

THE WORLD CUSTOMS ORGANIZATION'S E-LEARNING PROGRAM

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Abstract

In 2003 the World Customs Organization (WCO) introduced an e-learning program as an essential element of its training strategy to improve the quality and quantity of training in customs administration worldwide. Two years ago, the WCO engaged Premia Airtime Ltd as the official distributor of its training products to disseminate this training tool to the private sector with the clear objective of providing trade operators the same appreciation of international customs rules and tools as customs administrations receive through the WCO. The WCO e-learning program is a comprehensive, ground-breaking training tool which offers an integrated learning environment designed to facilitate easy and effective training to cover the broad scope of the international trade environment. With the positive application of the WCO e-learning program, the competency levels of customs and trade administration, a key issue for the 21st century, should be systematically improved.

Introduction

Over the last ten years online training, or e-learning, has been forced upon the world of education. After an initial fashionable impact, the e-learning process was increasingly adopted as a consequence of the ease of access and demonstrably effective training processes. Whether designed for students in educational institutions or for vocational training, nobody would contest the pertinence of online learning. But how can we make it achieve its maximum potential?

One of the missions of the World Customs Organization (WCO) is to improve customs service among its 172 member countries. As part of this mission, in 2003 the WCO introduced an e-learning program as an essential element of its training strategy to improve the quality and quantity of training in customs administration worldwide. The project was also designed to strengthen the links with its institutional partners and the trade community. After five years of development, the WCO's e-learning program now provides more than 250 training hours online and is accessible to more than 30,000 customs officers in 130 countries.

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So, where are we now? How can e-learning help human resources departments achieve their objectives in organisational management while adapting to the realities of the world market. How can e-learning guarantee companies or administrations access to the capacities, competencies and organisational strategies they need to develop efficiency and effectiveness? And, how can e-learning assist staff adapt to new rules and changes in techniques and processes?

E-learning: new technology for information and training

'E-learning is a distance learning system that makes use of modern multimedia resources and allows one or more individuals to train using their computers. The multimedia supports used can combine text, 2 or 3D graphics, sound, images, animation and even video. These media revolutionise the teaching approach, using more games-oriented techniques where interactivity plays a major role, diversifying tools used, adjusting more closely to the student's learning process as the student takes control of his training. The latter can train at his own pace according to his needs and availability. This is particularly important at a time where lifelong training becomes the norm'¹ and the mobility of the worker is increasing significantly.

The saying 'Learn what you need, where you are and when you want' is true but no longer sustainable without a strategy which accords with the goals and priorities of the organisation that provides the training. The acceleration of mutation and discontinuity of strategies and rules in the modern world provoke enormous alignment problems. Each time an organisation wants to change rules, policy or strategy, it will communicate the changes to management who, in turn, transfer them to the staff to adjust and adapt to these new rules, policies or strategies, recognising that these knowledge workers are numerous, dispersed and international.

Another problem to consider is the imminent loss of specialised knowledge with the retirement of a significant number of qualified workers in the next decade. For example, in a number of Japanese organisations or companies up to 50% of the workforce will leave the job market before 2015. That creates an obligation to educate thousands of employees in a more complex and unstable environment, mostly with the challenge of distance.

It might be difficult to imagine the development of intellectually competent workers, or the adaptation of worker teams or cadres to new strategies or standards without a massive increase of access to training and specific knowledge outcomes. This access rate, however, is still insignificant despite efforts that have been provided to overcome the problem.

In France, the European country whose training is the most widespread, 25% of employed workers attend face-to-face training each year as do 54% of the cadres. But if employees attend training programs of two or three days per year, this represents less than 1% of their total work commitment. In order to improve staff training, both by numbers and frequency, it is essential that access to education and training programs be increased.

There is no comparison between the training rate of cadres based in France and their equivalents in emerging countries. Any increase in face-to-face training is difficult in the planning process and can negatively affect profitability. However, an increase in the number of training courses and the flexibility in their delivery could assist human resources meet their commitment to providing increased competence and knowledge levels in the operational departments of their organisations.

Reaction and reordering on a large scale are inevitable in a modern organisation. Apprenticeship objectives are on two poles: 'Learn for today and learn for tomorrow'. This approach is necessary for all those employees who need to change their job positions several times in their careers.

As the question of profitability is important for the management of every organisation, human resources departments should be committed to developing personal capabilities in both competence and synchronisation. An American survey (Human Resources Competency study) has shown that human resources practices have an impact of 10% on the financial performance of the organisation: twice that of five years earlier. Consequently, it is necessary to demonstrate the quality and to measure the quantity of training to show management what kind of return on investment they can expect.

E-learning in the customs and trade communities

The WCO is an independent inter-governmental organisation one of whose missions is to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of customs administrations. The WCO devises quality technical assistance and training programs aimed at improving member administrations' human resources management and development capacities.

There are enormous challenges facing customs administrations due to increasing volumes and globalisation of trade as well as regional integration. Knowing this and recognising that the dissemination of information and the provision of training are indispensable to the uniform implementation of key customs-related international conventions, recommendations and other standards, the WCO e-learning program responds to the ever-increasing demand for training. The program is a comprehensive, ground-breaking tool which offers an integrated learning environment designed to facilitate easy and effective training. It is an interactive multimedia facility available to members and educational establishments for both initial and ongoing training and has been designed to offer a global structure which is modular and can be fully personalised to suit the specific needs of each audience.

The first e-learning course on customs controls, risk assessment, profiling and selectivity was offered in June 2003. This was followed in June 2004 by the course on customs valuation and post-clearance controls. Comprehensive programs on the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System, the Istanbul Convention on Temporary Admission, Integrity, Counterfeit Goods and Intellectual Property Rights have been available since September 2005. E-learning courses on the Customs Data Model, Supply Chain Security, the SAFE Framework of Standards, Transfer Pricing, Wild Fauna and Flora have been developed in the last year. The Rules of Origin was the latest addition to this list. The Revised Kyoto Convention will be the next course to see the light of day.

Customs administrations by their size, number and distribution of officials, and because of their hierarchic organisation, resemble multinational companies. The WCO e-learning program is adapted to accommodate the constraints this type of structure can encounter when building a training strategy. As well, the WCO organises specialised training seminars to strengthen the skills and competencies of customs professionals and trade operators. For greater efficiency, e-learning is provided before these seminars to raise and equate the knowledge levels of participants, to learn the standards and acquire the necessary glossary and terminology.

The experience of the past five years demonstrates a need for coordinators and tutors to make full use of this e-learning tool. Best practice includes requiring team managers to follow the progress of students and to apply learned material in daily activities. For this reason, the proximity of team managers to students is essential to ensure the right use of the tool and a profitable return on investment.

The future advantage in common training

In the modern international trade context, cooperation between the two communities, the customs administrations and trade operators, is increasingly required. New technologies and activities such as electronic customs clearance, the complexity of the logistics process, the fight against fraud, piracy and counterfeiting, and the emergence of concepts like the Authorised Economic Operator (AEO) complicate the task. How would the situation be if a common language and knowledge were not available and hence, contribute to misunderstanding? It seems unavoidable that trade operators have to manage the international customs rules with assurance and, as a matter of fact, lighten the customs administration for better targeted control. Irrespective of location, such as having a customs officer in Siberia or a trade operator in South America, they should be able to understand each other well if they have completed an equivalent WCO e-learning course.

Conclusions

The WCO e-learning program provides the opportunity to develop customs administration training beyond its current regular format and existing limitations in numbers in both Customs and the trade community. The online training procedures, through their availability and flexibility, provide human resources directorates with new tools which contribute to new organisational goals.

The competency levels of customs and trade administrations, a key issue for the 21st century, could be systematically developed and their outcomes in the international trade environment assessed. With a commitment to using the WCO e-learning program, the strategic objectives of both parties could be more rapidly implemented and supported, and have the additional benefit of fostering learning across borders and cultures.

Endnote

1 See <http://www.premierairtime.com/index.asp?ID=8>.

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Norbert Conchin holds a Graduate Diploma in Economics and Marketing (Paris). He has 25 years experience in international business and trade, information management and training. Norbert is Managing Director of Premia Airtime Ltd, the company responsible for the international distribution of the WCO e-learning program and the promotion and organisation of WCO seminars to the private sector on international customs rules.