Online Education and American Workers' Perceptions

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Abstract

American workers, despite the desire and a variety of opportunities present for reskilling or upskilling, have challenges with an online format for professional development. A brief history of technology-mediated education is reviewed, along with current modes of online instruction. The benefits and disadvantages of online education for employees and employers are explored, as well as the barriers for employees in participation and skill attainment.

A recent national study of employment established the importance of reskilling and upskilling to both employers and workers (Career Optimism Index, 2022). At the top of the list of actions (top 34% or above) that workers take when considering a career change are seeking out opportunities to build skills, learning new skills and expertise to be competitive in the digital age, enrolling in a training program, and enrolling in an education program. Fifty-two percent of employees believe that they will need to learn new skills to continue at their current job. When considering the diversity factor, more Black, Asian, and Latino workers reported this factor than their White counterparts. This same worker group felt less optimistic about their opportunities for learning new skills, at only 29% overall, and less so for Black workers (31%) and Baby Boomers (34%). So, it is established that learning new skills is important to workers.

In this same study, employees reported that they are provided ample opportunities for online education (Career Optimism Index, 2022) which matched employer reports of providing courses through an online education platform (43% of workers and 44% of employers). The availability of an option of using an app for access to anywhere/anytime online learning was cited by 33% of workers and 37% of employers. While these figures are encouraging, it also suggests that, of those responding to the survey, 57% of workers reported that they do not have an employer provided online education platform in which to access learning programs for reskilling or upskilling. This finding suggests that those employers who are not providing such a platform are limiting worker opportunities for reskilling and upskilling.

Is online education a viable method for worker skill development? Online education comes in many forms, so definitions are provided for clarity. At one mid-Atlantic state college, five forms of instruction were described on their website, four of which are technology-mediated in some way (College of Southern Maryland, 2022). They offer web-based courses, which are completely virtual and have no set time or schedule; real time technology, which are video sessions held by the instructor and attended by class members via a video platform; hybrid, which are a combination of web-based and meeting in person (some in-person meetings and some web-based activities); and HyFlex, which combine web-based and meeting in person, but unlike hybrid, students may choose which form they wish to attend and have the option to switch back and forth to meet their needs. Online training modalities may also fit these models: web-based, real-time technology, and perhaps some combinations.

Next, let's consider the nature of online education, as it may possess clues towards the relationship between online learning and worker education. The notion that one can learn on one's own time and space is not new to the American public. The promise of technology facilitating learning at a distance from an instructor or learning space for America began with broadcast radio in the mid-1920s and later with the advent of television in the 1950s (Baum & McPherson, 2019). These forms facilitate one way transmission of knowledge but lack interaction. Actively engaging with the information shared by the instructor has been found to improve retention and understanding (Baum & McPherson, 2019). Even with the Internet, computers, and learning systems now providing the environment for online education, at least at the undergraduate level, the lecture mode of instruction online still predominates. It is not known how this corresponds to online education provided by employers, but from the perspective of the cost of delivery, utilizing systems that deliver pre-recorded instruction (along with checks on knowledge retention by answering and scoring questions based on the material), is certainly more cost-effective than live instructors. Online training programs have proven their ability to save millions of dollars yearly (Bartley & Golek, 2004). The elimination of travel costs to a central site for training as well as the cost of time spent in a travel status contributes to those savings. Another saving is that content recorded for reuse results in employing less trainers. Other benefits of online training are that the training is learner-centered, allowing the student to dictate the pace and schedule; is scalable and provides for a consistent, quickly disseminated message to all workers (Bartley & Golek, 2004).

In one study (Cueva, K., Cueva, M., Revels, L. Hensel, M., & Dignan, M., 2021), cancer education delivered via synchronous webinars (real time technology) were provided to Alaska's rural tribal health workers. As a result of the webinars, these health care workers planned to change their own behavior to reduce cancer risk, as well as to communicate with their patients more often about cancer prevention strategies such as screenings, physical activity, tobacco cessation, and healthy eating. While the webinars addressed the desire for participants to participate in synchronous sessions, and therefore have opportunities for dialog, far fewer unique learners participated in the webinars than the team's asynchronous (virtual) cancer education modules. Therefore, from a knowledge transfer perspective, asynchronous forms of training reach a broader audience and, in this sense, are more effective.

If online education is more cost-effective for the organization and more convenient for the learner, what barriers exist for achieving the learning outcomes expected by both employee and employer? Given the emphasis of online education for worker reskilling and upskilling, it is helpful to understand the factors that explain participation in these activities and whether or not the factors that explain participation are different from those that explain participation in other types of employee training. In a study of 275 organizations and 557 employees, factors that influence participation are identified (Garavan, Carbery, O'Malley, & O'Donnell, 2010). The research discerned individual and situational factors which have an influence on worker participation in online training to include motivation to learn, e-learning task specific self-efficacy, and content quality. The self-efficacy relates to one's belief that they are capable of participation and have the related skills to conduct themselves in an online platform. With regards to motivation, those employees who consider online training as worthwhile, enjoyable, and leads to desired outcomes will have the greatest motivation to complete the learning activity.

In conclusion, American workers seek out educational opportunities for reskilling and upskilling. Online education is attractive for employers due to cost containment and the flexibility it provides. Employees, too, find online formats desirable due to their convenience. However, barriers for participation should be considered in the design of online educational programs to ensure a high quality of content, that workers have the necessary skills to perform online learning tasks and possess the motivation to learn in an online format.

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