The Way Forward with MOOCs – Professional Development Perspectives

Dr. Sreeleakha P1, Manikandan N2
1Assistant Professor, School of Business, Alliance University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India
2Content Analyst, Thomson Reuters India Pvt. Limited, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Abstract: Massive Open Online Course (MOOCs) is the buzzword facilitating employers and employees in learning today. The internet along with sophisticated technology is helping self-motivated learners largely. Coursera, edX and Udacity are the most popular companies offering online courses. Steadily and systematically, the technical and academic platforms developed by MOOCs are used for the advantage of training employees in the workplaces. The bridge between academic education and corporate training are becoming blurred. Lectures taught by world class professors are used for training employees in organizations. The discussion here focuses on the growth, benefits and challenges of using MOOCs as a technology in training employees.

Keywords: MOOCs, Corporate, Training, Employer, Employee, Learning

I. Introduction

The future of work depends on the people’s ability to build intellectual capital (Mol, Caroline., Dam, Nick Van., August 2013). With the advent of rapid globalization and technological advancements, skills and competencies can become redundant anytime soon. So, the challenge is to enhance and update oneself consistently. Learning, being a lifelong process has to be unlearned and relearned all through one’s professional career. Self-preparation coupled with organization’s support for learning enables an individual to stay updated with the skills required for a job. As training becomes costlier, companies are blending traditional training with technology to reap the benefits of reduced cost and time with accelerated learning for the employees. Massive Open Online Course (henceforth MOOCs) is the buzzword facilitating employers and employees in learning today. The concept of MOOCs originated with higher education in 2012, but is being considered by large corporations in order to train its own employees. The article discusses about the growth of MOOCs, MOOCs @ corporate, its benefits to employees and the challenges facing MOOCs.

II. Growth of MOOCs

With the emergence of correspondence learning that is nearly a century old, (Gad-El-Hak., 2014), individuals could gather knowledge and information in a relatively relaxed way compared to a formal college education. Back in 1969, the Stanford Centre for Professional Development, offered education through television channels; by 1996, these courses were offered via internet instead of televisions (Cooper, Steve; Sahami, Mehran., 2013). In an age of internet revolution, the correspondence learning mechanism is showing different pathways for learning. The internet along with sophisticated technology is helping self-motivated learners largely.

MOOCs is revolutionizing correspondence education today. Started in 2012, it is going multiple steps ahead and educating people free of cost aiming at large scale participation with open access via the internet (Graham, Kate., 2013). They blend content, community, and assessment tools from many open-learning sites into online courses that can serve thousands of students at once (Galagan, Pat., 2012). Its online materials are divided into manageable portions with short video lectures, interactive quizzes, assignments, as well as online forums where participants answer one another’s questions and grade one another’s work (Galagan, Pat., 2012; Grossman, Robert J., 2013). More than 10 million people have taken the MOOCs globally (De Coutere, Bert., 2014). Coursera, EdX and Udacity are the most popular companies offering online courses (Johnston, Timothy C., 2013; Sutton, Lynn., 2013). Coursera has partnership with over 62 academic institutions. These academic institutions offer the content and lecture support and Coursera provides the technical support for the course to be delivered through short videos. edX is a partnership venture of MIT and Harvard. They have offered 25 free credit courses, and are yet to add 100 more courses. Udacity that started off as a Stanford University experiment became widely popular in its first course on artificial intelligence with 160,000 registered students. Now it has approximately 20 active courses.

Traditionally, online courses were offered for free to attract more users for the services. Massachusetts Institute of Technology has been providing course materials free since 2002 (Grossman, 2013). More companies have joined the market and courses have become fiercely competitive. Udacity, edX and Coursera are now charging a fee for the credentials and grading thereby making business that was once popularly free to all (Cusumano, 2013).
Michael A., 2014; Grossman, Robert J., 2013). Gradually, the technical and academic platforms developed by MOOCs are used for the advantage of training employees in the workplaces. The bridge between academic education and corporate training are becoming blurred. Lectures taught by world class professors are used for training employees in organizations. When need arises, companies develop their own content for technical training programs with the support of MOOCs companies.

III. MOOCs @ Corporate

MOOC opens up vast resources for professional and personal development (Radford, Alexandria Walton., et al., 2015; Crush, Peter., 2014). The improved quality of online learning delivery platforms, the ability to offer a choice of learning paths, and the capacity to analyze a huge number of student experiences has made some believe that MOOCs is a game-changer. Those factors also might make MOOCs suitable for certain kinds of corporate education where the power of the Internet can be leveraged through partnerships to a large number of learners at a faster rate and less expensively compared to the past (Galagan, Pat., 2012). There is increased acceptance among employers to offer MOOCs based training to its employees. In a survey of 2820 academic leaders by Babson Survey Research Group during 2012, a third of the respondents opined that employers would accept MOOC instruction. Visionaries of MOOCs claim that employers would consider a MOOCs qualification equivalent to traditional college degrees for possible hiring in companies (Grossman, Robert J., 2013). In a survey done by CORP/U among 243 Chief Learning Officers to identify whether they would recommend MOOCs to support training, 75 percent of them expressed interest (Grossman, Robert J., 2013). In another research done by Radford, Alexandria Walton., et al., (2015), it was found that employers prefer MOOCs for three broad needs – developing employees soft skills (leadership, managerial skills, and account management), impart basic computer skills (to gain proficiency in excel and PowerPoint) and to teach hard-core technical subjects (like blueprint design, analytics, mental health). Though all these contents can be externally sourced with ease, MOOCs delivers it in a more cost efficient way. Traditionally, employers had to sponsor employees for these training programs - either by enrolling in educational programs offered by world class institutions or by participating in expensive conferences.

In the present days employers are proactive and have identified the possibilities of using MOOCs in training and development. In a survey done by Future Workplaces Survey, it was found that around 70 percent HR professionals intended to integrate MOOCs into their learning and development processes (Peter., 2014). Some of the companies that are already using MOOCs platform to train employees are listed.

- Global giant Coca-Cola Co trained its 8000 facility managers using virtual instruction, effectively delivered by Georgia Tech professors in English and Spanish. It also supplemented the training with live classroom sessions in order to develop a community and apply the learning to the business directly (Grossman, Robert J., 2013).
- University of Washington and Boeing trainers joined together to attract engineers through MOOCs (Grossman, Robert J., 2013).
- Yahoo, in partnership with Coursera provides employees access to their programs like, Cryptography, Machine learning, mobile development and the like.
- Deloitte encourages its employees to take specific courses of MOOC as its formal curricula (Mol, Caroline., Dam, Nick Van., August 2013).
- SAP recently launched a series of MOOCs for developers attracting 40,000 students from over 158 countries. 9,400 students successfully gained record of achievement which is five to seven times higher than the completion rates of academic MOOCs (Herring, Sam., 2014).
- Microsoft trained over 850 sellers through a customised online course with a highly productive outcome – that is, 85 percent completion rate, 95 percent satisfaction and high levels of learner engagement and commitment as opposed to the exorbitant withdrawal/non-completion rates in traditional online learning models (Fourrage, Ludo., 2015).
- Bank of America and Qualcomm are developing a strategy to align some of the publicly available MOOCs to their core competencies (Meister, 2015)
- McAfee used ‘flipping the classroom’ method to train its sales associates through the MOOCs training model. (Meister, 2013; Savino, 2014)
- Apart from providing only training, MOOCs are also used to identify, source and develop talent. When staffing firm Aquent did not meet its client’s needs to place niche talent, it developed a session with MOOC, identified interested candidates and selected the ones who performed well. This initial step blossomed as “Gymnasium” to develop future learning programs in the company (Herring, Sam., 2014).

If MOOCs has to be successful at the corporate level, it is mandatory that it should be tailored to the company’s objectives, firmly embedded in the corporate context, designed and structured by keeping in mind the learners per se (Fourrage, Ludo., 2015). While initiating MOOCs, it is better to consider the participation rate as success,
than over-emphasising the withdrawal rates, as these drop-outs too would have learnt some value-added information through the courses (Crush, Peter., 2014)

IV. Benefits to employees

A. The format is attractive for online learners. The learning contents are downloadable, self-paced, delivered in audio-visual mode and effectively broken down into small parts ranging only five to ten minutes duration each (Radford et al., 2015). This enables the learners to retain and reinforce the new learnings for a longer span of time. At AT&T, a course on Business Writing was delivered using both in-person and MOOCs platform; it was found that the learning retention was very high through MOOCs sessions when compared to that of in-person course (Meister, 2015).

B. Employees are highly benefitted as it does not incur too much of financial burden. With higher education and skill certification growing expensive day by day, MOOCs offer at price point of under $100 for each certificate; this might in future, become the “acceptable one” for employees pursuing higher education (Meister, 2013).

C. MOOCs help in enriching knowledge and updating skill among employees in their current profile. Though these courses are open to all, studies show that educated employees show keen interest in upgrading their skills. In a research by University of Pennsylvania, it was found that a good majority of MOOCs students already had a college degree and are taking the course only to advance in their jobs (De Couture, Bert., 2014; Radford et al., 2015). The study also showed that 44 percent enrolled into MOOCs to gain specific skills to perform better in their jobs; and 17 percent registered to learn skills that are necessary to get a job (Radford et al., 2015). In the workplace, certificates function as an incentive for employees to complete optional training or skill development courses, because they’ll have something to show for all their work. (Meister, 2013). Employees are becoming very proactive and are not prepared to wait till the employer insists on gaining specific skill sets and growing in their career. They take responsibility for their own growth and advancement. Eventually, it promotes and creates a culture of learning-driven organization.

D. MOOCs are convenient to upgrade skills without losing out on the job. Executive education, sabbaticals, and career break seem costly for both employer and employee. During a traditional up-gradation phase, employers have to bear the cost of pay-without-work and employees encounter ‘out-of-sight is out-of-mind’ syndrome and thereby lose out on highly attractive projects or promotional opportunities. When skill development and new learnings happen while being on-the-job, these costs can be eliminated and in due course, the employee becomes more suitable for the new project/role

E. It helps employees to choose and take the courses they personally want instead of fitting into a one size fits all program. Difference in knowledge, skills, competencies, behaviours and sometimes formal university education compels employees to pursue a course that best suits them in their current career. MOOCs facilitates employees in bridging the employability gap and also streamline their career path in the way they have charted.

F. It benefits self-motivated learners greatly. As they are already interested to gather more specialised knowledge, the learning outcomes when compared to traditional learning do not differ much. In a survey conducted by Babson Survey Research Group, more than three quarters of academic leaders rated learning outcomes as the same or even superior to face-to-face teaching (Grossman, Robert J., 2013). This shows that training and learning is based on the “interest” level of the candidate and the mode of delivery of the new knowledge does not have much impact.

V. Challenges

A. Pedagogy - The pedagogy in MOOCs is again ‘presentation-based’ which the education system is trying to get rid of since many years. MOOCs commit the very same mistake that was made 20 years ago with e-learning (Little, Bob., 2013). There is no element of interactivity in the video lectures which makes the discussion highly faculty-centric, rather than being more collaborative and learner centric. Games, simulations, teasers, interactive quizzes when embedded into the videos can be more engaging for the learners (Little, Bob., 2013). On the contrary, however, when the course is designed in such a way that demands deep introspection, rigorous assessment and feedback, the learners’ participation level drops down drastically. This is mainly due to the heterogeneous profile of the learners with their varied interest levels and different expectations from the course.

B. Drop-out rates – Monotonous video lectures fail to sustain interest and motivation to complete the course leading to exorbitant drop-out rates. Stanford states that 85 percent of the people fail to complete the course (Little, Bob., 2013; Perna, et al. 2014). As the drop-out rate is high in these courses, it is suitable for only a small minority of enrolled people (De Couture, Bert., 2014). In an examination of 17 MOOCs offered by MIT and Harvard in 2012 and 2013, Ho et al. (2014) found that only 5% of the over 840,000 registrants received certificates of completion; one third did not access a course (Perna et al., 2014).

C. Some of the other downsides of MOOCs implementation by employers are due to factors like lack of time and budget; lack of skills among corporate learning professionals to design MOOCs; low need for the course; security and technical issues; and poor content that make the course very challenging to sustain learners’ interest till the end (Meister, 2015). Sometimes stakeholders within the organization itself resist adopting MOOCs for learning and development. In a research done by Future Workplace, it was found that Training and Instructional
Staff (44%), IT department (32%), Business executives (31%), Employees (25%) and HR department (18%) are not in favour of instituting MOOCS due to lack of knowledge of the new model, perceived threat to their jobs and unwillingness to change their established practices (Meister, 2015).

D. More interest is shown by academic institutions than corporates to organize such online programs (De Coutere, Bert. 2014). MOOCS is only slowly venturing into the stage of development in corporate training. It may take considerable time in envisioning the success of such programs due to critical questions that challenge both employers and employees - how do people get credit for course completion; is it possible to customise the courses for companies; how do we track the completion of such courses in Learning Management System; how do companies deal with open-source websites? (Mol, Caroline., Dam, Nick Van., August 2013).

VI. Conclusion

The era of online learning is gaining momentum in a very different way. The changing profile of learners, duration of learning, mode of delivery and the content of learning has customised the process of knowledge and skill development. Massive Open Online Course which revolutionised the academic learning is used by corporates for their learning and development programs. The discussion here focussed on the growth, benefits and challenges of this new technology in training employees. This massive course is already being considered by Human Resource managers and employees widely. When challenges of MOOCS are mitigated and its benefits felt, the function of training and development in companies can become even more efficient, productive and profitable.

References