Lessons learned from co-operation
VIN - a project of co-operation between businesses and university

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Introduction

In this paper the example of the co-operation project VIN is used to demonstrate how a project design which includes three target groups from businesses, a sustainable implementation of Web 2.0 technology and e-learning, can be initiated within the companies. In a second step the specific additional benefits from the co-operation of the project partners and target groups are highlighted and the experiences with the implementation of the project design are reflected on. Detailed data about the sustainability of collaborative learning and the specific additional benefits of the co-operation are not yet available. They will be provided by the course relevant evaluation and the evaluation of the project's progress in co-operation with the Institute for Vocational- and Economical Pedagogy of the Universität Hamburg (Institut für Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik). The pilot project VIN began in December 2009 and has not yet been completed.
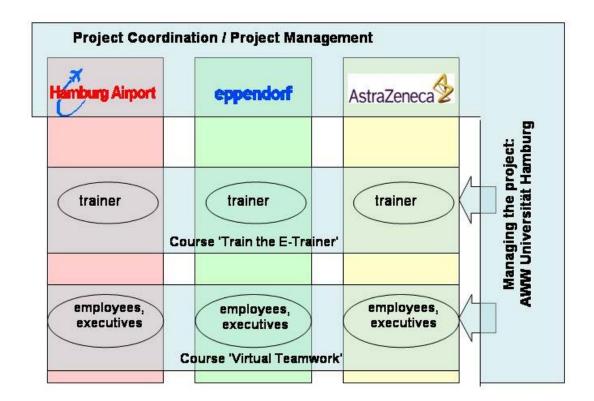
The project "Virtual interaction with Web 2.0 in businesses – make it work" (VIN) is a pilot project of the Centre of Continuing Higher Education of the University of Hamburg (Arbeitsstelle für wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung, AWW) and three major companies AstraZeneca, Eppendorf Inc. and Hamburg Airport. The aim of the co-operation of these four partners is to make the technological possibilities of Web 2.0 efficiently accessible for their employees and to integrate it into their everyday work regime. By the means of the introduction of e-learning and the technology of Web 2.0 the respective companies hope to improve the efficiency of exchanging information as well as providing access to a pool of well structured company data from any location, supporting a constructive way of improving qualifications of employees by this exchange. In doing so, the companies hope to achieve innovative changes in the culture of information exchange and communication, as well as the ways of qualification.

Holistic implementation with three target groups

The partaking companies have chosen the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies in co-operation with the partner businesses and the University of Hamburg to facilitate a sustainable implementation and greater learning effects. To assure this, three target groups from the partaking companies will be explicitly trained in e-learning and Web 2.0 technologies: executives, trainers and employees. With the help of a program called 'Train the E-Trainer', teachers and trainers from the companies will gain specific qualifications in learning and teaching concepts based on the collaboration of the participants that implement the actual Web 2.0 technologies in a didactically sensible way. By these means, trainers will be enabled to develop their own suitable e-learning activities that improve the online self-learning competencies of their colleagues.

The course 'Virtual Teamwork' trains executives and employees of the companies to create more efficient ways of virtual communication and collaboration as well as to structure information and knowledge with the help of a group- or business-wide wiki. Changes in the customs of information,

communication and qualification will therefore be introduced by the different trainers, employees and managers involved.

Additional benefits of co-operation for the businesses

The teaching and learning concepts involved in this process will not only be based on collaboration but also on learning from and with each other has become the central principle of cooperation between the partaking companies and the Centre of Continuing Higher Education. This enables the partners to look beyond their own concepts and processes and to gain new insights from their collaborators. This can lead to innovative potential for all those involved. By the exchange of successful practice examples, the implementation is assured.

The participating companies can use Web 2.0 technologies for national and international co-operation with subsidiary companies and business partners. Advantages offered to the companies are quick exchanges of information and synchronised levels of knowledge, efficient communication structure and culture as well as an improved knowledge management. The introduction of e-learning would allow a flexible time management, a reduction of travel costs but also standardised quality and multiple didactics, in particular for qualification initiatives of distributed world-wide employees. Additionally, the partaking businesses want to offer their young, future employees attractive working conditions by introducing these new technologies that are already used by young people in diverse ways At the same time, neither the structure nor the corporate cultures of the companies are prepared for the implementation of Web 2.0 technology and e-learning. They are not part of job descriptions, there are no company agreements regarding the subject of e-learning and no regulations concerning data protection etc.

The project managers from the businesses are faced with the challenge to initiate a cultural change of the information-, communication- as well as the qualification culture. This path involves a

change management which engages decision makers such as heads of departments, managers, shop committees and employees. On the project manager level, an important aspect of co-operation is the mutual exchange of advice with the design of this process and the handling of obstacles. During the course of the project a valuable foundation of trust developed between the project partners, which enabled them to openly address problems. By the exchange of experiences, knowledge and successful practice, examples about effective change management are generated under consideration of the participating parties.

Additional benefits of co-operation for the university

The Centre of Continuing Higher Education in particular is hoping to gain experience in the field of implementing concepts of knowledge management and qualification concepts in this business oriented context. Through the joint creation of case studies, a transfer of knowledge among the businesses and the university occurs. This will be useful especially for future projects involving co-operation with other companies.

The Centre of Continuing Higher Education uses e-learning concepts for teaching which incorporate collaboration, moderation, case studies, learning by doing and transfer competencies. Trainers were able to consider and use this concept in part only for the conception of e-learning initiatives in the businesses. The learning conditions in the companies' context differ from the learning conditions at the University. The possibility for virtual teamwork and the use of case studies in e-learning initiatives varies according to the target group. Important factors that influence the design of the initiative are the existing competencies of the target group as well as their working conditions. For example, the willingness of field staff which are subject to a premium bonus scheme, to contribute their knowledge to a wiki, is not very high.

Additional benefits of co-operation for employees

In addition, the other target groups gain benefits from the co-operation. The trainers skilled as e-trainers profit from the exchange with the e-trainers from the other companies in creating company specific e-learning modules, including the didactic design and teaching of the training contents. Above all, through the project they are endued with an interbranch network of e-learning designers.

The coaches and trainers of the participating companies are qualified for learning and teaching concepts, based on collaboration of participants which cover the current topic of Web 2.0 technology in a didactically sensible way. The trainers are actively engaged in learning themselves by working in teams using the open source teaching and learning platform OLAT. For this purpose they make use of forums, wikis, blogs, virtual classrooms and chat. Didactically, the course is oriented towards problem-solving, and focuses on learning by doing and the transfer into the work routine. The course finishes with the presentation of each team´s own e-learning concept. The process of joint learning builds the foundation for a later co-operation with the creation of company specific e-learning modules. In this course the trainers gain the adequate know-how to develop e-learning initiatives for their companies. They advise each other with didactical and technical implementations of their initiatives. Additional benefits which follow from the conception of e-learning modules are didactic variety and transparent quality management.

Managers and employees of the co-operating companies participating in the program 'Virtual Teamwork' gain the ability to learn and professionalise virtual co-operation. The project allows them a co-operation across locations with the help of a-synchronised and synchronised communication tools. Additionally, they gain online selfstudy competencies and are enabled to continuously develop their qualifications and competencies themselves. This process is supported by networking of employees within and outside of the business.

Conclusions

Up to this point the project highlighted the importance of engaging groups of interests from the enterprises with the change process. Agreements need to be made within the enterprises in order to allow Web 2.0 technologies and e-learning to support the employees in workprocesses and to promote their qualifications. A further important aspect concerning the success of the project is to assure that e-learning and Web 2.0 technologies are not added as a further sphere of activity to the existing fields. Rather they must be integrated into the everyday work regime of the employees and free space for learning must be created. An additional benefit of co-operation exists for all target groups in the consultation over common problems and the encouragement on solution types for the own enterprise. A further important benefit consists of establishing a network with colleagues within and outside of the buisnesses.

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