Experiencing learning innovation: the case of the Dutch Vehicle Authority

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Introduction

The 'Dienst Wegverkeer' (RDW) is the home of the vehicle inspection organization in the Netherlands. This operational business unit is subject to external and internal developments that put a lot of pressure on the existing training organization. External developments include the increased motor vehicle usage, the changes and greater uniformity in regulations on European and international scale, fast technological changes and improved service quality demands from clients. Internal developments are amongst others the rising average age of the employees and the related loss of knowledge and experience. Thus it became inevitable to acquire more inspection personnel and to train the employees better and faster. It was evident that a profound change in the learning strategy was needed to cope with these increased learning demands.

The mission

a. The 'old' training situation

The training situation was mainly classroom oriented with retraining and examinations and additional working practices that demanded a large teacher capacity. This training was very much place and time restricted and dominated by the use of traditional learning activities, that did not fit the needed workplace related learning crucial for the changing working practices. In fact the readiness for new employees to start working was very much delayed by this traditional training approach. As an answer to this, a new learning strategy was needed to make training and learning more efficient, effective and attractive, enabling RDW to cope with these challenges, while assuring a high quality standard.

b. The 'new' learning strategy

The new learning strategy focused on a blended learning solution with a combination of e-learning, practical assignments, coaching and training. At the heart of the innovation is a Learning Content Management System (LCMS) for the storage of content, monitoring of activities, progress and results, a course planning system, exams, user definition, allocation of coaches and module maintenance. The employees have access to the system via an electronic learning environment for user identification, communication, progress and results, exams and other organizational issues. This includes the development of a personal training plan for which the participant decides about the time, place and pace of the learning activities. A coach guides the employees and monitors how the practical assignments are carried out. To support the implementation of this profound change, a promotion CD was developed to clarify the new concept for all participants (see figure 1).
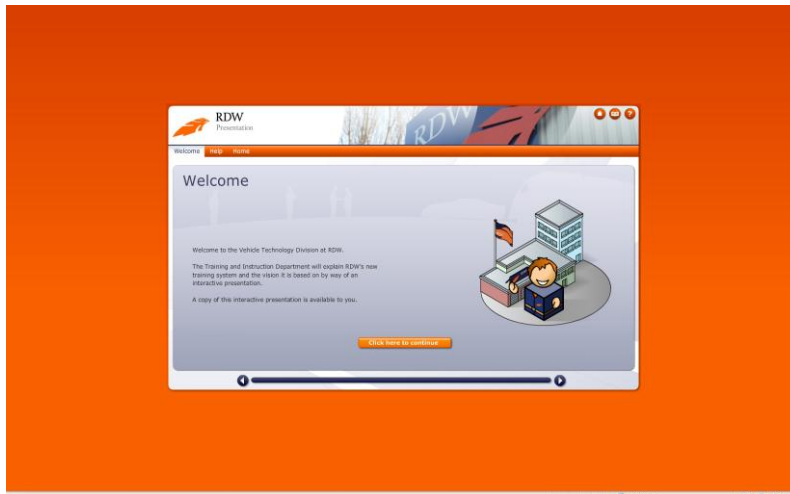

Figure 1. A screenshot of the promotion CD for the new learning strategy

Essential for the newly developed content are the image based and the practical and visual orientation of the e-learning materials. Theory and practice are combined in such a way that the student can choose either way to acquire the needed knowledge. There is video, visual instruction material, visualizations, simulations, different types of coursework and the practical assignments linked to the e-learning content. Exams are done in clusters, via e-learning and in practice under the supervision of a coach and an external examiner. In this way the employees can do initial training, retraining and examinations as well as additional training and exams at the time of need and at a higher pace than possible in the traditional training system.

Pacing the development

The focus in the first phase of the project was on compliance courses like an introductory course to RDW, a course about the Speed Limiter and one about Identification. Also non-technical courses were developed like the one on Integrity with the aim to develop social skills using e-learning in a blended mode. The focus is though on the development of task related courses which include the theory, skills and practical assignments to acquire the needed certificates for car inspection (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Only certified employees can operate as inspector

Beside the existing training issues, new courses are being developed in line with the introduction of a series of new regulations for which the vehicle inspection organization has a controlling task. The new courses are validated from the perspective of the inspection organization, but also as regular technical courses for which the employee might receive a formal certificate that can be used on the labor market.

Monitoring and evaluation

The project has an interesting organizational structure with lots of stakeholders and is highly innovative in the context of the organization. The new learning strategy incorporates a fundamental change that needs firm managerial support and therefore monitoring of the use and the results play an important role. Therefor an evaluation framework has been developed and executed to capture the achievements from the beginning on.

In the first, experimental phase of the project participants showed to be very satisfied with the possibilities for online training and enjoyed the pace and time, the possibility to learn at their place of work and not lose any travel time. In the period after Online training was extended to cover the main job trainings in the organization, participants showed a high appreciation of the learning innovation

that was taking place. The data to proof this came from two rounds of evaluation. One at the start of the implementation of Online learning and one after a majority of employees had gone through their first online learning cycle, including the final tests.

Data from the user database (see table 1) showed that the participants obviously spend more time to prepare for an examination in the old situation than in the new learning situation. Also the scores were in general better. There is a significant difference in the number of people passing the test the first time. In the new situation 94% pass during the first test compared to 77% in the old situation.

	Classroom	Online
Learning time	20	10,5
Test scores	89%	92%
Passing rate	77%	94%

Table 1. Comparing the 'old' with the 'new' situation

Also the qualitative data show some differences comparing the old and new situation. In table 2 you can see a selection of the main scores. Important to know is that the HR policy of RDW stimulates the employees to become more entrepreneurial workers and take more responsibility for their own professional development. This was an important element in the development of the new learning situation and therefor also in the evaluation.

	Classroom	Online
Quality of the training is good	60%	67%
Online learning is a good development	60%	69%
To improve my learning I need to be able to …..		
a. Make my own planning	34%	52%
b. Select my learning materials	52%	56%
c. Organize my own learning	60%	57%
d. Use online content as reference		78%
Online learning is important to achieve a higher level	48%	61%
More possibilities to learn independently	74%	78%

Table 2. The appreciation of the employees for the Online learning situation

The level of acceptance of the online training was a main point of concern, since the new situation was rather different from the old and much appreciated classroom oriented approach. The numbers show that in the perception of the employees the new situation gets a high score right from the beginning on. This is also shown by the score on the question if online learning will help you to achieve a higher level of learning.

The outcome of the evaluation was presented to the board of managers at RDW, which thereafter decided to go ahead and integrate Online learning as the way to go and focus on further development.

The Business case

In the decision making process to decide about the integration of Online learning as the main training model, the business case played an important role. On the basis of the experiences in the field, the monitoring of developments and the evaluation, it became clear that:

    a. Online learning saves time (and money).
    b. The opportunity for Learning 24/7 is appreciated by the employees.
    c. Existing Computer skills are no threshold for using Online learning.
    d. Employees are satisfied with the quality.
    e. The use of the LCMS system as a reference is a great success.

These achievements were noticeable in this very first stage of the development of Online learning and increased the assurance that the strategy was right. This was supported by the insights on the management level were the following issues were of major importance:

    a. Online learning qualified as an integral and supporting part of the HR policy for employability.
    b. End user support was good, but not so much on the middle-management level.
    c. Online learning increased the efficiency and effectivity of training with the right content at the right moment.

RDW continues to develop the Online learning approach and has shown to be one of the forerunners among the governmental organizations.