Enabling the effective take-up of e-learning by custodial officers - Part I

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Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the implementation of e-learning in corrections centres by identifying the key enablers to assist correctional officers to adopt e-learning strategies. Findings from this research will inform current and future projects in a number of correctional jurisdictions. The research draws on a review of the relevant literature, a survey of custodial officers in New South Wales and the author’s own knowledge and experience of the corrections industry.

Over the past 18 months Corrective Services NSW has developed a range of informal e-learning materials, mainly as a means to support changes in corporate systems. These materials are made available via the

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corporate intranet site and receive approximately 1000 visits each month. At the time of conducting this research formal e-learning courses were in the piloting phase only. An investigation of the use of e-learning as a tool for the delivery of staff development clearly shows that this style of learning is now a long way from the learning ‘novelty’ it represented 20 years ago. The recent national e-learning survey conducted by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (2010) showed that 50% of all employers surveyed now use e-learning as part of the learning and development provided to their staff, with 60% expecting to use it over the coming two years. Not only does this survey show that the use of e-learning as a staff development tool is growing, but also that this growth has been very rapid. (The number of employers using e-learning in the 2009 survey was 18%)

Corrections is a significant activity within Australia, with on average 23 000 gaol offenders at any given time and a further 54 000 managed within the community (ABS 2011). An examination of the industry’s training practices shows that it has a strong history of and commitment to the provision of learning and development to its staff. This is no more strongly demonstrated than through the operation of the Corrective Services Training Package, which has been in place since 2001. This training package, which is currently in its third iteration, has a 100 per cent uptake by the providers of corrections within Australia (Government Skills Australia 2011). The establishment and operation of formal training academies in the Western Australian, Queensland and New South Wales jurisdictions is a further indication of a commitment to the provision of learning and development to staff.

Despite a substantial commitment to staff development, the growth in the popularity of e-learning has not been reflected in the corrections industry, with its take-up as a mechanism for delivering learning to correctional staff lagging significantly behind the figures shown in the Australian Flexible Learning Framework survey (2010). That said, e-learning has not gone unnoticed within the industry and many Australian correctional jurisdictions are embarking, or are about to embark, on the full-scale implementation of e-learning for staff learning and development. Given this, it seems timely to examine the correctional environment to determine whether current research in relation to the implementation of e-learning as a tool for delivering learning and development to staff is applicable to corrections or whether the uniqueness of the environment presents its own challenges in relation to the effective uptake of e-learning.

**Literature review**

What is e-learning? From the outset of this research project it was obvious that the term ‘e-learning’ is interpreted in a very diverse range of ways by the target group for this research, with answers to the question, ‘what is e-learning?’ producing a wide range of responses. The only theme common to all answers was that there was a computer involved in the process. The same diversity of definition applies in the current literature on e-learning and there appears to be no standardised definition of the concept. The key distinction between e-learning and more traditional learning in the literature is that e-learning involves the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) (Sulcic & Lesjak 2009), although a number of researchers drill down further to draw a clear distinction between learning that occurs only within the confines of a computer, which they refer to as online learning, and learning which uses technology to enhance it, which they refer to as e-
learning (Lim, Ripley & O’Steen 2009).

What is also clear from the research is that the idea of e-learning has changed, and continues to change, from something that is limited to self-paced learning on a computer, to something more fluid, embracing a range of technologies as a way of enhancing learning (Lim, Ripley & O’Steen 2009). In many ways this process has seen the gap between learning and e-learning narrow, and many now argue that e-learning is a redundant term, as all learning now involves technology.

The key conclusion drawn from the review of current literature is that there is no agreement on what constitutes e-learning and that, as a result, the use of the term is likely to lead to a range of interpretations, based on personal experience and perceptions. Consequently, given the lack of a clear definition, this became a strong consideration in the formulation of data-gathering tools for this research.

**E-learning and corporate learning and development**

A review of the literature was unable to identify any previous research relating specifically to the use of e-learning for staff development in the correctional environment, although the review identified a growing body of research that focuses on e-learning within the corporate learning and development environment (Waight 2005, p.1118).

**Why should corrections use e-learning?**

As noted in the introduction, over the past ten years corrections in Australia has demonstrated a strong commitment to learning and development for its staff, although apparently with little investment in e-learning. Apart from a desire to ‘follow the pack’, are there compelling reasons for corrections to adopt this approach to delivery? The research in the field of corporate learning and development identifies a number of core benefits flowing from e-learning.

The central driver behind e-learning is the desire to overcome the limitations of the ‘classroom-based’ model of teaching (Oiny 2009, p.113), an issue of particular relevance to corrections, with its large number of people spread across a wide geographic area. In this context, a reliance on the face-to-face delivery of training represents a high-cost option, with large amounts of travel required by the participants and/or the facilitator, which can make access to training more difficult, particularly for those in more remote areas.

Cost is not the only driver relevant to the take-up of e-learning, with e-learning also demonstrating benefits in terms of the effectiveness of training. By putting the control of learning into the hands of the learner, training can be tailored to the needs of individuals in terms of content, timing, location and speed of delivery. As McCormack and Jones (1997) put it, e-learning ‘allows all learners to train whenever they want, when their own professional and/or personal constraints allow them to do so most efficiently’ (cited in Oiny 2009, p.113). This idea of ‘empowerment’ comes through strongly in the literature as one of the more indirect benefits being enjoyed by organisations that have implemented e-learning.

Empowerment is becoming more and more important for organisations, because having staff with the ability to adapt and change quickly represents a great asset in today’s rapidly changing world (Ali & Magalhaes 2008).

A final consideration is the need to attract and retain staff. As more and more members of Generation Y enter the workforce, it is necessary for organisations themselves to adapt if they are to attract this cohort. While
generalisations across an entire generation are dangerous, the research clearly shows that Generation Y generally has higher expectations in relation to the use of technology in the workplace and the ongoing provision of relevant learning and development (Polimeni, Burke & Benyaminy 2009). To ensure that it can continue to attract new employees, corrections must adapt its learning and development processes to meet the needs of this new group of potential employees. Clearly, if an industry such as corrections is to maintain its strong commitment to learning and development within a climate of increasing financial constraint and changing demographics in the workforce, it needs to embrace e-learning for the delivery of at least some of its learning and development offerings.

Why focus on learner engagement?

Central to the research undertaken into e-learning in the corporate learning and development field is the notion of learner engagement or learner motivation. As Frankola (2001) puts it, ‘to take advantage of e-learning and the opportunity it presents, it is essential to develop an understanding of how to get employees engaged’ (cited in Rabak & Cleveland-Innes 2006, p.118). Bartz (2010) takes this idea even further, stressing that the ultimate success of any e-learning project will be the level of learner engagement. With this in mind, it is important to identify what the potential barriers to this engagement might be and how they can be addressed and/or overcome.

Learner engagement blocks and enablers

The literature identifies a number of enablers and/or barriers to effective engagement with e-learning. These factors can generally be divided into external factors (those outside the individual learner) and internal factors (those relating to the learner) (Rabak & Cleveland-Innes 2006). Internal factors, because they occur within the learner, are the hardest to identify. Rabek and Cleveland-Innes (2006) identified the foremost internal factor as being the learner’s attitude or perceptions about e-learning. Learners who have a negative attitude to e-learning are unlikely to want to engage with it and, if they do engage, are unlikely to succeed. This is what Waight (2005, p.1121) calls ‘low self-efficacy’, and because it is not easy to identify, it is difficult to overcome. Self-efficacy is a complex notion and is dependent on factors such as the learner’s level of confidence, their attitude to change and their fear of failure (Mungania & Reio 2005). Learner self-efficacy is an important consideration because, as Mungania and Reio’s (2005) research demonstrates, ‘the relationship between e-learning barriers and e-learning self-efficacy was statistically significant’ (p.1115).

The skills of the learner are also critical to effective e-learning. The study by Simmering, Posey and Piccoli (2009) showed a ‘positive relationship between computer self-efficacy and learning’ (p.114). While low-level computer skills may be easily addressed through training, they are often also accompanied by a level of anxiety and/or discomfort which is less easy to overcome and which can have an adverse impact on successful engagement with e-learning. This is because the cost of engaging with e-learning (in this case the anxiety that the learner experiences) is perceived to be much greater than the benefits to be gained (Chien 2008).

A final internal factor is learning style. Some learners have a learning style that naturally suits the self-directed nature of e-learning, whereas others do not (Mungania & Reio 2005). Overcoming this barrier will require not only educating...
learners in how to navigate e-
learning, but also how to
learn via e-
learning. This is also a significant
consideration in the design of e-
learning (which will be discussed
further below).

External factors affecting
engagement are easier for an
organisation to identify and to
control. These factors include e-
learning design, access to
computers, and the allocation of
sufficient time to learn and the
provision of support to learners.
The design of e-learning has to take
into account a number of potential
barriers. Mungania and Reio (2005)
separate these barriers into two
groups: instructional barriers and
content suitability barriers.
Instructional barriers are concerned
with how e-learning is designed and
delivered and include factors such as
ease of navigation, validity of
assessment, levels of interaction and
clarity of course expectations. As
Kushnir (2009) points out, ‘the
organization of e-learning
environments can have a
tremendous impact on learning’
(p.291). Content suitability barriers
arise when the content in e-learning
is not relevant to the learner and the
way the learner learns. Considering
all these design factors is therefore
crucial because ‘learners [who] can
quickly access and navigate courses
and see the relevance of what they
are learning with their jobs will be
more likely to become engaged with
Mungania and Reio (2005) identify a
further set of external factors and
label them ‘situational barriers’.
These include any factors within the
learner’s ‘situation’ that will act as a
barrier to engagement with e-
learning. The major situational factor
is time. As Misko et al. (2004) put it,
‘an individual’s time commitment and
motivation are the major barriers to
completing online learning programs’
(p.74). Ensuring that learners have
enough time to complete the learning
and are able to manage their time
while learning will greatly enhance
their capacity to engage with e-
learning and avoid ‘turning the e-
learning feature of “any time
anywhere” to “no time” and
“nowhere”’ (Wang, Foucar-Szocki &

Technological barriers represent a
significant external factor (Mungania
& Reio 2005), access to technology
being the foremost consideration
here. Misko et al. (2004) examined
the use of e-learning at Qantas and
identified lack of access to
technology as a ‘major challenge’ in
the effective delivery of e-learning
(p.76). In relation to this research,
this is a particularly relevant point,
since access to computers varies
greatly between correctional centres.
Related to technological barriers is
the ability of the technology to
support the learning process. E-
learning that does not run correctly
or which puts up technological
barriers to the user will hamper
effective engagement. Ali and
Magalhaes (2008) identified this as a
significant barrier, with some
elements of e-learning ‘taking far too
long for the user to access’ (p.45).
The final external factor to consider
is organisational barriers (Mungania
& Reio 2005), which include the level
of support offered to learners, the
ease of access to learning and the
recognition of any e-learning which
has occurred. These factors are very
closely linked to the culture of an
organisation and say a lot about the
value that the organisation places on
learning, and e-learning in particular.
Situations where e-learning is seen
as the ‘poor cousin’ of face-to-face
training, either through a lack of
support and/or recognition, will
struggle to attract and engage
learners.

Beyond identifying the specific
barriers that may affect engagement
with e-learning, the literature on e-
learning within the corporate setting
has also identified a number of
important general points. The first of
these is that there is no single
barrier to effective engagement.
Rather, a lack of engagement with e-learning is generally the 'culmination of a series of small individual problems' (Schilke 2001, cited in Mungania & Reio 2005, p.1115). And in relation to this point, the 'culmination of individual problems' is not the same in all organisations and situations. Instead, there is a specific set of factors unique to each environment. This is important because it means that issues relating to engagement with e-learning can only be addressed once the specific set of issues for that environment is clearly identified.

The other key point is that barriers to e-learning engagement must be addressed systematically. Simply addressing one or two factors will not be effective because the factors are interrelated and interdependent. As Mungania and Reio (2005, p.1115) write, 'Clearly, the multi-dimensional nature of these barriers demands a systemic approach to best manage them'.

What came through most clearly in the literature is the overwhelming focus on e-learning barriers, as opposed to the actions that could be taken to encourage engagement. This appears to reflect this relatively new area where few examples of successful implementation exist. With this in mind, this research seeks to identify some general enabling actions that could be taken to promote e-learning engagement and overcome the identified barriers, and test their perceived merits within the correctional environment.

**Methodology**

This research project employed a mixed methods approach, combining the collection of quantitative data through a survey and an analysis of these data through qualitative methods. The use of a survey alone was not deemed appropriate for the research question because surveys are not effective at clearly identifying the 'why' of a situation (Bell 2009). It was hoped that, by combining the breadth of data gathering offered by surveys with the depth of analysis offered by semi-structured interviewing, the 'why' would be more clearly identified and examined.

One important decision made early in the project was to not define e-learning for respondents, which might influence their responses, but rather to collect their ideas of what constituted e-learning. This decision was made because, as the literature review had established, e-learning was not a widely recognised methodology in learning and development programs; furthermore, there appeared to be no widely acknowledged definition to act as a reference point for the participants. By keeping the definition open, it was also hoped to better understand the 'reaction' of learners when they were told they would be learning via e-learning.

The research commenced with the distribution of a survey to existing custodial officers (appendix 1). The survey was designed to capture data in four key areas:

- demographics
- experience with e-learning
- attitudes to e-learning
- enablers to participation in e-learning

The design and development of the survey was directly informed by the literature review, with the final survey seeking to capture information across all the key barriers identified within previous research in the corporate sector. The aim was to identify the specific mix of enablers required for this context. Speaking to custodial staff also showed, from the barriers, security of information to be a core issue: they are very protective of their
personal information due to the nature of their work. Given the importance of this issue to this group, security of information was added as a potential barrier, despite this not being identified in the literature review.

As the ability to use a computer was a commonly identified barrier to engagement with e-learning, it was considered important that the survey distribution and collection methods allowed staff who did not regularly utilise a computer to have an equal opportunity to participate. To this end it was decided to use both an online and paper-based survey, with physical and automated distribution methods being employed for their distribution. As a result of these decisions, three methods were selected for survey distribution. The primary method of survey distribution was via the organisational email 'broadcast'. This broadcast is received by all staff, making the survey available to all 3600 custodial officers within Corrective Services NSW. The email contained both a copy of the paper-based survey and a link to the electronic survey. Two more targeted methods of distribution were also used, in an attempt to increase the rate of return. These methods provided an additional method of distribution to the broadcast email and were designed to target specific groups within the total pool of 3600. These methods were:

- Copies of the paper-based survey were given to all custodial officers who participated in training activities during the research period. Approximately 250 custodial officers were targeted via this method of distribution.

- A copy of both surveys was emailed to all custodial officers who had participated in any training activity in the preceding 12 months.

The survey was open for six weeks in total.

To allow the data gathered during the survey process to be analysed more comprehensively, and to test and confirm some of the findings, the survey was followed by a series of interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and used the survey questions as a conversation starter. Twenty-five staff members were approached to participate in the interview process. These staff were selected as a consequence of their ongoing participation in a pilot e-learning course, which gave them direct experience with e-learning in the correctional context. They were also selected because they were all supervisors of custodial staff, and therefore could comment not only on their own experience but on the challenges of getting their staff to engage.

The interviews were conducted during December 2010.

**Limitations**

This research has a number of limitations. Firstly, it looks specifically at custodial officers working within correctional centres. While this group represents the majority of staff within the corrections industry, there are other distinct groups within corrections with their own unique culture. A clear understanding of the e-learning enablers for this broader group would require further study.

A large number of the target group for the survey had no experience with e-learning. Given this, responses were generally based on what they imagined e-learning was. While this gives an excellent insight into personal perspectives on e-learning, it may have been at the expense of potential external influencers of e-learning implementation. That said, the ability to probe the data via the semi-
structured interviews with custodial officers with a direct experience with e-learning in the correction environment did allow this data to be validated, and a clearer picture developed of the external factors. Further clarity should be sought via further study once e-learning is better established within the context.

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