

An Exploratory Study of Online Learning for Professional Development: Should Club Managers Go the Distance?

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the feasibility and interest level of offering the core professional development program for members of the Club Managers Association of America (CMAA) in an online learning environment. The article outlines the CMAA's professional development core courses and the previous research involving online learning for organizations. Findings identified the study population's general demographics, their background experience in online education, and their interest level for future professional development online initiatives. Conclusions, recommendations, and strategies were offered for CMAA online learning initiatives globally.

Key Words: web based learning, continuing education, organizations

Introduction

The membership club management industry includes golf and country clubs, city, yacht, athletic, university, and resort clubs. The Club Managers Association of America (CMAA), the professional association for managers of membership clubs, reports a membership of approximately 7000 managers who manage over 3000 properties nationwide (CMAA, 2008). The CMAA, in addition to providing support networks promoting successful and efficient operations, encourages the education and advancement of its members through their Lifetime Professional Development Program. The Business Management Institute (BMI) courses, the core of the CMAA's Lifetime Professional Development Program, offers multiple professional development opportunities in areas including club management, leadership, human resources, golf management, and food and beverage operations. At the present time, the Club Managers Association of America delivers professional development training solely through the traditional format of face to face delivery. The aim of this study was to explore the feasibility and interest level of enhancing the professional development opportunities by offering BMI classes in an online learning environment. Most mainstream training and education institutions intend to use online

learning environments for some level of course delivery. This pursuit is not intended to replace face to face instruction but to increase educational offerings for the members of CMAA.

CMAA Professional Development

The CMAA's Lifetime Professional Development Program prepares members to lead, succeed, innovate, stretch boundaries, expand expertise and create a thriving club environment (CMAA, 2008). There are ten academic programs offered, all presently offered in a face to face learning environment. The core segment consists of five levels of courses labeled as BMI I-V. Other programs provide training in the areas of Golf Management, International, Certification Review Course, Food and Beverage Management, and Wine and Food Experience. Briefly, BMI I - Club Management provides an overview of the industry. BMI II - Leadership Principles is designed to enhance leadership, management, and critical thinking skills. BMI III - General Manager/Chief Operating Officer outlines the responsibilities and competencies of a general manager/chief operating officer. BMI IV - Tactical Leadership explores tactics to enhance leadership style and potential. BMI V - Strategic Leadership offers strategies in the following areas; developing mentoring programs, conducting financial analysis, club technology, and employee retention. BMI - Golf Management explores the history of golf, agronomy, golf shop operations, tournament operations, merchandising, and business planning. BMI - International is co-sponsored by the Club Managers of Europe, introducing facility development, people development, professional leadership, traditions, and culture. BMI - Certification Review is focused on the nine competency areas tested for the Certified Club Manager (CCM) designation. BMI - Food and Beverage provides insight from the management and control perspectives. And finally, BMI - Wine and Food Experience provides basic wine training, the pairing of food and wine, and hosting a successful wine and food event. The question arises as to whether online learning courses may be introduced to expand these professional development programs, particularly at the international level.

Literature Review

Online Learning Environments

Online learning environment research is well documented in the literature. Benefits, challenges, and opportunities have been explored, focusing on participant experience and learning effectiveness. The extent to which non-traditional classroom alternatives are used is referred to as online learning environment (OLE) modalities (Slate, 2001). Modalities range from traditional courses using web enhanced features, to reduced class time (mixed mode) methods, to fully web-based course versions.

Convenience consistently appears as a tremendous benefit and influence for participation in online education for both traditional and non-traditional learners. Convenience was a major benefit to practicing engineers seeking improvement of employability skills through online education (Kariya, 2003). Chang, Hung, Keh, Chang, and Shih (2005) identified student convenience, flexibility, and stability as key drivers for enrollment in asynchronous online learning courses. Flowers and Cotton (2003) documented elimination of travel to campus for both learners and instructors as a tremendous benefit to online learning environments. Financial savings and convenience were identifiers for online continuing education pursuits (Slate, 2005). Witt and Wheelless (1999) found less social interaction as a major disadvantage, yet Harris and Gibson (2006) found increased social interaction as a motivator to enroll in distance education.

Distance education gained popularity, due in part, to its academic effectiveness. Markel (1999) claimed pedagogy should not have to be compromised based upon instruction mode. Numerous studies in varying industries have researched learning effectiveness of online education, a potential concern for the argument of future online education offerings for the Club Managers Association of America. Dellana, Collins, and West (2000) compared the effectiveness of a virtual undergraduate management science classroom and its face to face counterpart, resulting in no differences in academic performance between the two modalities. Buzhardt and Semb (2005) found higher satisfaction rates and no academic performance difference when comparing the use of online and paper-based study guides. Stacey (1999) highlighted the effectiveness potential from asynchronous online discussions when compared to traditional environments while Meyer (2003) contended asynchronous learning environments may provide a better fit regarding students' preferred learning modes.

Compromising effective learning outcomes, unfortunately, has been a concern for learners choosing online education (Farris, Haskins, and Yemen, 2003). The distance learner may encounter challenges apart from traditional face to face classroom learners. Diligent study, hard work, and motivation are commonly documented influences when choosing convenience of online education (Kariya, 2003). Accessibility issues and lack of familiarity or experience may also be questioned with the potential initial offering of online education for CMAA. Electronic formats have become a mainstream practice within many universities and training programs for both traditional and non-traditional learners.

Discussion in a traditional face to face environment allows for knowledge sharing between and among instructors and students. Similar discussions take place in an online environment; however, such communication is through threaded discussions. Certainly, arguments can be made for benefits and challenges of both environments. Threaded discussions afford students the flexibility of their engagement, time for thorough reflection and thought prior to engagement, and eliminate the often uncomfortable public speaking that reduces and sometimes all together prevents students from active participation in class discussion. Students also have the ability to respond to every question/issue raised in the online learning environment (Robles & Braathen, 2002). Knowledge building results when learners interact with their peers, collaborate, discuss, form arguments, and negotiate meaning (Harasim, 1996). Fullan (2000) contended there is a ceiling effect as to how much we can learn if we keep to ourselves. Online discussions have been noted to provide higher level conversations and learning resulting from such listed benefits. Sweeney and Ingram (2001) documented effectiveness of online threaded discussions resulting in direct, critical thinking style responses. Ellis, Calvo, Levey, and Tan (2004) concurred, with online education allowing for deep reflection on addressed topics.

Early adopters contended online offerings would be restricted to outreach programs for those learners who encountered barriers to attend traditional education and training programs (Lyminen and Rose, 2003). Likewise, a major barrier for members of the Club Managers Association of America is their widespread dispersion throughout the country, making in person attendance at seminars challenging. Online educational environments can close the distance gap, offer a social space where a community of learners congregate and participate in a shared learning environment, and decrease financial expenditures related to travel. Online education typically offers learners more control over their study level, involvement, and time on task. Such benefits allow for professional and career development while juggling responsibilities between family and work. The absence of scheduling conflicts affords learners an opportunity to partake in learning opportunities for degree completion goals where traditional face to face environments may otherwise prevent participants from attending classes, completing degrees, and achieving advanced certifications.

Learning Theories

There are four relatively modern theories in existence that can offer pedagogical advancement to distance learning methods. This poses particular relevance to coursework in applied professions, such as education, nursing, business management and others. A brief description of Cognitive Flexibility Theory, Dual-Coding Theory, Elaboration Theory, and Transactional Distance Theory follow.

The objective of Cognitive Flexibility Theory is for learners to understand the interconnection of content knowledge areas within 'complex' areas of intended learning. Learning outcomes associated with the theory would encourage 'open thinking' and avoid 'oversimplification of subject knowledge' (Spiro, Vispoel, Schmitz, Samarapungavan, and Boerger, 1987).

Dual Coding Theory is also referred to as dual processing for learning. It suggests that two systems (e.g., verbal and nonverbal) comprise working memory of learned knowledge (Mayer, 1999). The two systems are connected and when both are used in parallel fashion information processing may be maximized by the learner (Paivio, 1990). This theory supports the use of combined visual, auditory and kinesthetic modes of instruction to appeal to all learning styles and to expose the learning to variations in material in order to enhance understanding.

Elaboration Theory is focused on course design and somewhat overlaps the tenets contained within Cognitive Flexibility Theory in that it advocates a simple-to-complex approach in developing instruction modules (Chou, 1999). Elaboration Theory also touches upon the content of Dual Coding theory by advocating a double learning process consisting of knowledge expansion and then condensation (Reigeluth and Stein, 1983) implying that first exposure to the knowledge and then exposure to more

difficult examples is better. Also, the theory suggests that combining the two in a teaching environment produced the optimal outcomes.

The Transactional Distance Theory poses direct implications for OLE course designers. It articulates the concepts of interaction (transactional) and autonomy (distance). The theory suggests that increased levels of learner autonomy will result in improved learning abilities (Stein, Wanstreet, Calvin, Overtoom, & Wheaton, 2005). Advocates of the theory focus on course structure, dialogue and autonomy. They suggest that a balance should be created among the variables to facilitate learning within a course (Kanuka, Collett, and Caswell, 2002).

The common thread espoused by the four theories embrace the concept of OLE course design that appeals to visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning style preferences. The theories also pose implications for tutorial use in OLE platforms. It must be recognized that certain members of the professional association may not be familiar with the use of computer platforms. Therefore, tutorials must be developed to engage all of the senses through the use of visual, auditory and kinesthetic oriented tools such as video, audio, and hands-on practice modules.

Online Training in Organizations

The business literature is replete with examples of organizations using online delivery methods to provide training and certification program preparation. The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) defines e-learning as the delivery and administration of learning opportunities and support via computers and networks to improve performance and development (Anonymous, 2001). An increasing number of organizations in China have introduced distance learning programs to certify marketing professionals in electronic commerce and E-business systems preparing trainees to pass a national-level comprehensive certification examination (Zhang, Li, & Lin, 2005). Many professional trainers with years of experience in both classroom and OLE training methods have been hired to provide online task support programs for learning reinforcement (Mao and Brown, 2005). A number of organizations and universities currently collaborate to provide Six-Sigma training and certification through a broad array of websites (Shafer, 2005).

While many studies in the literature report on initiatives and benefits associated with e-learning systems, a smaller number address the pedagogical nature of the delivery methods. One source cautions trainers to consider various modalities such as web-based delivery, mix-mode (blended learning) classes and self-paced tutorials to develop effective combinations of delivery modes based on maximizing competencies (Newman, 2005). Other researchers have focused on corporate universities to find that issues of pedagogy and learner responses have been inhibited by other organizational factors such as return on investment (ROI) expectations associated with such programs (Homan and Macpherson, 2005). Another report suggests techniques for balancing business and learning concerns for administrators of OLE programs in organizations (Taher, 2003). Still another study provides focus on the transition from traditional to technology-based learning methods as a strategic initiative that should consist of clearly articulated objectives and tactics (Rooney and Scott, 2003). It has been further suggested that some organizations hold e-learning programs to higher levels of evaluative metrics; consistent with expectations associated with other business systems, such as e-commerce (Massie, 2003).

It is apparent from the literature that positive and negative experiences surround e-learning initiatives within various organizations. There are reports of certain sophisticated and holistic programs within some advanced organizations, in which OLE learning projects are incorporated into broad learning management systems (LMS) driven by top management support (Nisar, 2002). Other researchers contend that the LMS approach is providing competitive advantages for certain organizations, when it incorporates OLE training delivery methods into the system (Wild, Griggs & Downing, 2002). One pattern that seems to be consistent among reports from the literature indicates that the use of technologies for learning is rapidly increasing throughout many organizations and industries with mixed results (Adams and Waddle, 2002).

Methods

The purpose of the study was to explore the feasibility and interest level of enhancing the professional development opportunities by offering BMI classes in an online learning environment. A 20 question

survey was distributed to the participants at various BMI seminar sites, requesting general demographical information, their interest level, and previous experience with online education. Participants for this study were from the BMI I-IV and from the BMI - Wine and Food Experience seminars. The survey was anonymous and conveniently delivered to encourage participation. Survey data were input into a statistical program for analysis.

Results

A total of 438 surveys were distributed with 333 returned for analysis. The researchers were satisfied with the 76% return rate but found no distinguishing pattern as to who completed the survey and who did not complete the survey. The study population was identified by job title/category, gender, age, and club type, as depicted in Table 1. Unfortunately, not all respondents provided the requested information.

Table 1. Demographics

Variables	Characteristics	Percentage (N=333)
Job Title/Category	GM/COO	39
	Assistant GM	26
	Department Managers	19
Gender	Male	66
	Female	19
Age	<30	13
	30-39	27
	40-49	34
	50-59	11
	60+	2
Club Type	Country Club	66
	City Club	6
	Athletic	3
	Other	8

The educational background and longevity as a CMAA member of the participants were also identified. The survey requested participants to identify their highest level of education completed. It was revealed that 18% held a high school diploma, 15% held an associate degree, 26% earned their bachelor's degree, and 5% earned at least one graduate degree. Unfortunately, 36% did not report their education level.

Survey data also documented the respondent's longevity of membership with the Club Managers Association of America. Approximately 29% of the respondents have been a member of CMAA less than three years, 27% have been members of CMAA for three to five years, 17% have been members six to ten years, and 12% have been members 11-15 years. Approximately 15% did not report their membership longevity with CMAA.

There were two questions regarding online education. The first question was to identify the participant's interest level if parts of future BMI education would be offered online and education credits were awarded.

A five point Likert-type scale was utilized to answer this question, ranging from will most likely not participate to strongly favoring future participation in BMI online education opportunities. The second question requested participant's background experience with online education. Table 2 depicts the results of future online education interest and background online experience of the respondents. The balance for each variable was not reported by the respondents.

Table 2. Future Online Education Interest & Background Experience in Online Education

Variables	Characteristics	Percentage (N=333)
Interest Level	Strongly in favor to participate	29
	Somewhat in favor to participate	22
	Neutral	4
	Unlikely to participate	8
	Will not participate	2
Background	Has had experience in online education	32
	No experience in online education	68

Discussion

A strong case can be made for considering the development of online education for BMI curriculum based upon the respondent's background experience in online education, formal education level, age, job title, and by group topic. Further analysis revealed interest in future online educational offerings regardless of experience in online education. Approximately 77% of the respondents who had no prior experience with online education would likely pursue online education for CMAA continuing education credits. Likewise, approximately 82% of the respondents who have had online education experience would likely pursue online education opportunities for CMAA continuing education credits.

The majority of respondents (68%) have had no experience in online education. As previously noted, members of professional associations with little or no background in online education would be strong candidates for tutorials. A surprising finding, however, was found between age and online education experience. The technology generation would resemble the current study's under age 30 category, born with technology common to business, schools, and home environments. Interestingly, the present study's under age 30 population reported that approximately 58% had no experience in online education. More intriguing, however, is that over two thirds of them have received a bachelors or graduate degree. Higher education institutions nationwide offer online classes in almost every discipline with many institutions offering fully online degrees.

Another surprising finding was respondents between the ages of 50-59 reported similar online education background experiences with 52% reporting no online experience. Educational levels achieved by respondents in this age category, in contrast to the under age 30 respondents, may more readily explain the lack of experience in online education. Findings revealed 31% have been awarded an associate degree, approximately 28% have received a bachelor's degree, and 10% have received a graduate degree. It is quite possible that even though a smaller percentage pursued higher education and may not have had as much exposure to formal online education offerings, the researchers assume this age group chose online when offered to avoid interruption in their work cycle. Findings for the additional age categories as they relate to experience in online education were not surprising given their formal

educational years were prior to the technology era. Approximately 78% of ages 30-39, 70% of ages 40-49, and 75% of ages 60+ had not experienced online education.

It appears that the majority of respondents would pursue continuing education credits via online programs regardless of previous online education experience. A closer focus on age revealed approximately 70% of ages 40-49 had no experience in online education yet 79% were likely to pursue future online education opportunities. Approximately 80% of ages 30-39 were likely to pursue online continuing education and 70% of the under 30 age group. The lower commitment level in the latter may be related to their lack of understanding in the importance of continuing education for career advancement and the time and financial commitment of such pursuits pulling them away from family and work. Furthermore, only 27% of the ages 50-59 would likely participate in online education. It would be an assumption that the minimal interest level may be related to such age group nearing the end of their work cycle with additional continuing education credits as a low priority.

Findings revealed 80% of the general managers responding to the survey were either strongly or somewhat in favor of their participation in future online education opportunities. Only 3.5% of the general managers claimed they would not participate. Approximately 73% of the Assistant Managers and 82% of the Department level managers would be interested in online continuing education classes for CMAA certifications. Such results are not only favorable for the development of online education initiatives for present leadership but also should be a strong indicator that leadership would support participation from their respective work units.

Results were also analyzed by groups. An overwhelmingly positive show of support for online education initiatives came from BMI IV. A little more than 78% of respondents from BMI IV would participate in online education, followed by BMI II respondent's support of participation (53%), BMI IIIa (42.1%), and BMI IIIb (40%). The balance in all groups, for the most part, gave strong indicators of their likely participation in online education initiatives if offered to them for CMAA certification credit. A further analysis into BMI I demographics may explain why the group did not commit as strongly to future participation in online education initiatives as compared to the other groups. The BMI I participants, when compared with other groups, had a lower percentage of general managers and assistant general managers. Thus, their responsibility level at their respective clubs may not provide the insight as to the consequences of their absences while attending face to face seminars. Furthermore, they are beginning their pursuit of CMAA certification levels and therefore have not had the monetary outlay when compared to senior level leadership. Two thirds of the participants were in their first three years of membership with the Club Managers Association of America. Important to note, seminar costs may or may not differ based on delivery type. However, a tremendous benefit to online education is that all expenses related to travel would be eliminated and flexibility in anywhere/anytime modalities would allow leadership the ability to remain in their work environment while pursuing professional development education.

Conclusions

There are limitations associated with the present study, as may be the case with most field research and with preliminary exploratory studies. One limitation consists of the sample size of respondents, noting the high number who did not respond to all survey questions. It is commonly realized within this industry that managers are reticent to completing written surveys. One reason for this consists of time restraints associated with the demands of professional duties. Another includes the number of requests by industry related researchers for data, although there is limited literature available within the sector of golf and club management. An additional limitation that influenced the nature of responses is the lack of exposure to online training methods, which are just recently becoming embraced within the hospitality industry.

Nevertheless, this preliminary study may serve as a catalyst for various avenues for future studies and future CMAA activities. Within the specific domain of this research, follow-up studies may be conducted to examine the outcomes associated with the implementation of OLE training courses for golf and club managers. This might provide insights concerning the efficacy of online instructional programs within the professional organization. As previously stated, there is a need for additional contributions to the golf and club sector literature. There could be future research concerning competencies and educational programs relating to golf and club management. Certain investigators may choose to provide

comparative studies among various professional association training methods. Some researchers may choose to report on the evolutionary nature of OLE training among CMAA members.

With regard to CMAA activities, the CMAA and its international counterparts are highly active with professional development by offering numerous conferences every year. A likely scenario might be that club professionals may choose both face-to-face conferences in addition to those offered in an OLE format. This might result in higher participation in programs. This is the intent of CMAA officials who commissioned this study. A counter argument might be that the addition of OLE courses might cannibalize attendance at traditional conferences.

The association is committed to expanding programs within international locations. In fact, there are seminars currently being delivered in Scotland. The provision of alternative OLE course and certification options would permit the membership to participate in professional development activities on a global level. It has already been noted that key considerations for those interested in the OLE options are those with limited travel funding and positions that preclude long absences from club property operations. Additional incentives to pursue the OLE modality would be the maintenance of work-life balance by providing educational programs that do not require managers to being away from family members.

Current traditional BMI programs are provided through collaborative ventures with various academic institutions. Many academicians are adept in the design and delivery of online learning modalities from both technical and pedagogical perspectives. The transition to OLE formats could easily be developed through existing relationships with these institutions. Certain technical strategies would be developed such as the selection of server locations and courseware platforms. One suggestion would be to develop a universal template for courses so that there is continuity among the appearance of each module.

One recommendation for CMAA officials would be to develop a strategy of delivering pilot programs for a small number of specific programs. This could be done concurrently with traditional programs to compare attendance levels. Another option would be to run intermittent programs between OLE offerings and traditional conferences.

As noted in the literature, the majority of attendees will opt for an OLE program for convenience reasons having to do with time and location. The ideal course design would be to use asynchronous (not real time) formatting to permit participants to work at any time from any location. OLE courses are learner-centered in nature, with the instructor acting as a facilitator of interactive discussions. It is necessary to assimilate the audience into the course at the very beginning with the objective being to create a virtual community. One example would be for the instructor to post a brief biographical sketch and to ask participants to introduce themselves to each other. Successful instructors are very interactive with the audience during the beginning of a seminar. Once a sense of familiarity is established, the instructor facilitates interaction among peers who learn from each others' experiences. Experienced instructors from collaborative institutions employ these techniques in OLE courses.

A number of professional associations have embraced OLE course and certification delivery methods. A recent successful pilot project was completed with the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA). The education division of the CMAA is to be commended for considering the foray into OLE program delivery. There is a strong likelihood of success with such an initiative.

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