

Measuring the Impact of MOOCs (Jan 13)

Research suggests massive open online courses (MOOCs) figure to play a larger role in the corporate learning programs of the future. HR professionals with an eye on providing these courses must carefully consider their relevance to the workplace, and how MOOCs can be integrated into current e-learning offerings, experts say.

By Mark McGraw

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E-learning programs don't look like they used to. An evolving workforce that requires on-the-spot training, available whenever and wherever they need it, has necessitated a shift toward more self-directed, self-paced e-learning opportunities.

Part of this shift has been the rise of massive open online courses, commonly referred to as MOOCs. These courses, designed to connect large groups of students in disparate locations, are a natural fit for academia, and have gained popularity in recent years. For example, a 2011 open online course in artificial intelligence at Stanford University drew 160,000-plus enrollees, and was the genesis of Coursera, an educational technology company founded by Stanford professors.

But, as corporate e-learning content becomes increasingly portable in response to evolving learning preferences, MOOCs could very well become a fixture in the business world as well.

Take recent research from New York-based Future Workplace, for example. The executive development firm polled 195 HR and learning professionals in an effort to gauge the level of interest in MOOCs among heads of corporate learning and determine the potential impact of MOOCs on corporate learning curriculums.

The survey found 72 percent of respondents saying they see an opportunity for their learning and development departments to integrate MOOCs into their current learning programs.

The poll also asked respondents which topics would be most important if they were to integrate MOOCs into their organizations' learning and development programs. Some of the most-popular topics included project management, fundamentals of innovation, leading virtual teams, customer service, data analytics and financial management.

Part of the appeal of MOOCs in the corporate setting is that courses are broken down "into little modules that are primarily video-based," says [Jeanne Meister](#), partner with Future Workplace and co-author of *The 2020 Workplace: How Innovative Companies Attract, Develop & Keep Tomorrow's Employees Today*. "They enable enrollees to 'meet up' in cohort groups around the world, and provide each other with instant feedback."

Indeed, open online courses are "somewhat of a new phenomenon" that look increasingly attractive to employers, says Curtis J. Bonk, professor of instructional systems technology at Indiana University and author of several books on e-learning in both the academic and corporate setting.

"We do see a lot of MOOCs jumping in from the higher education space," says Bonk. "Employees taking these [courses] may pick up new skills or credentials. And, this is where HR leaders might be interested in making information available. For a company with heavy aspects of computer science and programming, for example, a course related to those topics might be beneficial -- and possibly free. Why not take advantage of that?"



Indeed, the rise of MOOCs may continue as workers' desire for training that includes collaboration and instant feedback increases, says Elliott Masie, technology, business and learning consultant, and leader of Saratoga Springs, N.Y.-based think tank The Masie Center.

"The opportunity for mass personalization [of e-learning] is there," says Masie. "We're watching our workers invent new ways of collaborating."

HR leaders at organizations that are considering providing open online courses to employees must evaluate MOOC offerings and the companies offering them, says Meister.

"They first have to vet providers. Look at what they're offering, and ensure that it's workplace-oriented and not just academic," she says. "Let's say they find a handful of MOOC offerings. HR has to ask, 'Are we offering these courses currently, either as a face-to-face or as an e-learning-based course? Then consider how MOOCs can be assimilated into your current offerings.'"

"The question," she says, "is one of integration."

Some courses designed with academia in mind may focus on statistics, for example, or "topics that more closely align to a liberal arts curriculum," Meister continues. "Workplace-oriented topics would really focus more on core skills and capabilities – project management, fundamentals of innovation, how to lead virtual teams, for instance."

Course length and potential certifications are additional factors for HR to consider, says Meister.

A majority (nearly 60 percent) of participants in the Future Workplace study expressed an interest in offering employees the opportunity to obtain certificates in online course offerings.

MOOCs typically range from four-to-eight weeks in duration, with the possibility for enrollees to obtain a certificate, she explains, adding that courses running "closer to three weeks and including gamification" may be a more realistic time investment for employees.

Indeed, "creating courses that are shorter in duration" and "include some type of gamification of content" were among the common responses (70 percent and 30 percent, respectively) from respondents when asked what MOOCs should be adapted to include in order to gain greater traction in corporate learning. More than 70 percent also said MOOCs need to "provide more workplace-type offerings."

Ultimately, large organizations and their HR leaders figure to get their wish, Meister concludes.

"These courses are going to have a profound impact on corporate learning and development," she says. "Providers are going to be [developing] more workplace offerings."

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