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## Determining factors in online training in companies



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### ABSTRACT

This article sets out the features of companies that use e-learning to train their workers. Moreover, the factors that determine why companies use this education methodology are analysed. The study indicates that the variables that have traditionally explained the existence of training processes within a company, such as larger company size, a better-educated workforce, or an employment relationship of indefinite duration, are not useful when explaining why a company is more likely to train its workers using e-learning. Instead, intensive use of digital technology (ICT), the capability to innovate with such technologies or a greater adaptability in work processes explains, to a large extent, the probability of e-learning in the organisations. This fact produces a virtuous circle between ICT learning and practice at the “digitised” workplace.

This research is based upon data obtained from a survey made with a sample of 2,038 executives representing the Catalan business sector.

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## 1. Introduction

Digital technologies entering the economic field in recent decades have accelerated the process of economic globalisation and the relaxation of laws relating to terms of employment in such a way that companies have found themselves compelled to transform their productive and organisational processes. Furthermore, workers have to adapt rapidly to a new work dynamic, based on self-programmable or autonomous tasks, constant learning and a relaxation of labour relations (Bresnahan, Brynjolfsson, & Hitt, 2002; Carnoy, 2000; Castells, 1996).

Thus, the massive incorporation of knowledge to the business activity together with the relaxation of the labour market has produced a wide-spread increase in the need for continuous professional training (Vilaseca & Torrent, 2003). This set of training actions developed by companies, workers or respective representative organisations must aim to improve the professional abilities and qualifications of current workers, making it possible for them to face the demands of this changing, digitised and global labour reality.

The technological revolution generates new challenges but it also provides new solutions. Hence, in this context, e-learning emerges as a new training alternative that enables current workers' training and qualification needs to be met properly. E-learning constitutes a flexible methodology that makes it easier to combine work and training. However, use of e-learning in Spain is still limited, with only 36% of Spanish companies with 10 workers or more implementing it (Eurostat, 2009). This figure would be significantly lower if smaller companies were taken into account (Markowitsch & Hefler, 2008).

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The basic motivation of this article is to pinpoint the reasons that led to this reduced use of e-learning, by identifying and examining the features of companies that do decide to train their workers by virtual means.

After bibliographical research on the issue, it is clear that there is a significant amount of scientific research where the probability of companies training their workers or not, according to the attributes that both organisations and workers have, is analysed (Escardíbul, Oroval, & Afcha, 2007; Greenhalgh & Mavrotas, 1996; Harris, 1999; Hashimoto, 1979; Holtmann & Idson, 1991; Lynch, 1994; Oi, 1983; Tugores & Alba-Ramírez, 2002). However there are no analyses on the distinguishing features of companies that use e-learning. In order to see if the general pattern of the business decision to invest in training workers is independent from the training methodology (on-site or virtual) or not. These two aspects set up the basic aims of the article.

To this end, the next section examines the literature on how work has changed in a knowledge-based economy, as well as the main advantages offered by using online methodology for work-place training. Subsequently, the methodology and sources of information used in this research are explained. Finally, the main results obtained are set out and the conclusions attained are discussed.

## 2. Contextual framework

Although there are still numerous companies that do not consider worker training as a key aspect for maintaining competitiveness (on the contrary, they link it to the technology available or to certain equipment or to low-paid workers), in recent years greater importance has been given to the training and recycling of people as a factor accounting for increases in productivity (Monreal, 2004). In fact, many authors (among them, Johnson, 1982; Pfeffer, 1998; Piore & Sabel, 1984) say that the best way to increase company flexibility is by means of organisational innovations focussing on the worker, training intensive and enhancing productivity, giving them a feeling of security and belonging to a team (Carnoy, 2000). Typically, increases in productivity do not depend exclusively on investment in technology, but on organisational and training changes in the human resources as well, in order to maximise their potential and make it be to the benefit of productivity (Brynjolfsson & Hitt, 2003).

The consequences of traditional management, production and working methods in a knowledge-based economy are that they have a direct impact on people's lives by making labour relationships more flexible, either voluntarily or by imposition, thus requiring openness to innovation as an essential value in the company as well as a continuous vocational recycling process. Such constant processing of knowledge, updating of skills and continuous re-learning favours the use of e-learning as an essential methodology that guarantees the perfect symbiosis between work and training (Batalla, Martínez, & Vilaseca, 2010).

E-learning is a relatively new way of providing training and its use, while still limited, has been increasing constantly in recent decades (Brewer, Doo, & Cross, 2008; Lim & Kim, 2003). The aim of e-learning is to assure that technology contributes effectively to develop workers' abilities and knowledge and to support their progression in order to keep companies economically competitive (Pantazis, 2002). Most of the teaching community accepts e-learning as a valid and efficient training strategy, with a set of benefits to on-the-job training (Nisar, 2002), such as: (1) saving of time allocated for training; (2) improvement in student support, allowing for personalised interaction and good follow-up on each student's participation and progression; and (3) increased flexibility of learning, training is available whenever needed, regardless of the time and location, allowing the user to follow at their own study pace.

From the company's point of view, it makes the identification and recording of worker training needs easier, allowing for the development of tailor-made training processes based on each work feature and the business priorities. Moreover, it favours the recording and follow-up of the training given and the evaluation of each participant. This recording of each worker's output on the training courses is a very important tool when making decisions about which workers or groups the company should invest in order to improve its human resources (Nisar, 2002).

Thus, e-learning favours a substantial reduction in training costs, makes knowledge easier and integrates workers into the company (Clarke, Lewis, Cole, & Ringrose, 2005; Shankar, 2007; Wurtmann & Galli-Debicella, 2008). Pulley (2005) further underlines that e-learning is the only methodology which allows workers to take part in the training process from their workplace, including from different and distant geographical locations, in a synchronous or asynchronous way. Such asynchronicity makes access to learning resources possible 24 h a day 365 days a year (Childs, Blenkinsopp, Hall, & Walton, 2005). Finally, e-learning facilitates the customisation of learning according to each worker's needs, choosing the most suitable learning materials and making continuous updating possible (Shankar, 2007).

According to the above evidence, it appears clear that, from the point of view of the organisation, virtual learning has many advantages. Nevertheless, there are still very few companies that plan and implement e-learning strategies to improve their workers' level of competency.

In the context of a knowledge-based economy, this paper aims to answer (1) what features do companies that invest in their workers have and (2) which factors determine the use of e-learning. The specific questions asked in the study were:

With regard to the first objective:

- (1a) What are the variables which characterise those companies that invest in training for their workers?
- (1b) Do these variables change depending on the training methodology used, virtual or face-to-face?

And with regard to the second objective:

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