remaining "ahead of the pack" in terms of human capital management as a means of becoming and retaining EOC status. Education about an organisation's EOC program is seen as vital for retaining staff, attracting quality job applicants and enhancing a business's reputation (Hewitt, 2003). This is where Information and

Communication Technology (ICT) can add value to an organisation through its intrinsic worth.

ICT is the most accessible and available vehicle for communicating with external and internal stakeholders of large organisations (Euneson, 2005; Harrison, 2007), and can be effectively used as a means of educating staff about their organisation's employee benefits and *good* employer practices (Reiser, 2001a; Reynoldson & Vibert, 2006). However, for ICT to be helpful in the education process, consideration must be given to pedagogical design in keeping with adult learning principles, as well as the objectives of the EOC program. This paper focuses on teasing out the parameters of EOC within the Australian context and outlining how ICT can be used to educate staff about their organisation's EOC program.

Defining EOC

In Australia, the term "EOC" has typically been associated with recruitment and strategies to attract and retain staff (Drucker, 1999; Herman & Gioia, 2004; Leary-Joyce, 2004). More recently, EOC has been viewed as *best practice* for employment conditions, including: employee opportunities, sustainable culture, public reputation and desirable qualities like facilities and support networks that make organisations attractive employers (Hewitt, 2003; Hull & Read, 2003; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002).

A number of studies such as "Best employers to work for in Australia" (Hewitt, 2003); "What makes a best employer global study" (Looi et al., 2004); "Simply the best workplaces in Australia" paper (Hull & Read, 2003), *Global Human Capital Survey 2002/3* (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002); and "The Capability Within — The Global Human Capital Study 2005" (IBM, 2005), have outlined essential criteria for running a successful EOC program in Australia: leadership and inter-relationships, safety, wellbeing, staff development, opportunity, inclusion, community involvement, financial education, and sustainable practice. According to Hull and Read (2003), leadership and inter-relationships are pivotal criteria to a successful employer of choice program.

EOC can be viewed from two perspectives: the employer's perspective, i.e., CSR strategies safeguarding effective operations for a business, and the employee's perspective, i.e., CSR strategies securing an employee's commitment to the business. EOC encompasses the internal policies and practices that ensure the organisation's culture is corporately responsible for its operations and the resulting effects on all stakeholders, including customers, shareholders, government and the organisation's primary asset — employees (Abbott, 2003; Fels, 2003).

Business Reputation, Staff Retention and EOC

An organisation's reputation is an important asset that needs to be protected. Business reputation extends beyond financial performance for shareholders (Fombrun, 2005) and incorporates all stakeholders, including employees, government, community and consumers/clients (GRI, 2002; Suggett & Goodsir, 2002). Internal employer of choice programs can deliver intangible benefits of brand enhancement and better staff morale, fortifying corporate responsibility and strengthening business reputation (Bright, 2005).

Australian companies recognise the importance of business reputation and the benefits of providing a solid foundation in EOC policy and practice and addressing human capital issues. This development is influenced by factors such as international laws and trends in relation to employer of choice practice, corporate responsibilities, Australian government legislation relating to EOC criteria and risk management. The past few years have seen more global campaigns for open and accountable behaviour from organisations, producing increased government regulations. At the same time, Australia is experiencing falling unemployment rates and employee burnout. All these are driving the need for improved education and communication with regard to employer of choice strategies, policies and practices (Hewitt, 2003; Hull & Reid, 2003; Human Resources, 2005; Work Safe Victoria, 2004).

As mentioned earlier, two key considerations for the current Australian workforce are low unemployment rates and employee burnout. The Australian unemployment rate of 4.3 per cent was at 30-year low in February 2008 (ABS, 2008), resulting in a *job-seekers* market. Such a job-seekers' market allows the Australian workforce to exercise a greater choice and to consider a broader range of issues when contemplating employment (Fracaro, 2005). Annual staff turnover in Australia has leapt from between 11 to 13 per cent in 2005 to more than 18 per cent in March 2008 (Schneiders, 2008).

The retention and attraction of effective staff can successfully be managed through providing a working environment conducive to employee needs and preferences. The risk of employee burnout can also be managed through policies supporting staff safety, work-life balance and health. All these can be taken care of with a well-planned comprehensive EOC program which makes use of technology to help employees come to grips with what the program is about. As Looi et al. (2004) have pointed out, intangible benefits like employee opportunities, corporate responsibility and environmental accountability are enthusiastically considered by prospective and present employees as determinants in the choice of an employer. Such intangible considerations make it all the more imperative that

organisations put a lot of thought and effort into designing their EOC programs and educating their employees about them.

Employee Education

The knowledge worker (Drucker, 1989) is a powerful resource in terms of increasing the intellectual capital of an organisation and improving the productivity and viability of the operation. Staff education is fundamental in terms of safety, productivity, lifelong learning, communication, and effective people policies (Harrison, 2007; Work Safe Victoria, 2004). These issues play an important role in the operations of a company and are core to an employer of choice program. Yet many Australian companies are failing to educate staff on how to make EOC policies work effectively (Morgan, 2008).

An internal staff education program which adheres to the principles of staff development, adult learning and lifelong education can be introduced in order to provide vital EOC information based on the criteria outlined earlier. Such a program can also be a vehicle for expanding knowledge on relevant EOC topics, along with providing the opportunity for staff input into the curriculum development process through feedback and analysis. A staff education program conducted internally for employees in an office environment would need to be capable of educating large office-based staff numbers *en masse* and have the flexibility to adapt to the culture and work patterns of the business.

Computer Assisted Learning (CAL)

Many issues associated with office education can be addressed through online education or CAL. An online resource used to facilitate the development of an EOC education program utilising contemporary information and communication technology has the ability to be a cost-effective educational tool that can operate successfully under office conditions in large organisations. The online resource will not only provide EOC information for users, but also have the capacity to pinpoint areas requiring further development. This can lead to a more complete and progressive EOC education program.

ICT has pedagogical capabilities for business education that can genuinely facilitate learning and extend added value (Martin et al., 2003). Pedagogical dimensions are concerned with the aspects of design and implementation of computer assisted education that directly affects learning (Martin et al., 2003; Reeves, 1992). Visually rich means of instruction, direct links between business and instruction, and taking practice from abstraction to realism through online instruction add value to a business (Reynoldson & Vibert, 2006).

Reynoldson and Vibert (2006) have identified seven distinctive capabilities of ICT-enabled education, which complement an office environment: flexibility, customisation, practicable lifelong learning, borderless education, visualisation and simulation, business-in-the-classroom, and theory-practice nexus (p. 7).

ICT allows flexibility as it removes limitations imposed by traditional timetabling and styles of business education, and replaces them with virtual learning communities. Learners can customise their studies through taking greater control by matching personal needs with programs online. ICT also meets the lifelong learning needs of users, who desire to engage in continuous, or periodic, studies in order to upgrade their skills throughout their working life and beyond. Remote access and access to several different suppliers allows for borderless education. These functions are considered to be positive for communication and improve resource capabilities (Reynoldson & Vibert, 2006).

Using digital media that incorporates realistic simulations and visually rich adjuncts enables ICT to move beyond text-based materials. ICT overcomes the spatial and temporal barriers associated with movement between the teaching academy (or training centres as is the case with many large organisations) and the business through low-cost, online and instantaneous communication. Students are able to move in the real world applications, against textbook conceptualisations, and from imagined to actual contexts. These capabilities are deemed to contribute genuine pedagogical potential for a business (Reynoldson & Vibert, 2006).

CAL In-house

Research has shown that ICT is an effective tool for business education, not just communication, and has the capability to be programmed to suit the environment in which it is being used. Indeed, Reiser, (2001a) notes that "Since 1995, rapid advances in computer and other digital technology, as well as the internet, have led to rapidly increasing interest in, and use of, these media for instructional purposes, particularly training in business and industry" (p. 1). Businesses with large staff numbers require an educational tool that allows learning across the floor, is time flexible, allows for employee input and feedback, provides authentic experiences, and is economic to implement (Barker, 2003), and ICT through CAL provides that tool. Information and communication technology as an education vehicle has many advantages for large staff numbers in relation to convenience, availability, time and location. ICT is simple to update with many internal intranet systems capable of conveying information instantly. Across-the-floor knowledge is available to all staff with computer access.

A CAL tool is time flexible and cost effective (as explained above), it can easily be uploaded to the in-house drives, and is available at convenient times for staff with access to computers. The majority of office staff has access to, and are capable in, the basic principles associated with computer operations (Barker, 2003). "Those who undertake formal learning are also those individuals likely to use ICT," according to Gorrad, Selwyn and Hubert (2005, p. 84). Most office workers are trained, capable and comfortable working with computers. Justin O'Brien, Director of High Performance People Group, sums it up beautifully when he notes that "The benefits of online learning systems compared to face-to-face training for large staff numbers are many. Such systems are cost effective, transportable, adaptable, and can be programmed to reflect the culture of the company" (personal communication, January 23, 2008).

It is important that the education tool can create authentic activities in keeping with the values and ethics associated with the employer of choice principles of particular companies. This is consistent with contructivist theorists (Dalgarno 2001; Reiser, 2001b; Vygotsky, 1962) who believe learner-centered education is the most effective way to learn. Constructivists base learning on building upon prior knowledge, presenting information within a context in order to relate to prior experience and learner activity rather than teacher instruction (Dalgarno, 2001, p. 184). Reiser (2001b), citing Dick, points out that authentic learning tasks that echo the complexity of the real world environment in which learners will utilise their skills need to be reflected in instructional design and adaptation of online learning management systems.

What and how much is learned is influenced by the learner's motivation. Motivation to learn, in turn, is influenced by the individual's emotional state, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking (American Psychology Association, 1997). Dalgarno (2001) believes that attention to design can create a learning environment in keeping with constructivists' criteria for effective learning.

The structure of ICT allows for instant feedback in the form of electronic mail (e-mail) and electronic discourse (chat rooms and bulletin e-boards). Users share ownership of the information through their feedback and direct input into the upgrading of information. The online functions of ICT also allow users to expand the information available through links to external websites (McCann, 2008).

Despite the numerous advantages outlined here, a few challenges present themselves in the use of ICT (CAL) as an educational tool in the office. First, without a trainer/facilitator on-hand to answer questions and give immediate feedback, staff may have difficulty completely understanding the learning material (Alley & Jansak, 2001). "An advantage of face-to-face learning is that you have a

facilitator available upon request to answer enquiries and further explain information. Trained educators can recognise when learning is taking place under the right abstraction, something that programmed instruction from computers is unable to identify" states Justin O'Brien (2008).

In addition, asynchronous communication (e-mail and bulletin posting) often leaves users feeling isolated and unimportant (Alley & Jansak, 2001, p. 9). Response times to queries are often delayed and may have the effect of minimising the urgency and importance of the enquiry. Unsupervised online education may also lead to unnecessary and distracted browsing on the Web (Dalgarno, 2001), resulting in tangent investigations and divergence of focus from the core task. These challenges can be overcome by having assistance on hand (perhaps a phone call away, in the same way that computer company's do for their customers) to answer any queries from employees. A way of dealing with the more social concerns of isolation and distraction can be by motivating employees through some kind of reward system and other means that acknowledge that an employee has successfully completed the program of their own volition. Such an approach can hopefully encourage staff to engage fully with the material.

Office Education Design for EOC

The primary objective of EOC online learning management is to provide ongoing access to staff regarding information on their business' employee programs and operations, including the capacity for ongoing upgrading of this information and feedback mechanisms. The guiding principles in curriculum design for an online education system regarding employer of choice include: learner-focused EOC content, online access, familiar navigation, opportunity for external research, authenticity, reflection of brand and values, open feedback, site-usage data, and the opportunity for further development through integration with other modes of education.

Curriculum design needs to suit the objectives of EOC education for individual organizations: "Curriculum is thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored in" (Edwards & Kelly, 1998, p. 1). The boundary for an EOC curriculum needs to be permeable in order to support adaptation and variation to the resource for a range of workplaces. Many theorists and academics have prescribed models of curricula. However, Print's (1993) dynamic model associates well with the perceived learners and their input into the curriculum. This complements the constructivists' belief (Dalgarno, 2001) that each individual constructs their own representation of knowledge drawing on their own experiences; and everyone's construction of knowledge is equally valid.

The design of the EOC curriculum for specific organisations should include input from a selection of stakeholders, including senior management, staff, and external contractors. Due to the nature of the content, input is required from human resources, public affairs and those associated with corporate governance and social responsibility (IBM, 2005; Pickett in Human Resources, 2005). The updating of the curriculum as a result of feedback or industry developments should be overseen by the formation of a curriculum committee (Liu, 2001).

The curriculum's classification for EOC is relatively simple in content but complex in framing. The functionality of an EOC online system is to educate staff on the employer of choice policies and practices for that business. The principle of classification is concerned with "the (knowledge) categories, contents and relationships to be transmitted" while the principle of framing refers to "the manner of transmission" (Bernstein, 1990, p. 196). EOC criteria form the basis of the classification, with ICT as the initial transmitter.

The pedagogical philosophy behind an EOC learning system equates with constructivists' beliefs for learner-focused objectives. A weak framing permits input from learners into the system and allows negotiation within the curriculum through modification and options, while focusing on outcomes: "Strong framing entails reduced options; weak framing entails a range of options" (Ross, 2000, p. 99).

The directory content will typically contain information on the criteria for being an employer of choice for that business. This classification should address people management issues regarding effective people-policies relating to: internal and external relationships, occupational health and safety, learning, community involvement, environmental conscience, and financial security (Herman & Gioia, 2000; Hull & Read, 2003; Looi et al., 2004). It links with the policy and procedures for the host company, and should permit access to external websites for expanded information, allowing for individual interpretation and aiding life-long learning.

Online access permits media integration that extends to the external Web, opening the opportunity for external research to be included in any further discourse (Alley & Jansak, 2001). The endogenous constructivists' approach stated in Dalgarno (2001) emphasises the importance of learner-directed discovery of knowledge.

Staff may access the system from the company computers. Ideally, the education tool is framed on the company's internal Web system, or intranet, and can be situated on the tool bar, or under the *Human Resources* directory of the company's intranet. The navigation of the user-interface remains simplistic and can be text-based or icon and text-based depending on the format of each intranet system.

Access at anytime (particularly relevant to shift workers and client-service staff with strict timetabling) and unrestricted learner-control are strong advantages of such a system.

Keeping screen design as an extension of the branding of the company's desktop face allows the tool to remain aesthetically pleasing to management and familiar to staff. The program forms part of the business' communication system, not an alien tool external to the operations of the business. The cognitive load remains manageable with employees intuitively using the directory to access information they desire directly. Users can use the directory to visit specific sections of the EOC program instantaneously. Mapping in the system follows normal host-intranet procedure so users can avoid disorientation and view where they have previously visited. Familiarity with the style in which information is presented ensures staff are comfortable with the navigation within the system (Reeves & Reeves, 1997).

Constructivist computer-assisted learning tools, according to Dalgarno (2001, p. 186) draw on hypertext and hypermedia environments allowing learner-controlled browsing of content and simulations and micro-worlds that permit active exploration within a virtual environment. Hypertexts are chunks of textual information while hypermedia incorporates pictures and graphical buttons that can act as links, along with text. A simulation is a model of the real world environment, with a micro-world as a simplified version of the real world environment (Dalgarno, 2001). Such systems allow a learner to express what he or she knows and then engage in Web-based activities to merge his or her understanding with that of experts and other professionals (Oliver, 2000).

According to Seely Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) the relevance of the situation and the context are key determinants in the learning process. Effective learning needs to take place in an authentic social setting as the context, culture and situation will impact on the learning process (Alley & Jansak, 2001). An in-house EOC education system enables learners to personally apply information to their immediate situation. Users of the system do so with the intention of learning more about how their company addresses opportunities that will benefit these individuals. Motivation to learn is intrinsic as students take responsibility for their own learning (Alley & Jansak, 2001). Constructivists believe that activities situated in an authentic context motivate and encourage students to learn (Boyle, 1996).

This authentic activity, a feature of constructivist epistemology, can be enhanced through simulations and micro-worlds (Dalgarno, 2001) using graphics and diagrams of the actual business (Reeves & Reeves, 1997). Video messages (e.g., message from the business head) and digital films specific to the business can be

introduced and constantly updated on the system. Such a multi-faceted approach accommodates individual learning styles (Alley & Jansak, 2001; Dalgarno, 2001; Oliver, 2000). A major advantage of this education system is the curriculum's ability to accommodate and echo the values and culture that senior management want to reflect through the program. The e-learning system can be tailored to address the values of the company directly from within the resource.

The program should be obligated to provide 360-degree feedback, in keeping with constructivist philosophy. The system can be designed to allow direct e-mail between staff and business units (Barker, 2003). This complements Moshman's interpretation (Dalgarno, 2001) on dialectical constructivists' theory based on social interaction in the learner's knowledge-construction process, which may be achieved online through computer-mediated communication, (i.e, asynchronous — e-mail, mailing lists and online bulletin boards). An open discussion board that eliminates any privilege on discourse for the ongoing development of the education program can be introduced. Feedback in the system relates directly to practices and policies associated with that business/employer's of choice program enhancing concrete experiential value.

Bulletin posting, from senior management through to junior staff, enables reflection and feedback. This allows all staff to contribute new ideas and elaborate on examples of positive practices that they have experienced elsewhere. Cooperative learning is integral to the system. According to Oliver (2000) students must sense some form of ownership of the curriculum. Harrison and Bergen (2000) note that an important component for online learning is a bulletin board, where students and instructors post messages for all to see. Bulletin boards ought to be monitored with old messages being archived in an electronic file. The system may also provide one-to-one private e-mail to allow confidential enquiries and an e-mail letterbox to particular business units for individuals requesting further information. The reflection and clarification processes provide learners the opportunity to modify misconceptions or improve poor understandings (Oliver, 2000).

A key outcome for the EOC information resource is to provide direction in order to facilitate further development and expansion of the education program. The resource engages employees in EOC and identifies areas for further education development through feedback directly from staff, data on popular sites, participant enthusiasm, performance management, and discourse for particular criteria and/or sites. Areas of concern, interest and relevance can be pinpointed through these feedback mechanisms. Education strategies can be developed to address specific identified areas for development and provide staff with an opportunity for extended learning by expanding knowledge on identified interest areas. This may occur through upgrading system-content and/or through other

more traditional modes of education, including training, lecturing and face-to-face learning.

Conclusion

This paper's main aim has been to determine what constitutes EOC within the Australian context and to show that ICT through CAL can be a valuable tool for educating an organisation's employees about their EOC program. Employer of choice reflects the value and importance an organisation places on its key stakeholder — its staff. It is clear that organisations that invest in their people are perceived to be better places to work and are more likely to retain key staff and outperform other organisations on financial measures (Hewitt, 2003). There is a business need in Australia for an effective program that educates staff, management and business-policy designers about employee opportunities and makes the most out of an organisation's culture. The first step to developing and articulating an EOC brand is internally, through an organisation's greatest ambassadors: the staff (Australian Institute of Management, 2004). Using the information technology already available in an office environment, computer-assisted learning represents an ideal tool for facilitating staff education about an organisation's employer of choice program.

The curriculum design proposed here and the associated opportunities for further development of the EOC program are in harmony with adult learning principles. Dewar (1999, citing Bundage and MacKeracher) notes that "Adult learning is facilitated when the learner's representation and interpretation of his/her own experiences are accepted as valid, acknowledged as an essential aspect influencing change, and respected as a potential resource for learning. This resource design allows for autonomous and self-directed learning, applies value to the learner's prior knowledge and experience, is goal orientated, directly relevant to the user's business environment, respects opinion and feedback, and has practical applications." Computer Assisted Learning which embraces the principles of adult learning in keeping with constructivists' approaches can provide the ideal platform for educating a large office-based staff about an organisation's EOC program.

The continual improvement of the system is reflected by the opportunity for input from all employees using their previous experience and research capabilities within the system, resulting in the capacity for spiral learning (Alley & Jansak 2001). In order to pinpoint the most effective means of promoting the use of CAL as an education tool internally, individual organisations will require further research. Such a system has the capacity to remain contemporary, with an ability to change in order to reflect global and local environments, and allow for continuous improvement.

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