

Barriers to e-learning in the Community Pharmacy Sector

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Executive Summary

This project examined the barriers to e-learning of trainees in Community Pharmacy, and explored the obstacles for pharmacists to the uptake of e-learning as a realistic delivery option for their staff. The purpose of the project was to inform The Pharmacy Guild of Australia's (The Guild) Training Division on the prospect of adding an e-learning component to its suite of training products. From this research project, an e-learning strategy will be formulated, taking into account the findings and recommendations.

The first important issue investigated was that of Internet access. The research showed that it wasn't as significant a problem as first anticipated. Further, there was little difference in responses from rural or metropolitan areas. In the pharmacy sector, all pharmacies have computer hardware for the dispensing of medicines. Whether this hardware could be made available for training purposes was another matter. The majority of trainees had access to the Internet, whether at home, a friend's place or elsewhere.

The Guild utilised its member base to survey pharmacists randomly selected in all states and territories with faxed surveys. Trainees were selected from the national training database, and surveys were mailed out. The trainee sample was a mix of current and past trainees from the last two years. Response rates were adequate with over 19% of pharmacists and 13% of trainees responding. Focus groups and some individual interviews were also conducted to provide additional qualitative material.

The barriers for employers were related to resourcing and logistical issues such as lack of space for trainees to study, and computer access. The pharmacists in general were supportive of e-learning as a training option. The barriers for trainees were more 'content' and 'delivery' specific. Trainees were not supportive of a full e-learning model, citing such things as missing out on contact with other students, unreliable technology, being bored sitting in front of a computer screen for long periods of time, or printing out copious quantities of material to read.

Trainees preferred a blended model approach, which factored in such elements as interactive and varied learning activities, access to trainers and assessors at any time and quick turnaround of feedback.

Approximately one third of pharmacists and one third of trainees would not utilise online learning if it were available. Strategies to overcome these barriers will be developed and incorporated into any e-learning plans of The Pharmacy Guild of Australia.

The pharmacy sector represents small business. It is anticipated that this report will inform the small business and retail sector, training providers who deliver services to this sector, and VET in general.

Recommendations

Training Providers

Training providers considering e-learning should:

- ensure that trainees and employers support e-learning as a method of delivery, and are provided with options
- provide professional development for teachers and assessors
- utilise a blended model of delivery with a mix of face to face contact and e-learning methods
- undertake care in the selection of content for e-learning avoiding dependence on text-heavy approaches
- provide learner support, and induction programs, to assist trainees to maintain motivation, keep deadlines, and making contact with other trainees
- provide a 'help desk' for technological problems that might occur
- ensure that trainees have regular contact with trainers and assessors
- package material into 'Just-in-time' training and short duration components so students can do short bursts of study before or after work, during lunch breaks ,and
- work collaboratively with industry to provide an e-learning model tailored to suit the enterprise or industry.

Small Business Sector/Retail Sector

Small businesses should be encouraged to:

- establish a learning culture within the workplace
- look at innovative ways to support learning in the workplace, including scheduled time-off either at work or at home
- support trainees in making contact with trainees in other organisations, (although this may not be a realistic option given the competitive nature of small business
- where possible provide a separate area where trainees can study, facilitating computer access and other resources
- share resources with partners (collaborative arrangements with other small businesses, not necessarily direct competitors), and
- collaborate with training providers to develop an e-learning model that works synchronously with business.

VET Policy

Development of policy should aim to:

- encourage further research and consultation into innovative learning models that will work for the small business sector with an emphasis on minimising interference with work routines while maximising staff participation
- evaluate blended learning approaches to get a clearer picture of the effectiveness of delivery methods for different client (sector) groups
- encourage infrastructure sharing and information sharing among RTOs to support learning

- encourage a collaborative approach involving industry and training organisations within industry sectors to develop e-learning materials. This would be more cost-effective
- market, promote and encourage blended approaches to learning, particularly in New Apprenticeships, with priority towards developments that will enhance training provision into small and micro business
- explore issues in relation to consistency and sufficiency of evidence in assessments/rpl in e-learning and other flexible learning environments, ensuring that quality and consistency are maintained
- evaluate the use of toolboxes, and
- recognise e-learning/home study as a legitimate form of training for funding purposes.