The impact of e-learning champions on embedding e-learning
- in organisations, industry or communities

Executive Summary

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Introduction

E-learning champions as agents of change can be found in the vocational education and training (VET) system - which includes TAFEs, private RTOs, schools and adult learning settings. This report identifies the program design and performance reporting framework required for a champion strategy to impact effectively and achieve the goal of embedding e-learning in VET teaching and learning.

This report is based on a study funded and supported by the national training system’s e-learning strategy, the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework¹), that was conducted in the second half of 2008. The methodology included:

1. A review of literature on agents of change in VET and the use of champions in e-learning development initiatives (see McCulloch et al, 2008).
2. Consultations with 15 experienced e-learning champions who each had at least three years experience, selected from 120 nominees nationally (see Jolly et al, 2008).
3. Case studies of three of the champions interviewed, which provide examples of successful e-learning champions in action from three different contexts: industry (health and community services); community (Indigenous); and a VET organisation (a state TAFE) (see Shaw et al, 2008.).

Key findings

Characteristics of an e-learning champion

The literature identifies effective agents of change as requiring considerable theoretical and practical knowledge and well-developed analytical, interpersonal and diplomatic skills.

The e-learning champions interviewed have the following characteristics:

- skilled in e-learning
- willing to share their expertise with passion and enthusiasm
- client focused and able to communicate effectively with all kinds of people
- able to provide tailored e-learning messages, solutions and advice
- enterprising and willing to solve problems: small/large; technical/non-technical
- open to scrutiny and willing to adapt as new information comes to hand
- persistent and model in their actions and communicates a commitment to promoting e-learning and the use of technology to provide educationally sound and reliable teaching and learning solutions. One of the case study champions provides a detailed account of how to achieve this. A model has been developed to illustrate this and is included in the report. (See Chapter 2.)

¹ http://flexiblelearning.net.au
The activities champions undertake

E-learning champions empower, motivate and mentor teachers and trainers in e-learning and network with other teachers/trainers to encourage knowledge transfer and technology exploration as part of their everyday operations. (See McCulloch et al, 2008.) The champions interviewed confirmed these literature findings and highlighted the relative success of different strategies.

Good practices by e-learning champions to facilitate the uptake of technology in VET teaching and learning include:

- developing a strong understanding of teacher, trainer and learner needs through active listening and relationship building
- offering e-learning solutions that are contextualised to the user’s needs and build on their current skills and knowledge
- monitoring the preparedness of teachers and trainers to include e-learning in their practices and make opportunities available at the appropriate times
- transferring e-learning know-how in small chunks
- supporting each person on their e-learning journey, building confidence initially through one-on-one interactions
- improving activities based on feedback and their own research.

Both the literature reviewed and the 15 e-learning champions interviewed suggest that organisational support is required to embed e-learning in teaching and learning practices. One person cannot by themselves shift e-learning from the margins to the mainstream. To embed e-learning requires organisation/industry/community-wide change and processes in place that aid the work of a change agent to sustain the innovation.

The e-learning champions manage upwards, regularly communicate successes and build strong allies within the organisation in management and the IT department to navigate through blockages. They need to think and act strategically to ensure e-learning becomes prominent across all levels of the organisation.

To build and maintain momentum, e-learning champions must:

- make strategic decisions and focus the available resources on achieving a critical mass of adopters - it is the early majority of adopters who will embed e-learning practices
- encourage early adopters to achieve further innovations
- establish mechanisms for sharing e-learning resources and know-how such as online social networking, peer-to-peer mentoring, use of blogs and wiki spaces, show-case events, and general staff induction and training programs.

The impact of e-learning champions

This study concurs with the literature findings that e-learning champions aspire to:

- change attitudes towards e-learning
- build e-learning capacity among as many teachers, trainers and learners, where possible
- influence their organisation to adopt processes that will sustain e-learning and build the organisation’s reputation in e-learning.
The Framework’s 2008 E-learning Benchmarking Survey\(^2\) reveals that, nationally, 36% of VET activity now involves e-learning and half (58%) of the teachers/trainers in participating VET providers now use e-learning in some part of their training delivery. Comments by staff from the case study organisations, including managers, emphasised the depth of impact on teachers/trainers’ and learners’ attitudes and capabilities that could be linked to the e-learning champions.

E-learning champions reveal they have mixed success at the organisational level. Few of the champions consulted have the advantage of organisational-level mission statements, e-learning goals or targets. All the champions believe that e-learning would be less likely to continue, except in isolated pockets, if they were to discontinue their work tomorrow.

The need for ‘management buy-in’ is a consistent message from the e-learning champions, both in this study and earlier studies. Both the literature and the national consultations for this study suggest that one person or group of people (the champions) cannot embed e-learning. To embed e-learning requires organisation/industry/community-wide processes to be put in place that will aid the champions and the teachers/trainers they work with. The nature of the management support required includes policy support, budget support and a responsive IT department.

In the case studies, ‘management buy-in’ to introduce e-learning at a strategic level has occurred using different approaches. One example uses an inclusive whole-of-organisation collaborative exercise approach, another a business case to management approach, and the third an external freelance consultant working with organisations and targeting community or social groups.

It may be concluded from this study that e-learning champions do invaluable work in building e-learning capacity among VET teachers/trainers and their learners. A supportive whole-of-organisation approach is required to sustain the work of e-learning champions and the changes they have influenced. E-learning champions need the skills to engage executive and senior managers and achieve systemic organisational change if e-learning is to be embedded in teaching and learning practices.

Key focus areas include:

- e-learning as part of the strategic plan for achieving quality teaching and learning
- a budget line for robust e-learning technology
- recurrent funding allocations for staff e-learning training/exploration
- mechanisms for the diffusion of e-learning knowledge, experiences and resources.

**Measuring the impact of e-learning champions**

E-learning champions achieve many flow-on effects from their activities that are difficult to measure.

The measurement focus to date has been on e-learning capacity and usage among teachers/trainers and learners and on aspects of their attitudes to e-learning. Less emphasis has been paid to collecting evidence that e-learning has been sustained and is embedded in an organisation.

The qualitative information collected in this study indicates that e-learning champions have had a significant impact at the teacher/trainer/learner level and mixed success at the organisational level.

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\(^2\) [http://flexiblelearning.net.au/e-learningindicators](http://flexiblelearning.net.au/e-learningindicators)
Whatever measures are used, it is difficult to assign the outcomes to an e-learning champion alone; there are other variables that have influence. The champion’s role is facilitative not absolute. It is difficult to measure the full impact of a successful champion because they achieve cascading or flow-on effects from their activities over time, not all of which are explicit or measurable. Obtaining a complete picture of their impact is difficult.

Figure 2: An e-learning champions’ program design and performance framework

Credible Champion

Getting started

Influencing others

Organisational commitment

Sustained embedded e-learning

Credibility Criteria
- Skilled in e-learning
- Shares knowledge, skills and resources
- Is passionate and tenacious
- Is client focused
- Communicates well at all levels
- Is enterprising
- Problem solves
- Role models commitment

Champion Tasks
- Provides tailored educationally sound solutions
- Encourages teachers to explore
- Works with teachers as they become ready and willing
- Supports teachers one-on-one and troubleshoots more widely
- Reviews and adapts as required

Champion Tasks
- Builds capable e-learning teams
- Creates communities of practice
- Facilitates peer-to-peer learning
- Recognises and showcases achievements
- Nurtures influential advocates
- Seeks to enable changes at organisational level

Management Tasks
- Makes e-learning part of the strategic plan
- Ensures e-learning is appropriately resourced
- Requires IT branch/selection to be supportive
- Makes e-learning part of teacher performance plans
- Encourages participation in professional development activities, provides opportunities and time to learn, experiment and review e-learning tools and products
For more information

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