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E-LEARNING FEATURES IN BIG COMPANIES: A COMPARISON BETWEEN BRAZIL AND FRANCE

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Abstract

The Internet has brought about deep changes in the way companies do business as well as promote knowledge and information exchange. The growth of e-learning is one of the consequences of these changes, and it already stands among the most profitable applications of e-business, representing a market whose attractiveness is forever on the increase. The objective of this research is to map out and compare the use of e-learning in the biggest Brazilian and French companies, describing the principal features and indicating the differences between the countries. To achieve this, a survey will be held with the 100 biggest companies in each country. The ready and validated questionnaire in Portuguese represents the results so far.

Keywords: *e-learning, web-based training, distance education, internet*

1 Introduction: Research Objective and Question Addressed

The Internet has brought about deep changes in the way companies do business as well as promote knowledge and information exchange. Elearning stands among these changes and appears as one of the most profitable e-business applications (Drucker 2000). It represents a market whose attractiveness is forever on the increase (Kalakota and Whinston 1996; Laudon and Laudon 2000). The benefits of this new teaching-learning system could justify making organizational efforts to operate with online learning, however different the interests among organizations may be. There are companies envisaging coaching their collaborators, others intending to develop e-learning technologies, such as software and their products. Other companies still seek to render support services to organizations that are planning to develop courses on the Internet. Besides this, it is believed that there are significant differences among e-learning programs of companies from different countries. These differences may derive from culturally based issues, different technological development levels and pedagogic practices, to illustrate but a few. For this reason the objective of this survey is to map out and compare e-learning use in the biggest Brazilian and French companies, describing the principal features and indicating the countries differences.

The purpose of this survey is to search for the answers to questions such as: what technology is currently in use? Is the development of technology and course contents made in-house or are they purchased as a ready product? How many e-learning programs are there and what are they? Are they operational, managerial or strategic? Are the courses based on self-instruction? Do participants interact among themselves? How does one evaluate satisfaction, learning results and the applicability of developed contents? Comparing these types of questions will make it possible to map out the main features of e-learning programs in Brazil and France, as well as to verify the main differences there are between the two countries.

2 Theoretical Foundation of the Study

The Internet has been challenging the traditional business frame of mind, generating organizational changes and broadening the geographical frontiers of businesses. It is, today, the fastest growing technology, also displaying the greatest impact upon society (Laudon and Laudon 2000). Because the Internet grows fast and is the initiator of new communication forms, it has changed the way business is conceived and carried out, as well as organizational activities as a whole; this change is found in the realm of education too, namely with e-learning.

The integration of information technology and learning processes produces a potential effect on the distribution of knowledge in academic and commercial environments (Webb 1998), but one cannot think of e-learning as just a new distribution channel, without taking into account the media and the learning relationship potential (Chatterjee and Jin 1997). Learning is active, constructive, cognitive – it is a social process along which the learner manages cognitive, physical and social resources to generate new knowledge. At all events, the Internet is making educators think over the real nature of teaching, learning and educating (Mamaghani 1998).

One of the major benefits of e-learning is to allow knowledge to reach a greater number of people, making this knowledge 'accessible' from anywhere at any time, and quickly allowing users to go back to it when there is a need. In other words, it is made into something constant and continuous. (Amor 2001; Mamaghani 1998). Liegle and Madey (1997) name other benefits, such as real-time grading of interactive exercises; immediate feedback to users, training, IS department; tracking of individual performance on a question and exercise basis; hypermedia learning systems which accommodate various learning styles; and worldwide distribution.

Hamalainen (apud Turban et al. 2000, p. 185) point at a series of factors which have contributed to the development of the e-learning market. They are continuing education growth, just-in-time and on-the-job education growth, globalization not only of businesses but of education as well, fast and constant content changes, the increase in conventional education costs, expansion of digital libraries, virtual universities, digital technologies convergence, plus the expansion of e-commerce Internet infrastructure. The Internet enables the development of courses in which there is not only interaction between parties, but where the very methodology and knowledge construction process are based on interaction and cooperation among learners and teachers (Kalakhota and Whinston 1996).

3 Research Methodology

The objectives of this paper will be attained with two surveys via the e-mail, where the present stage of the 100 biggest Brazilian and French companies, as far as their e-learning use is concerned, will be attempted to be mapped out. Reference literature for carrying out this survey will be Oppenheim (1992), Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996), and Segall and Henessey (1998) for 'via the Internet' data collection. All methodological precautions will be observed during data collection and analysis, so that the current situation can be described. Quantitative data will be statistically analysed and for qualitative data the content analysis technique will be observed (Krippendorff 1980; Weber 1990).

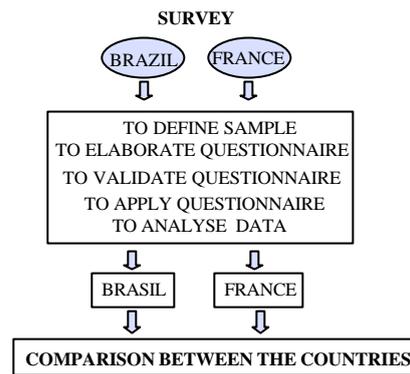


Figure 1. Survey stages

4 Current Status of the Project

The sample to be used has so far been defined as the 100 biggest companies in Brazil and France. The companies listing was obtained from periodicals that publish yearly surveys (in each country) naming each country's biggest companies; and as the survey data will be collected by e-mail, these companies e-mails are currently being gathered. Based on the literature reviewed, the Portuguese version of the questionnaire for data collection is ready. The questionnaire has been so far validated, more specifically its face validity, i.e., its convenience of vocabulary and form. (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996).

Validation was held in accordance with the following steps: a) after researchers had discussed the questionnaire, it was presented to 10 Business and Management Master's students at the Rio Grande do Sul Catholic Pontifical University, who gave feedback about how they understood the questions and how long they took to be answered; b) after the necessary adjustments, and as the collection will be made by e-mail, the questionnaire was converted into an electronic format with a specific software. In order to check how the electronic sending would take place, the questionnaire was sent to 6 people with different IT knowledge levels, seeking to verify whether the file with the questionnaire would arrive normally at different types of computers, navigators and servers, whether it was easy to fill out and if automatic sending takes place smoothly, etc.; c) after further adjustments (now only in its technological part), the questionnaire was sent to two specialists in the field and to two companies using e-learning to check content and display aspects, more precisely clarity and precision of terms, number of questions and the necessary time for filling it out, instructions, question order, questionnaire format, question content, and questionnaire application form (Edwards et al. 1997). These specialists have made a few suggestions, which have been added to the final version.

The survey questionnaire is composed of 3 parts, each one of them having (numerical and text) single or multiple choice questions, besides written answer questions: a) first group refers to the existence (or not) of distance training/courses, regardless of the technology used; b) second group refers to how distance training/courses via the Internet/Intranet work; and, c) third group refers to the respondent's data. The questionnaire could be obtained by sending an e-mail to the first author.

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