

## PANEL

# The Social Organization of Tele-Learning in Companies

*Participants*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The system of learning in organizations is about to change. Computer supported tele-learning provides new opportunities for training and further education of individuals as well as groups. While long-existing traditional forms of tele-learning were considered “dull,” the new technical option of transferring video, audio and text by broad bandwidth channels puts new attention on

distance learning processes. A variety of synchronous and asynchronous forms of teaching and learning wait to be explored.

Viewed from either the organizational, the economical, or the didactic-methodological perspective, tele-learning incorporates a vast potential for application within a medium time range.

Especially for small and medium enterprises and in regions with weak infrastructure, tele-learning promises advantages compared to the usual system of skill development: it can be used at the discretion of individual learners, employees can stay in-house, saving costs of traveling and fees this way, and they may expect up-to-date learning packages to take on skill deficits. Thus, experts predict the breakthrough of tele-learning applications not so much in domains such as schools or universities, but in companies.

Closer observation of the tele-learning scenery reveals that there is a gap between technical possibilities and concepts of uptake and use. The enabling technology, based on ISDN, mailboxes, teleconferencing and now widely available satellite and networking facilities, is indeed developing at a considerable pace. Not so much attention is paid to the social and organizational side of tele-learning. Requirements for "best" arrangements of tele-learning are not yet clear. The appropriateness of areas for tele-learning, where current forms of education should be replaced, is also not much investigated. A framework for evaluating learning effects is missing in many cases.

A number of pilot projects involving companies across Europe are underway, trying to find answers. Many of them are funded from money in the programme area of "Telecooperation" of the European Union. Beyond this realm, individual companies interested in tele-learning face many ambiguities. For them, it is still unclear which strategy they should follow and which steps they should take.

## **2. IMPORTANT ISSUES IN TELE-LEARNING**

If a company decides to introduce tele-learning, it is wise to know who is willing to take on the leadership of implementing and maintaining the system. Questions arise around issues such as organizational requirements for access, control, and coordination. Depending on synchronous or asynchronous learning situations, organizational precautions have to be taken. The coordination of access rights and the exchange of material seems crucial. Also, the interests of a company, of end-users and of the providers of learning material have to be brought into a balance. Since few traditional relationships are available in this area, new alliances have to be built.

The main question from an economic angle usually centers on basic and ongoing costs. If a company wants to implement tele-learning, the current hardware and software situation has to be considered thoroughly. A good knowledge of technology and of the market is necessary to select the appropriate equipment. Since most systems supporting tele-learning functions are in their early marketing stages, it can be expected that costs will go down; this would indicate

postponement of the implementation process. On the other hand, criteria are not available for assessing when the right time has come for a company to enter the field.

Tele-learning in its general version can be characterized by the permanent spatial separation between teaching and learning persons. Viewed from the didactic-methodical level, computer support not only adds new multimedia features, it creates potential areas of interaction. Teaching materials can be co-developed by exchanging ideas and requirements between educational institutions and learners. What is most important, synchronous interaction between tutor/teacher and learner can be arranged by means of teleconferencing. Thus, one main requirement for all learning situations — immediate response — can now be reconstructed in new ways.

It is obvious that the systems currently being tested do not supply us with answers to all these questions. So far the field of tele-learning is very open, many players are not yet known, and a balance of needs has still to be found. As this process of reorganization of knowledge transfer in companies is just about to start, it seems helpful to reflect current experiences with tele-learning and to explore opportunities for appropriate social organization.

### **3. GOAL OF THE PANEL**

The panel wants to address these social, organizational and economic questions in the area of tele-learning. The goal is to share experiences and to generate guidance on directions we should take or avoid in the development and use of tele-learning.

The following five themes should help to structure the discussion:

- **Organizational context:** How is tele-learning embedded in an organization? Who does it and when? What are the incentives? Who has/who gains control over access or usage profiles? Who designs and who provides? What are the new coordination requirements? How can a balance of needs be managed in the process?
- **Social organization and technical infrastructure:** Bandwidth of tele-learning environments; discrepancies in the social and technical structure; comparability; adaptation of organization to the technology; group-learning processes; cross-company or cross-country uses.
- **Economics of tele-learning:** Advantages over traditional learning; economic consequences on the company and individual level; cost factors of different tele-learning environments.
- **Learning theories and actual achievements:** Learning theories adopted or assumed; evaluation dimensions; changes in learning practices; requirements for supporting existing practices.
- **Next steps to take:** Any success factors recognizable? Do we agree on evaluation dimensions? What do we learn from earlier/similar learning technologies? What are the most controversial issues? Which problem should be solved next?

The panelists are from four different European countries and provide both industrial and academic experiences. Their professional backgrounds cover a variety of relevant areas in tele-learning:

for instance, regional and infrastructural prerequisites, company strategies, approaches to system development, support of learning practices, and organizing further education for small and medium companies.

In an opening statement, each panelist will provide an overview of his/her perspective on tele-learning, research, empirical data, and experiences. After that, the audience will have the opportunity to discuss the issues in the field of tele-learning with the panel participants.