

Open and Distance Learning: Transitioning to Alternative and Effective Learning Systems

As the future of work continuously evolves and moves closer to hybrid and work from anywhere home/setup, the need to upskill and devote time to learning is still constant. Most employees struggle to find time to attend onsite trainings even though organizations are now re-opening face-to-face learning sessions. Employees now see the value of Micro Time management where they find ways to maximize even the 5-minute break in between meetings. They are now more conscious of the time used for shadow work, which is the passive amount of time they use to transition to new tasks/activities.

Aside from time, people now see that they can be as productive when working at home, as compared to before, when they were working in the office. And lastly, people are now more mindful of the health risks going out, brought about by contagious diseases.

As HR/L&D/Top Management, the challenge is to create more opportunities for employees to upskill and advance their knowledge, and eliminate the risks posed against time management and health & wellness.

WHAT IS ODL?

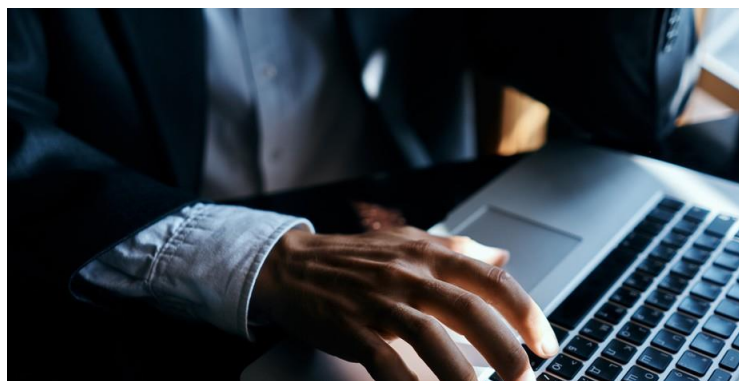
ODL is a combination of 3 main concepts which are: Open, Distance and Learning. Open learning means providing accessible education to individuals with minimal restrictions on usual barriers such as age, location, time, and socio/economic situation. For example, a learner, who needs to attend a training which requires a 4-hour travel time, and reasonable transportation cost, can now sit comfortably at home with less time and cost spent. The same competencies can be acquired, with a carefully prepared training program using the ODL approach.

ODL promotes flexibility and inclusion in the type of learning offered. Distance learning focuses on maximizing technology and other resources that would allow transfer of knowledge despite proximity. A learner who lives in Europe can now learn real-time, from a distance even if the training is held in Asia.

And lastly, e-learning is about the intentional use of networked information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching and learning (Naido, 2006). Together, ODL emphasizes global, and diverse connections to those who want to learn and to teach. It creates a domain of learning that allows the learner to move at their own pace, while being mindful of their daily schedules.

This approach to learning is one of the best methods that can be applied to organizations who would like to encourage their employees to find time to upskill themselves despite their busy schedules.

In general, most training programs can be converted to ODL, however, discretion should still be best exercised in designing the approach, based on the needs of the learner. Should a company decide to move forward with ODL, management must also first recognize the need and readiness of their organization and its people to move into ODL.



CORPORATE APPROACH TO LEARNING (ODL VS TRADITIONAL LEARNING)

Open and Distance Learning

- Learner-centered
- Learner-paced
- Cost-effective for learner and trainer
- Maximized use and exposure to technology

Traditional Learning

- Instructor-centered
- Instructor-aced
- Costly in delivery of training
- Tend to resort to manual approach

ODL ADAPTATION IN THE CORPORATE SETUP

Change management must be carefully planned, from transforming the mindset of the employees to allowing them to learn independently, to investing substantial amounts of money, and to migrating the existing learning opportunities into ODL.

To design an effective ODL system, the need must be identified. This can be done through a proper Training Needs Analysis. The same approach used in Traditional Learning can be used together with Skills/Competencies mapping, based on the requirements of the positions identified. A Skills Map will allow the learner to see the lacking/gapped skills based on what they can do, and what they need to learn, and how to do it, depending on their career track.

A new addition to the Training Needs Analysis is identifying the organization's readiness to the ODL approach. This readiness assessment will be part of Change Management. Readiness is affected by many factors, and the three most important ones are the Individual's Environment/Situation, Access to Resources, and the Ability to Learn Independently by the individual (Spriggs 2020).



These three must be established and organizations should be able to provide the needed support for the employees, so that they benefit from the ODL system.

When putting in place an ODL system, the organization must evaluate the overall business strategy, and from there consider the identified needs/gaps based on the required skills that will enable the strategy. These skills will be drawn from the daily roles and responsibilities of the position. By determining what competencies the individual should have to deliver the output required from a certain task, the missing skills can be highlighted. A proper skills mapping and evaluation of each position's roles are required to create a curriculum targeting the skills to be taught in ODL.

Designing a curriculum that is intended to be offered through ODL can be challenging, as it needs to consider the readiness factors mentioned earlier. Also, when designing a curriculum that will be executed through ODL, one must consider how it will complement the existing training interventions. How can it enhance the experience of the learner by partnering it with social and experiential learning opportunities? Although ODL can be a stand-alone program to be offered to employees, it can be most effective when still paired with social and hands-on/experiential learning.



The next important task to do in setting up an ODL System in the organization is documenting the operational processes and policies. Formulating these require a good understanding of the ins and outs of the system. It requires visualizing the smooth operations of ODL from the administrators and decision makers' point of view, and at the same time, balancing that with the learners' user experience. The documented processes and policies are then included in the overall manual/guide and employee handbook.

Overall, setting up an ODL system is a project on its own which will require the skill of project management. It is because it involves delivering a series of outputs that will help institutionalize the practice in the organization. It will include sub-projects under it from Platform Setup to Content Setup and to Operations Setup. And finally, once the ODL System is in place the employees can now experience independent learning that will help them be more productive at work.

Overcoming Challenges in ODL Implementation

It is normal to experience setbacks and problems when adopting a new system. Though some of these challenges may be complex, most of it can be easily addressed through proper change management planning. Here are the usual challenges encountered when adopting ODL, and how these were resolved based on best practices and Case Studies.

- **Lack of Engagement / Buy-In of Employees**
 - Most organizations experience prolonged resistance from the employees when introducing a new system, and one of the possible reasons is because of the lack of buy-in from the employees. There's a need to clearly establish the value-add for the employees and how the change will benefit them the most. In Toyota Motor Europe, they emphasized the advantage of the change to the employees, where Sann René Glaza, TME's Learning Technologies Group Senior Manager, said: "that getting people to embrace e-learning is much more about change management.



It's bigger than making people to use the system; it's about changing the way they think about getting information.”

(Source: <https://belitsoft.com/custom-elearning-development/successful-companies-using-elearning/>)

- **Ensuring Training Quality** - Though companies may still find using ODL questionable due to the uncertain outcome of the training as compared to the traditional approach. Implementing ODL in-house can pose some quality risks, as there might be a limited number of Subject Matter Experts in the organization who can effectively transfer the knowledge into the learning platform. For Paypal, they have continued to tap external subject matter experts to lead their trainings. They also partnered with accredited E-Learning companies who have successfully created specific technical modules for their specific needs. Paypal continues to partner with Udemy for Business for their in-depth learning, where their employees have access to over 1,600 courses ranging on a variety of topics.

(Source: <https://about.udemy.com/udemy-business/paypal-invests-in-workplace-skills-development-with-rollout-of-udemy-for-business/>)



- **Lack of Communication and Guidance** - This is one of the most common challenges of adopting ODL. As employees are used to face-to-face, manual, instructor-led training, the thought of independent learning can be a daunting task. And employees fear this change because they lack the confidence to use a new system. In PepsiCo, when they launched their online learning platform, they provided support through a learning hotline, that employees can call on for support, and a team of learning coordinators who guided their employees in terms of their learning plans and goals as they use the online platform.

(Source: <https://www.pepsico.com/our-impact/esg-topics-a-z/employee-learning-and-development/>)

These companies successfully overcame the challenges of adopting ODL as they have recognized the importance of Change Management, Clear Communication Channels, and Partnership with Established Online Learning Companies when adopting e-learning. They saw the need to create various support systems to ensure that employees have access to the resources and support they need to succeed in their learning journey.

Getting Your Organization Onboard with ODL

Adapting and shifting to an ODL system requires a methodical approach to ensure that everything is in place by the time the system is rolled out. In NRI, we provide a step-by-step guide on how to set up your own and customized ODL system, depending on your preferred platform. Depending on the organization's readiness and capability to adapt and shift to ODL, NRI can guide you from step zero.

Below is the complete solution provided by NRI:

- **Phase 1:**
Skills/Competencies Mapping
- **Phase 2:**
Digital Training Curriculum
or Architecture Development
- **Phase 3:**
Digital Training Implementation Design and
Operational Support (Excluding Platform
Setup)
- **Phase 4:**
Digital Training Facilitation

In summary, Open and Distance Learning is one of the most effective and efficient methods of employee upskilling. Not only is it learner-centered, but it is also a sustainable approach to reinforcing learning and development, whether for a start-up company or a big corporation. ODL is a big step that will help address the demand for new skills fast.

References

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