The State of WBT in Turkey: The Near Future

Soner YILDIRIM
Computer Education and Instructional Technology Department
Middle East Technical University
Faculty of Education
soner@metu.edu.tr

Selin BAYKAL
Computer Education and Instructional Technology Department
Middle East Technical University
Faculty of Education
selin@nar.com.tr

Abstract

This study is undertaken to assess web-based training (WBT) as a tool for corporate training in information technology (IT) organizations in Turkey, by using the experiences, perceptions and foresights of IT managers. The study used data from 10 IT managers as interviewees from 8 different IT companies of Turkey. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, the research questions focused on individual and institutional experiences of IT managers, their perceptions about the benefits that WBT offers and obstacles it creates and lastly their foresights about the future promises of WBT

Introduction

The remarkable development in technology for the last three decades has fundamentally affected individual's daily routines and organizational structures. Now, people are not either trained in the same manner as they were 20 years ago, or workers are expected to accomplish the same task as their fathers did 30 years ago. Ever since the advent of ICT into society and the work place, companies are struggling with the question of how to keep up with new technologies. It's obvious that a considerable number of firms will not be able to survive in the future unless they improve their capacity for making a use of new technologies, especially internet based technologies.

As the historical aspects indicate, there has always been a need for training to develop production and workforce. Especially, in today's competitive business environment, to be on the advantageous side, organizations need to continually expand their capacity to create their future. Such an organization where people continually expand their capacity to achieve their goals, where there is a synergy among people and every single person is encouraged to think and learn freely to add a piece on the whole, is called a *learning organization* (Senge, 1994).

WBT is one of the most efficient and cost effective training solutions today. Trainees can take training whenever and wherever they want. In the last few years, the percentage of employees participating in training courses have increased but the cost of the trainings given has decreased (Hasebrook, 1999). In today's competitive world, traditional means of education are no longer adequate to meet the needs of life-long learning. WBT is becoming a major source for ongoing education in the international knowledge-based economy.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate web-based training as a tool for corporate training in Turkish information technology organizations. The evaluation is going to be within the frame of the experiences, perceptions and foresights of IT managers from several large-scale companies.
More specifically, the research questions are as follows:

1. What are the experiences of IT managers on applying web-based training for their corporate training?

a. What are the individual experiences?
b. What are the institutional experiences?

2. What are the perceptions of IT managers on applying web-based training for their corporate training?
   a. What are the benefits that WBT offers?
   b. What are the obstacles that WBT creates?
3. What are the foresights of IT managers about the future promises of web-based training for corporate training in Turkey?

This study specifically concentrates on the IT organizations in Turkey. The experiences, perceptions and foresights of the IT managers is assessed to contribute to the area with the ideas of the people who are the most involved ones in the subject area. Also, IT is a very fast developing sector; that is, IT people may actually need training themselves most frequently. Another interesting point is that they play an important role at the development stage of the training programs of many organizations and wonder what they are doing for themselves. This study also encourages further research on WBT implementations in different areas, to bring a broader point of view.

In light of these facts, the major goal of this study is to assess web-based training (WBT) as a tool for corporate training in information technology (IT) organizations in Turkey, by using the experiences, perceptions and foresights of IT managers. The study used data from 10 IT managers as interviewees from 8 different IT focused companies of Turkey. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, the research questions focused on individual and institutional experiences of IT managers, their perceptions about the benefits that WBT offers and obstacles it creates and lastly their foresights about the future promises of WBT.

Research Method

The study used data from 10 IT managers as interviewees from 8 different IT focused companies of Turkey. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, the research questions focused on individual and institutional experiences of IT managers, their perceptions about the benefits that WBT offers and obstacles it creates and lastly their foresights about the future promises of WBT.

The results were categorized around five main themes, which were inferred from the research questions. Namely, these themes involved the individual experiences of subjects, which concentrates on their personal use of WBT, the institutional experiences of subjects such as considerations about planning a WBT, the benefits that WBT offers, such as the elimination of timid behavior, obstacles that WBT creates, such as decreased communication, and lastly, the future promises of WBT, which concentrates on foresights of managers about Turkey.

This study used qualitative research methods for two specific reasons. First, qualitative research is an adequate method for disclosing underlying attitudes, thoughts, and perceptions when the literature suffers from lack of research on the phenomenon (learning styles and web-based instruction) that this study investigates. Second, a detailed description about the research content is needed in order to provide a complete and revealing picture to see what is going on. That's why, this study is a 'case study' since the participants were selected from only one department in one State University and it is needed to present a holistic portrayal of the phenomenon (Patton, 1987).

Results and Discussion

The first two parts of the result looks at the WBT experiences of the interviewees from two different aspects: First, the individual experiences; i.e. the online training the interviewees received themselves. Second, their institutional experience; i.e., online training that they made decisions on "training for who-how-what and when". In the following three parts, the benefits, weaknesses and future promises of WBT are discussed, based on both kinds of WBT experiences of the interviewees.

From the individual experiences of the managers, it can be concluded that managers have received WBT themselves for two reasons: To test their own products and/or to get inspired for new job opportunities for their companies. In such cases, the drop-out rate is high.

One major point to consider in WBT for their employees is the stimuli for it. When the objectives are set by the organization, the motivation is high. Another important stimulus is the personal interest of the trainee.

The contribution of WBT to the trainee is the increased efficiency at work and the challenge brought to the employee by the new experience.

In order for the institute-initiated WBT to be successful the structure of knowledge should be considered well. That is to say, the skill to be taught on-line is important. Type of skills that require audio-visual effects, animation and graphics, and software skills are quite suitable for WBT. Face-to-face skills such as personal relations, on the other hand, may not be suitable to learn online.

The budget costs are another important consideration for WBT applications and concerns about budget may lead corporations to choose WBT. Low cost of WBT is a main factor especially for large-scale spread structured companies. Online training decreases travel and accommodation costs, which makes it more preferable when available.

Other reasons to use WBT are to catch up with new technologies and the popularity of it. One should be warned, however, that defining the needs is an important step. A good needs analysis is required.

In deciding for WBT, the technical infrastructure of the firm plays an important role. The speed of sending and receiving information, sound effects, and the quality of graphics are some of the important technical factors that affect the quality of an e-learning program. Therefore, any company thinking of employing WBT should assess and strengthen its technical infrastructure to increase the positive effects of the program.

Content design is a very important aspect to be considered in designing WBT. As well as the quality of the content and graphics, the user friendly interfaces are very important. The interaction of the user with the machine should be seriously taken into account.

Another conclusion is that for an application to be successful and achieve its goals, it should be supported by the managers and accepted by the employees. It is, of course, best when demand comes from the employees themselves. In a firm where strategic planning is carried out as a team of all employees, this is quite possible. As employees' ideas for future investment are taken into consideration, they are more willing to be a better part of it. Moreover, in information technology companies, employees have to follow innovations and developments closely as they take place so fast that one can easily fall behind if does not receive necessary knowledge or skills and thus become redundant. The attitude of managers in a firm should also be supporting and praising, since it is impossible to create a continuous learning environment without management support.

One of the main goals of receiving web-based training is strongly related to performance assessment. It can be concluded that when an institute has its employees receive WBT, they should take the gains into consideration and reflect the result on to the performance assessment criteria, resulting in a reward for the employees in forms such as incentives, priority for desired jobs or others.

Having set the goals, there comes the question of whether creating your own WBT or adopting it. The subjects of this thesis are information technology firms, most of which are the providers of WBT programs themselves. This situation makes them ask the topic question of this paragraph: i.e. should the firm create its own training program or adopt it.

The answer, of course, lies in the area that training is needed. If the content material of the training area can be supplied by these firms, then comes the question of designing it, which definitely requires the expertise of an instructional technologist. The firms should work with an instructional technologist to access the needs, to structure the knowledge and to design the scenario for the training program. The content planned in this way should be discussed well with the technologist/programmer in order for it to be applicable in terms of technology. The visual aspect should not be shipped: such design and source coding demands graphics and user-friendly interfaces to be incorporated in.

All this work surely requires the investment in manpower and time, considering that technology needed already exists in those companies so new investments in technology is not required. Even in this situation, the company may decide that designing a tailor-made course for its own purposes will be too expensive so they may extend it to others as well. In short, this becomes a matter of the consideration of the budget of the firm spared for training.

Of course, the budget is an important consideration and in many cases it will be more economical to design your own program, rather than adapting a training program. In brief, deciding for WBT requires a good calculation of the budget.

Whether a firm designs its own WBT or adopts it universities are one of the best providers of the content. They also provide consultancy at the designing stage. This kind of cooperation is also important for bringing the industry and theory closer.

Let us now look at the benefits of getting on-line training over classical methods of training. First, the learner can control his/her own learning in terms of time, place, and learning pace. The learner is able to manage his/her own training time given that WBT is asynchronous. This flexibility is one of the features that make WBT superior to classical methods of training. This is a great advantage for the manager as the employee can be encouraged to receive training during his non-working time, which means there will not be any loss of work hours in the firm. In addition, WBT is place-independent. This means that trainees are not confined to the work place, and even those who are on holiday will not miss the training at the company, as whether you wear your swim-suit or pajamas does not matter in WBT! Another factor by which more control is provided to learners through WBT is that every learner can spend as much time as they want and also repeat any part as many times as they need, which allows them to control their pace of learning. While this can be a great difficulty in face-to-face learning, WBT eradicates it.

A second advantage of WBT is its cost effectiveness since it brings a considerable amount of decrease at travel and accommodation costs. Also the repeatability of a course for many times, with as much people as necessary helps to reduce from training costs. Indirectly, this gives the opportunity of being less selective to the companies, while sending employees to training.

WBT also has positive impacts on learner motivation with a standard and well designed content. In face-to-face training, it is up to the skills and even the mood of the trainer to keep up the atmosphere of learning. In WBT, on the other hand, as the interactive program is especially designed for higher motivation, it will always yield better results in this sense and will be standard for every learner. In addition to that it is possible to provide up to date knowledge all the time in a feasible manner when compared to classical training methods via WBT.

Finally, WBT is best for learners who are too timid to ask questions in a crowd. This characteristic of a person can be a serious block to learn and WBT is a good tool to overcome such obstacles.

Having explained the advantages of WBT over classical methods, it will be useful to also go over some weaknesses that may decrease the value of WBT. One important problem that will block WBT is any infrastructural problem that will slow down or even interrupt training. Even if at the work place the infrastructure is applied well, it does not guarantee the system that is used by the learner when he/she is out of the office; e.g. using his own computer or any computer in any place. WBT implementations with careless instructional designs also bring a negative reputation for the method. One disadvantage of WBT is that it is difficult to check learners' progress as human-to-human communication is decreased. In addition to that, since it leads to decreased communication, especially for introvert people, it makes them less social. Lastly, with the current available technology, the skills that are eligible to be given over the web are limited, which makes it a weaker tool compared to face-to-face training methods.

Views on the future of WBT show that future training lies in blended learning. In other words, both traditional training and WBT will be used together in a mixed manner. In the future, however, the ratio of the use of WBT is expected to be higher. When WBT is considered as a service to be marketed in Turkey, it can be concluded that there will be more investment in WBT in the short term and there will be a larger WBT market in the long term.

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