

Australian *Flexible Learning* Framework

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

Implementing flexible learning in the workplace: strategies, models and barriers in the meat and food processing industries in regional Australia

Researcher/Evaluator: John Mitchell

Executive Summary

This research project had three goals:

- to identify the strategies used by a registered training organisation (RTO), the Central West Community College (CWCC), to implement flexible learning in the workplaces of two regional NSW enterprises, Simplot Australia in Bathurst and Cargill Australia Limited in Wagga Wagga
- to identify the collaborative partnership model between the RTO and the enterprises and how that model assisted the implementation of flexible learning
- to identify any barriers to the implementation of flexible learning.

The project was undertaken from June-October 2004 by John Mitchell from John Mitchell & Associates. Assistance was provided by Sandra Gray, Senior Manager, Central West Community College and other college staff.

A pragmatic 'mixed methods' approach based on Creswell (2003) was used for the research, involving both qualitative and quantitative methods, which suited the diverse aims of the project cited above.

The research shows that food and meat processing enterprises in Australia need to meet stringent quality and safety requirements, while also demonstrating advanced capacity to be customer-focused and innovative in product design and marketing. In these enterprises, staff skills are a key to business survival and e-learning is now viewed as a new way to provide timely, efficient training for such progressive enterprises. However, implementing flexible learning in such enterprises requires collaboration between all stakeholders and advanced skills on the part of the training provider.

Readers from other training providers and enterprises may be able to transfer to their own settings many of the key messages set out below, provided they first clarify the differences between their own contexts and those described in this report.

Key messages about strategies for implementing flexible learning

A range of educational, business and technological strategies can be used by training providers to implement flexible learning in regional enterprises.

Educational strategies include:

- determining user readiness for flexible learning in terms of computer literacy, for instance through the use of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework's (Framework) product, the Computer Based Assessment tool for self-assessment of computer literacy
- determining user readiness for flexible learning in terms of learning styles and preferences or, if this is impractical, then catering for a variety of learning styles by offering learners a range of ways to access learning in addition to the online medium including face-to-face sessions and learning materials in a variety of forms
- identifying existing learning materials that are in electronic format that can be modified for a specific program and enterprise, for instance existing materials on CD-ROM that can be customised for an enterprise and used online
- clarifying what additional materials and learning activities are required to supplement pre-packaged e-learning courses
- providing staff development for all staff who will be involved in supporting the flexible learning, including trainers, administrative and management staff from the training organisation and management staff from the enterprise
- including in the staff development not just familiarity with the technology and the instructional design, but an understanding of equity and access issues from a learners' perspective
- ensuring the e-learning is educationally sound: that is, relevant, engaging and not just text online, accommodating a range of learning activities
- creating an environment in the workplace which is conducive to learning and cultivates learner self-directedness, for instance by providing easy access to Internet-capable computers in private locations that are easily accessible in the workplace.

Business strategies for the provider include:

- analysing the specific nature of the enterprise, including factors such as difficulties in staff leaving production lines, the educational backgrounds of the staff and the proportion of casual staff
- clarifying whether the enterprise has any previous experience with e-learning and if so, what understanding exists within the enterprise about managing and supporting e-learning
- identifying training needs in conjunction with the enterprise and then identifying likely high demand e-learning programs that match these needs
- identifying compliance-related areas where e-learning may be an effective response
- identifying different cohorts of staff who might be early adopters of e-learning
- highlighting for the enterprise how the provider can add value to e-learning courses prepared by a third party

- marketing the flexible learning as providing value to the enterprise, particularly in enabling staff to acquire new skills and knowledge in a timely, efficient manner
- assessing the usability of pre-packaged e-learning programs and whether and how they could be customised to suit a specific enterprise
- determining where computer workstations or learning centres might be set up in the workplace
- undertaking risk management analysis to anticipate and avert problems
- conducting a commonsense cost benefit analysis to determine whether the benefits outweigh the costs, taking into account that the benefits might not be realised till some time after the initial expenditure
- developing pricing structures for different markets, taking into account different degrees of customisation of courseware and different levels of support to be provided
- using e-business processes where possible to support the e-learning, for example by enabling the end-user to undertake a range of online activities such as enrolling, contacting a range of staff and finding out more information about courses, especially from an informative provider website
- using e-business processes to provide additional support for the learner, such as tracking the progress of learners, issuing automatic reminder emails and issuing completion certificates online.

Technological strategies include:

- developing criteria for selecting a learning management system, which might include affordability, ease of use and reliability
- determining whether advanced features of learning management systems, such as online payment and links to the human resources systems, are affordable and necessary in the first instance
- requiring online providers to issue easy to use templates for converting existing digital information into an online format
- ensuring the learning management system can operated at low bandwidths by users at home.

Key messages about partnership models between providers and enterprises for implementing flexible learning

The findings also reveal components of partnership models between a training provider and enterprises that facilitate the implementation of flexible learning.

Components include:

- the existence of a business relationship between the provider and the enterprise before complex flexible learning approaches are introduced
- an understanding by the provider of each enterprise's unique history, structure, workforce, partnership expectations and business goals that can be assisted by flexible learning

- a high level of trust and mutual respect between the provider and the enterprise
- a collaborative approach to planning the implementation of flexible learning
- a mechanism for monitoring the impact of flexible learning
- a shared understanding between the provider and the enterprise about the key training needs that can be addressed by e-learning
- the ability of the provider to use a range of delivery methods, including conventional face-to-face delivery and flexible learning
- a willingness to use training delivery methods that suit the individual enterprise, including the timing and structure of training
- a willingness to customise training to suit the enterprise, including the inclusion of enterprise-specific content
- support for the partnership from senior management within both the provider and the enterprise
- a commitment to a long-term relationship by all parties
- a willingness by all parties to postpone immediate financial gains in lieu of a longer-term, stable relationship
- the allocation of specific provider staff to work with a particular enterprise
- the joint creation of a learning environment where individuals feel their specific needs are being catered for
- the development by provider staff of skills in partnering enterprises
- the ability of the partnership members to jointly resolve difficulties and overcome obstacles
- the ability of the partnership members to sustain the commitment to flexible learning.

Key messages about barriers to implementing flexible learning

Common barriers to the implementation of flexible learning in enterprises can be sorted into different categories, as follows:

- current: lack of customised online content for each enterprise
- potential: staff given insufficient time off from production lines to access e-learning
- tangible: lack of computers with internet access available in the workplace
- intangible: users' lack of familiarity with e-learning
- deep-seated: some users' lack of experience as self-directed learners
- surface-level: some users' preference for only teacher-directed learning
- recent: lack of trainers with experience in assisting e-learning
- long-standing: lack of packaged e-learning programs
- systemic: lack of policy-level support from some stakeholders

- localised: some resistance from some stakeholders to all the requirements necessary to establish and support flexible learning.

Some other barriers are as follows.

Systemic barriers

Some systemic barriers to the adoption of flexible learning in the meat and food processing industries in regional Australia stem from features of the industry:

- a focus on keeping the production line operating at an even level of output means that supervisors may be reluctant to release staff during a shift
- a skill shortage in some areas of the industry means that some staff are unlikely to be granted time to engage in e-learning during working hours
- in some enterprises a high staff turnover disrupts orderly training programs
- a high level of casual staff could be a disincentive to some enterprises to invest in e-learning programs
- some staff can be expected to be resistant to learning through the use of computers
- industrial relations issues such as the sensitivities about which staff can access e-learning opportunities may affect e-learning initiatives.

Policy barriers

Policies generally do not acknowledge the multiple factors involved in implementing flexible learning or the range of possible benefits, for instance at the enterprise level. Policy barriers stem from:

- lack of information by policy makers of the many educational, business and technological strategies needed to implement flexible learning in the workplace
- lack of knowledge by policy makers of the components of partnerships needed between training providers and enterprises, to facilitate the implementation of flexible learning
- lack of familiarity with the barriers preventing the implementation of flexible learning in the workplace.

Legal barriers

Some legal requirements could hinder the development of flexible learning, where enterprises interpret regulations as requiring large groups of staff to be able to demonstrate physical skills which they think can be taught more appropriately in face-to-face demonstration sessions. In some cases, some aspects of these skills could be developed through e-learning.

Technological barriers

Common technological barriers include:

- access to a cost-effective learning management system
- the lack of a reasonable speed for internet access in the homes of many staff.

Recommendations for stakeholders

Training providers

It is recommended that training providers identify similarities and differences between their own contexts and their stakeholders with CWCC's contexts and stakeholders, before seeking to transfer any of the educational, business and technological strategies used by CWCC to implement flexible learning in the workplace.

It is recommended that training providers compare their existing partnerships with enterprises with the partnership between CWCC and Simplot Australia and Cargill Beef, before seeking to implement flexible learning in the workplace.

It is recommended that training providers use the barriers to implementing flexible learning experienced by CWCC as a useful checklist when seeking to identify potential or actual barriers.

Enterprises

It is recommended that enterprises examine the educational, business and technological strategies used to implement flexible learning by CWCC with Simplot Australia and Cargill Beef, to determine the strategies that might suit the new setting.

It is recommended that enterprises compare their partnership relationship with training providers with the partnerships that both Simplot Australia and Cargill Beef developed with CWCC, before implementing flexible learning with a training provider.

Industry training associations

It is recommended that industry training associations in the meat and food processing areas – particularly MINTRAC and the new Agri-Food Industry Skills Council – promote nationally the good practice in implementing flexible learning in the workplace of CWCC, Simplot Australia and Cargill Beef.

It is recommended that industry training associations in industries characterised by intensive production methods or manufacturing in general revise existing policies or develop new policies in relation to flexible learning in the workplace, taking into account the effective strategies and partnership models used by CWCC with Simplot Australia and Cargill Beef

It is recommended that industry training associations supportive of implementing flexible learning in the workplace examine the needs identified by CWCC, Simplot Australia and Cargill Beef for generic digital learning materials that can be easily modified to suit specific enterprises.

E-learning providers

It is recommended that e-learning providers in the vocational education and training (VET) system seeking to support flexible learning in the workplace develop or partner with suppliers of learning management systems (LMS), ensuring the LMS are similar to that profiled in this report: easy to use, cost effective and easy for the user to brand as their own.

It is recommended that e-learning providers in the VET system seeking to support flexible learning in the workplace model the practices demonstrated in this report, by providing online content that can be easily customised to suit specific enterprises

It is recommended that e-learning providers in the VET system seeking to support flexible learning in the workplace issue training providers with easy-to-follow guidelines and templates for converting existing learning materials into the online format, ensuring the resultant online course is interactive, engaging and visually interesting.

Regional development agencies

It is recommended that regional development agencies such as the NSW Department of State and Regional Development promote the strategies and partnership models used by CWCC, Simplot Australia and Cargill Beef to implement flexible learning, in industries characterised by intensive production methods, skill shortages, high staff turnover and high levels of casual labour.

It is recommended that regional development agencies promote the strategies and partnership models used by CWCC, Simplot Australia and Cargill Beef to implement flexible learning, to stimulate the delivery of flexible, customised training in regional industries.

NSW Board of Adult and Community Education (BACE)

It is recommended that the Board of Adult and Community Education (BACE) consider modifying its existing BACE Strategic Direction, 'Utilising Technology for the Future', and the change drivers for the E-business and E-learning Strategy for 2002-2004, in light of the findings from this research, incorporating an emphasis on the strategies and partnership models for implementing flexible learning in enterprise workplaces.

NSW Department of Education and Training (DET)

It is recommended that, to stimulate further implementation of flexible learning in enterprise workplaces, NSW DET promote the range of strategies and partnership models used by CWCC with Simplot Australia and Cargill Beef.

It is recommended that, to stimulate further implementation of flexible learning in enterprise workplaces, NSW DET modify its existing 2005 Priorities Statement, particularly its objective 'delivering a dynamic and responsive system of public education and training' with the addition of words to the effect 'including skills training in the workplace that uses flexible learning'.

Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework)

It is recommended that the Framework promotes the case studies of CWCC collaborating with both Simplot Australia and Cargill Beef as exemplars of a training provider developing innovative, customised strategies and sound partnerships in order to implement flexible learning in the workplace.

It is recommended that the Flexible Learning Advisory Group modify the 'client engagement' and 'provider flexibility and innovation' components of the draft Framework circulated for consultation in mid-2004, to include findings from this study.