

Using e-learning for developing new skills for administrative staff

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Abstract

In order to maintain a high standard from the point of view of achieving their mission, educational institutions for health science must ensure that their employees – teaching staff, auxiliary staff, technical staff or administrative staff have the right level of training and necessary abilities to do their tasks. For this, continuous professional training is a component that cannot be neglected.

If, in the case of academic staff, there are generally clear requirements for continuous professional training in the case of administrative staff the situation is different. There are a lot of punctual factors that make the context and outcomes of continuous professional training of administrative staff to be very specific.

This paper presents the experience of the “Iuliu Hatieganu” University of Medicine and Pharmacy in implementing an eLearning continuous professional training course for their administrative staff.

Keywords: Professional development and e-learning.

Article

Introduction

One of the main objectives of educational institutions for health science all over the world is to create a system that would generate new knowledge in this field and that would convey the resulting knowledge to students in order to prepare them for working in this domain [1]. In order to maintain a high standard from the point of view of achieving this mission, it is extremely important that everyone who is directly or indirectly involved in the process of generating or transmitting the knowledge – teaching staff, auxiliary staff, technical staff or administrative staff – have the right level of training and necessary abilities to do their tasks [2]. As the current unprecedented technological development has been going on with all the consequential socio-economical transformations, there have constantly been new situations and requirements that could not have been imagined a few years ago. In order to cope with this changed reality, continuous professional training is a component that cannot be neglected and its goal is obtaining position-specific competencies as well as general, trans-professional abilities[3].

If, in the case of academic staff, there are generally clear requirements for continuous professional training [4], the lack of these can easily be noticed and has noticeable effect [5]; in the case of administrative staff the situation is different. Although in the majority of institutional operational plans the compulsory continuous training of staff is planned for, the way it is actually carried out does not have the desired effect all the time. The reasons for this are diverse. The large amount of work and the high number of problems to solve make it difficult to find time to allocate for continuous professional training. The resources of the institution are all the time limited [6]. A lack of funds to cover the costs of these courses can be another reason administrative staff does not take part in continuous professional training courses. On the other hand, sometimes the objectives of these training courses do not correspond with the personal development plans of the employees or with the part they play within the institution [7]. In such cases, these circumstances conspire to ensure that continuous professional training of administrative staff may only be a mere formality.

An alternative to specialised companies offering continuous professional training courses to administrative staff [8] is that educational institutions for health science could utilise their own resources to make customised courses for the continuous professional training of their administrative staff. As they are themselves specialist institutions in transmitting knowledge, they have all the skills to attempt this project. The topics of interests and the levels of complexity can be established in accordance with the specific requirements of the institution's administrative staff. The direct costs should generally be lower than those sought from external companies that could offer similar courses. Therefore, the creation of a formal structure to be responsible for the continuous professional training of administrative staff can create the prerequisites for raising the professional quality of those staff.

Any educational program that has as its aim obtaining knowledge and/or abilities consists of the presentation – through various methods – of educational material and an assessment of the evaluation of the acquired knowledge and/or abilities. For an institution, evaluating their own administrative staff is a delicate operation, especially if a staff member is not performing as expected. The duty of teaching staff is to certify that the minimum level has been achieved. The results of negative evaluations can lead to conflict situations between members of the academic staff and the administrative staff if handled improperly, something that should be avoided. On the other hand, in the conditions when the recruitment is difficult to make [9], a negative evaluation is not desired for the existing staff.

Irrespective of the specific administrative job that they do, most administrative staff members perform activities that require knowledge and abilities in management, communication, and computer use. Usually, educational institutions for health science have their own specific departments or subjects that deal with studying and disseminating this type of knowledge as it is applied to teaching of the health sciences. In all likelihood, with some reasonable effort staff members that teach these topics can identify the teaching objectives specific to administrative work and prepare materials necessary to achieve these objectives.

The following paragraphs will present the experience of the “Iuliu Hatieganu” University of Medicine and Pharmacy in implementing an eLearning course for continuous professional training of their administrative staff.

The intervention

The attempt to implement a course by presenting a specific management topic using traditional methods – a lesson taught in a classroom – revealed a series of problems. The large number of people that expressed their interest in taking part put the organisers in the position to have to resolve numerous problems specific to working with large groups of individuals, such as location or synchronisation of schedules and timetables, etc. Even though the feedback was extremely positive, the impact it had on professional development is debatable.

After having had the experience of the first course, it was chosen to use the eLearning format in order to gain competence in using computers. This resolved the problems related to working with large groups – time and space – as the administrative staff members were able to choose the time they could dedicate to training via this method. The theme of the course was the presentation of the basic notions of using cloud-type technology. Members of the University administrative staff were informed about the possibility of attending this course, its duration, its educational objectives, and the period and the means of registration. As this course was exclusively dedicated to members of the administrative staff, registration was done through the Human Resources department.

Results

Although the registration process was very straightforward and the period of registration was relatively long – one week – there were extra requests at the end of the registration period. This situation had been anticipated and there was a specific procedure for dealing with these requests. Therefore, the number of the participants increased by 6% up to the end of the course and the final number of people that registered was 134.

The educational material consisted of nine video tutorials: three presenting information related to the educational platform – authentication, utilisation, performing specific tasks; and six video tutorials presenting ways to perform the various activities that were the subject of the course.

During the course, the participants had to perform certain tasks, and when these were done they had to upload screen shots that would show that the tasks had been finished. This means that the assessment was extremely objective. There were no disagreements about the results of the assessments.

According to the objectives of the course, the tasks had been clearly defined and had a low complexity level. They were achieved by a very large number of participants – 81% of the participants finished the course. Of all registered individuals, 12% did not access the educational materials at all.

Feedback obtained from the assessment of the answers given by the participants to an anonymous survey at the end of the course showed that this method of training is acceptable and that the majority of them would like to do more similar courses on various topics of interest.

About 30% of the participants required technical assistance. Almost half of them ignored the indicated method for obtaining technical assistance and contacted the coordinator of the course directly via the telephone.

Both the educational platform – Moodle – as well as the CamStudio Recorders software used for the creation of the video tutorials can be used without paying a licence fee. Therefore, the cost of the software used for this course was zero.

Even though this course was implemented on a pro-bono basis, the effort necessary to produce the educational material was measured along with the activities specific to the implementation of the course on the educational platform, as well as the learning tasks necessary for the online course. So, about four hours work was needed to obtain a 25-minute video tutorial; the activities specific to the implementation of the course on the educational platform took about three hours and the time needed to fulfil the educational tasks was about two hours per day for each of the 14 days of the course (weekends included). It was also observed that these two hours did not represent a continuous period of time but were spread throughout the day.

Conclusions

From everything mentioned above, it can be concluded that the online course method can be used in continuous professional training of the administrative staff of health educational institutions. Through their own resources, institutions can help their administration employees to obtain knowledge and abilities in specific topics in ways that can avoid conflicts that might appear by assessing the level of knowledge in an unsatisfactory way. It is important that administrative staff be educated about following the procedures specific to the online courses (registration, use of the platform, technical assistance, educational support, feedback, etc.). Also, the organisers (teaching and support staff) must remember that the participants of the course are their own colleagues and they will continue to interact with them after the course has finished. Keeping these things in mind, the quality of the administrative staff will improve, ensuring the smooth conduct of the institution's teaching and research.

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