Improving collaboration and participation in E-Learning for SMEs by suitable models supported by virtual learning environments

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Background: Training and e-learning in SMEs

➢ **Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) are »engines of growth« and generate many employment opportunities.**

➢ **In many European countries SMEs have come under severe pressure and often lack the necessary skills and capabilities to remain competitive on national/international markets.**

➢ **Most European companies consider further training of their staff important but there are a number of obstacles to put it into practice.**

➢ **eLearning was seen as one of the prerequisites to achieve the Lisbon objectives but these expectations to improve training for SMEs have been only very partially met.**

In many SMEs there is a low level of motivation for signing up for online courses (www.ebusiness-watch.org). These are some of the reasons:

➢ **learners cannot relate the on-line courses offered to their work tasks**

➢ **learners are not allowed to take time out on the job for eLearning**

➢ **there is insufficient support, when users are having difficulties with eLearning platforms and other required technologies.**
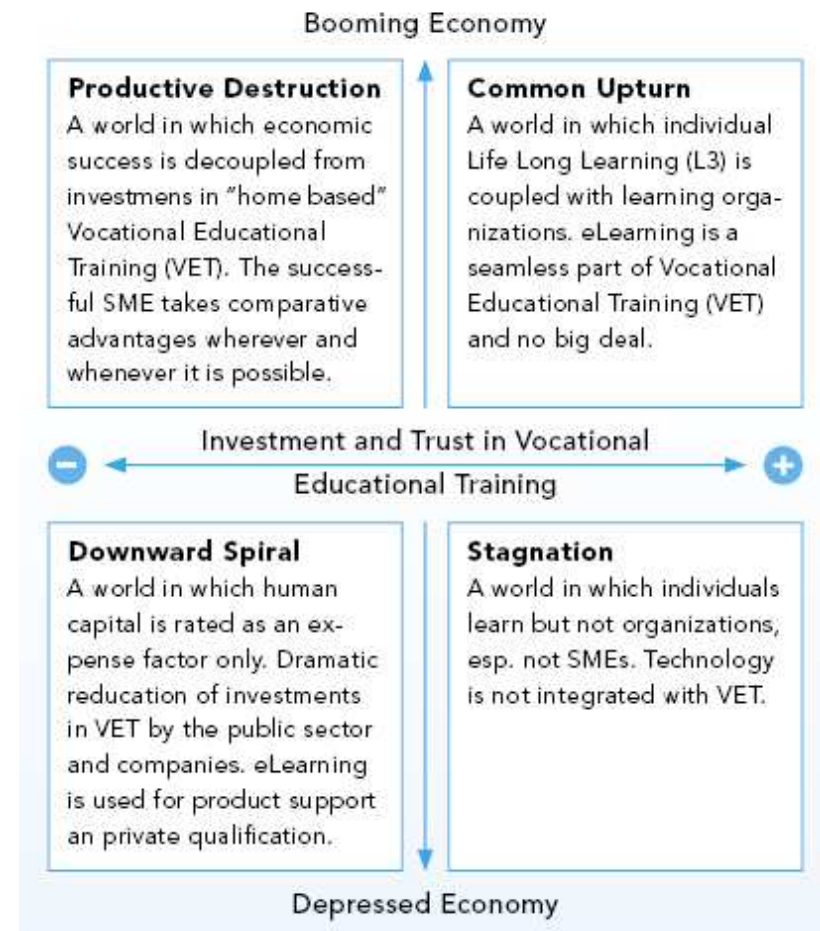
Some of the reasons for the poor implementation of eLearning in SMEs:

➢ **misconception or prejudices concerning "unconventional" training methods**

➢ **Concerns about high costs and overhead for the development and maintenance of eLearning modules,**

➢ **Insufficient provision of learning conditions and support by the company management,**

➢ **lack of time off for study for staff**

➢ **no funds in the company to support further training for staff,**

➢ **Learning software and modules, available on the market it inadequate for the needs of SMEs**

➢ **High degree of fragmentation: most SMEs are acting alone in facing their training problems.**

ARIEL

ANALYSING AND REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION
OF ELECTRONIC LEARNING IN EUROPE

ARIEL – Analysing and Reporting the Implementation of Electronic Learning in Europe (www.ariel-eu.net), which investigated eLearning supply for developing competencies of SMEs, particularly eCompetence aiming to improve their work and to support their integration into the European market. eLearning scenarios have been developed to help companies to build their eCompetences

Booming Economy

Productive Destruction
A world in which economic success is decoupled from investmens in "home based" Vocational Educational Training (VET). The successful SME takes comparative advantages wherever and whenever it is possible.

Common Upturn
A world in which individual Life Long Learning (L3) is coupled with learning organizations. eLearning is a seamless part of Vocational Educational Training (VET) and no big deal.

Investment and Trust in Vocational
Educational Training

Downward Spiral
A world in which human capital is rated as an expense factor only. Dramatic reducation of investments in VET by the public sector and companies. eLearning is used for product support an private qualification.

Stagnation
A world in which individuals learn but not organizations, esp. not SMEs. Technology is not integrated with VET.

Depressed Economy

SMEs need:

➢ **training models, combining conventional, e-learning and informal learning methods**

➢ **contents designed in correspondence to existing and required staff competencies and to the learningculture of the company,**

➢ **communities of practices**

- **to share knowledge**

- **to apply best practices in technology-enhanced learning**

- **to develop adequate models of eLearning**

- **to stimulate new experiments, actions and directions for learning.**

Communities of Practice

➤ "**Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour.**" (Wenger, 2004)

➤ **They trace their roots to constructivism (Palloff et al., 1999) involving open-ended questions, learning in social and physical contexts of real-world problems and using collaboration and cognitive tools.**

➤ **A community of practice is characterized by:**

➤ **a shared domain of interest of its members, a commitment of them to this domain and a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people,**

➤ **the community means members interact around common actions and ideas,**

➤ **the practice means members of a community are practitioners with different levels of expertise and they develop a shared repertoire of resources**

➤ **Voluntarity, so they have to create interactions that make them alive, attractive and engaging for members**

Moodle and Web 2-0 to support training models and community of practice

➢ **"Moodle is a software package which supports a social constructionist framework of education."
Martin Dougiamas**

➢ **Tools accessible in the system like Forums, Chat rooms, a dialogue tool, polls, wikis, glossaries, quizzes a workshop tool etc. aim at supporting collaboration, activities and social construction of knowledge.**

➢ **The current Web-based technology (Web 2.0) which is not only a technical revolution but rather a social one has vast potential to create prospering environments for emerging communities of practice.**

➢ **Social Software lends itself very well to support of activities within a community and for staff of SMEs to collaborate; it is based on the idea of distributed networks of people, content and services that are adaptable and responsive to very specific and often changing needs and goals of SMEs.**

The results and scenarios developed in ARIEL will be used within the valorization project SIMPEL (2007) to provide in cooperation with SMEs and SMEs consultants sustainable models of e-learning andcommunities of practice.
A Moodle-Site is used for internal project management and for supporting the evolving SIMPEL community of practice.

www.simpel-net.eu

➢ **moodle@simpel:**

➢ **Project management**

➢ **Internal discussion**

➢ **Modelling eLearning for SMEs**

➢ **Individual and team training for implementing/using the models**

➢ **Showcasing eLearning**

➢ **Networking**

➢ **Community of Practice**

Conclusions

➢ **The conceptions of e-learning especially in the workplace:**

  » **put learning, the learner and the notion of collaboration at the centre,**

  » **link learning to competencies, competence portfolios and, generally to competence management in the framework of Human Resources and Organizational Development.**

➢ **New developments in software, such as Web 2.0 and openSource LMS such as Moodle will support these directions.**

➢ **Comprehensive solutions are re-quired, which involve industrial and trade associations, especially on the branch-level, training providers and experts as well as SMEs.**