

## Competency Based Corporate e-Learning Systems – An Appraisal

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### Abstract

Corporate e-Learning initiatives are often being implemented with too little consideration for organizational issues; potential benefits of e-Learning as a tool for creating organizational competencies are usually not realized to a full extent. Thus the focus of the present paper is on integrating Corporate e-Learning and Competency for the organizational environment. The paper widely discusses on important aspects and benefits of linking these two important concepts for utilizing human capital to the maximum possible extent. The paper puts forth fifteen different sub themes which contribute greater extent for the success of corporate on technological platform.

**Keywords:** *Competency, Corporate e-learning, Competency based corporate e-Learning (Cbcel), Key Performance Indicators (KPI), Personal Learning Plan (PLP), Employee Assessment (EA), Value Added Courses (VAC), Just-in-time (JIT), Soft Skills Training(SST), Individual Learning Styles (ILS), Value Chain Analysis (VCA).*

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### Introduction

The business world always looks for new methods for winning customers and impressing markets. The World Wide Web has always been of advantage and support to the corporate world by delivering information technology. Continuous advancements in technology have transformed the workplace into a variety of platforms. The changing demand and requirements have been a greater challenge for corporate to cope up and cater to the expectation of its clients.

In order to address these gaps the organizations have started training its employees in different courses and

methods. The training costs were over shooting budgets; this was the time when many businesses looked at IT based e-learning to train employees. Training is one of the key components of employee development and retention practices. E-learning is being implemented in many corporations for training which also saves cost and helps in getting the latest from numerous sources around the world.

The e-learning applications have made significant difference in the work environment, activities and experience of employees. E-learning and competency development have overcome the problems of traditional training by using innovative methods.

Competency is an important nerve center for organizational functions to link to the overall performance. It aligns strategies with priorities of the organization. Corporate e-learning systems can become more successful only if and when it becomes a self-initiated program by each individual at his workplace. Today's organizations are incorporating such a competency based approaches in order to be more successful to utilize the human capability at its maximum capacity. When these tools are used, it provides an opportunity for employees to document and demonstrate their target achievements at the work place.

## **Meaning and Definitions**

### **E-learning**

E-learning, is an abbreviation of electronic learning and refers to any material delivered or presented via computer technology for the purpose. It encompasses all kinds of information, pictures, graphs, diagrams, and any other form delivered through the electronic medium. The main objective is to address the learning needs of individuals, groups, disciplines and subjects to find the best possible method to enhance their understanding. Through e-technology instant updating, retrieval, distribution, and delivery of required information is possible at a faster pace. Web-based learning, virtual interactions of team /groups are possible with e-learning.

Derek Stockley (2003) defines it as delivery of a learning, training or education program by electronic means. E-learning involves the use of a computer or electronic device (e.g. a mobile phone) in some way to provide training and educational or learning material.

### **Competency**

Competency is defined as ability based on behavior, tends to be referred to as a competency by Ganesh Shermion. Competencies are differentiated to different levels; behaviors form the basics to make a framework. This phenomenon is a deep understanding of a characteristics required to perform in a superior way. It is a most important success factor for achieving organization's objectives.

Competencies represent the knowledge and skills required for performing and supporting the business processes. They represent the basis for creating value in an organization. Competence factors are observable and measurable.

The term "competency" refers to a combination of skills, attributes and behaviors that are directly related to successful performance on the job.

### **Corporate e-Learning**

Any information, data and text material delivered via computer (internet & intranet) that supports an individual's job perspective and creates value addition to improve performance is defined as Corporate e-learning.

Corporate e-learning is both formal as well as informal. Most of the e-learning in organizations happens informally. E-learning is not individual learning alone it is also addressing learning service to large groups. Corporate e-learning is just not about the content but it addresses on bringing learning people together in one particular platform.

Corporate e-learning train's people in various fields as required. This means it takes care of challenges faced by companies by delivering the right kind of knowledge at the right time. The utilization of latest communication tools by delivering skills, knowledge and train employees is more apt tone called as corporate e-learning. The corporate has knowledge resource in the form of individual knowledge, group knowledge which comprises of both tacit and explicit knowledge. E-learning helps in capturing this knowledge and frames it for using and reusing them. By and large most organizations believe in this statement called "knowledge is power".

### **Competency based corporate e-Learning (CbceL)**

Competency refers to a cluster of skills and abilities needed by a person in order to act effectively in a given situation. Competencies cannot be taught in a single day. They are required to be developed over a period due to changes in the job roles and responsibilities. However, conducting such competency based training

cannot happen effectively through traditional methods of training due to various factors like time constraints, cost constraints etc. In such situations, a well-organized competency based corporate e-learning system would provide immense support to the employees and the organizations.

Competency based corporate e-learning system is a human resource tool, which enables the corporate enterprise to map employee/team performance gap analysis and to appropriately address through learner centric e-learning courses and develop employees for the betterment of business results at a reduced cost across geographical locations.

The concept of CbceL is discussed elaborately under fifteen subheadings. They are

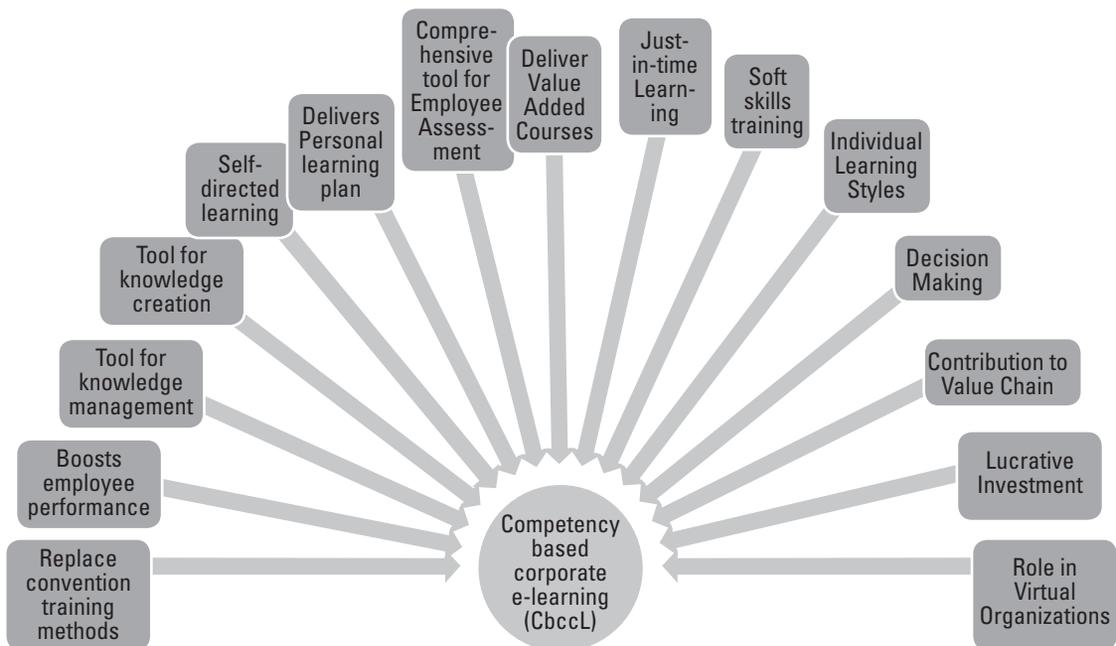
- CbceL -replaces conventional training methods
- CbceL -boosting employee performance
- CbceL- a tool for Knowledge Management
- CbceL- a tool for Knowledge Creation
- CbceL -makes employees Self-directed Learners
- CbceL – delivers Personal Learning Plan (PLP)

- CbceL – comprehensive tool for Employee Assessment (EA)
- CbceL - a medium to deliver Value Added Courses (VAC)
- CbceL can be Just-in-time (JIT)
- CbceL in Soft Skills Training(SST)
- CbceL accommodates Individual Learning Styles (ILS)
- CbceL in Corporate Decision-Making(CDM)
- CbceL in Virtual Organizations
- CbceL in Value Chain Analysis (VCA)
- CbceL a Lucrative Investment

**CbceL Model**

**CbceL -replaces Conventional Training Methods**

The problems in the traditional approach of training were many starting from logistical issues, trainer’s knowledge, update of information, inducting into the job process to employee, employee’s work load, responsibility, profiles, competency development etc. There was a great need to establish a method and mode by which all these issues are covered and employees



**Source : Author**

became more competent to help organizations which are turbulent and vibrant.

CbceL is where technology and learning combine to participate, interact, deliver and develop competencies of individuals. Corporate CbceL can be understood as delivering learning materials through information technology where individual learning, competency development and achievement of organizational goals are addressed.

However, few models used during initial phases of technology learning are those educational institutions who initiated the process of Learning Management Systems (LMS) and Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) during the eighties and nineties.

Major advantages of corporate e-learning (Edward T Chen 2008) aligning workforce with company strategy, global IT, ability to reach anywhere any time, internal and external education, lifelong learning, self-paced etc., Some organizations have their own specific reasons for choosing e-learning but the most important factor is their various researches mention must be made about the alignment of e-learning with business strategies along with the capacity to train entire workforce by customized curriculum based on the need requirements. With the increased awareness about the need for competency based training, CbceL becomes a boon in the current fast paced economy. Nowadays, companies using technology enhanced learning use CDs, DVD, internet, intranet to save cost and time for quick transfer of learning materials and contents to the employees organization wide.

### **CbceL -Boosting employee Performance**

In today's situation employees operate under pressure in corporations where there is constant change in the requirement of working practices. Also, the employees are under constant pressure to develop their inherent competency. The progress made by IT is considered as a means for learning and development. In fact, e-learning brings about a new approach to learning by adopting self-development, learn at work, self-paced learning etc., by creating value addition. CbceL, in particular, aids not only in the transfer of learning materials but also in the development of an employee as whole.

For CbceL to be more effective, organizations need to take care of a few measures like aligning individual and organizational goals, focussing on work and learning, so as to forge ahead towards competency development, learning being part of performance management and reward etc. To give a clearer picture, the above mentioned points may be construed as the broader guidelines and to be more specific key performance indicators (KPI) so as to make the system more successful.

According to (Wang, M., Ran, W., Liao, J., & Yang, S. J. H. (2010)) KPI for each job position must be accepted, understood well by the employees and their managers. The building of a KPI framework requires integration of various strategies at different positional levels in the organization. The KPI at the position level consists of three components: KPI item, rating criterion, and KPI value. KPI items are a set of performance indicators specified for a job position.

### **CbceL- a tool for Knowledge Management**

Knowledge becomes an asset when it is shared and value-based. These days companies worry is minimised on training because of network technology and e-learning. The volume of business is large and the speed at which they have to produce new products, services etc. The employees need to gain knowledge about a product changes at a very fast pace. Hence, the competency of employees has to be upgraded at the same pace. CbceL is the only logical solution to address these problems. If properly utilized, both tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge can be exploited. CbceL as knowledge repository will deliver continuously the information needed.

Sometimes e-learning needs to get out of company fourwalls in order to educate partners, customers suppliers etc. In return to that, news about market from them can be delivered through chat rooms, discussionboards; surveys etc. so e-learning value chain becomes prime important area for knowledge distribution. According to Rosemary H wild, Kenneth A Griggs and Tanya Downing 2002 e-learning value chain has these steps. 1. Organizational readiness with appropriate infrastructure, knowledge editor,

organizational culture, employee attitude, knowledge needs, computer usage and technology needs.

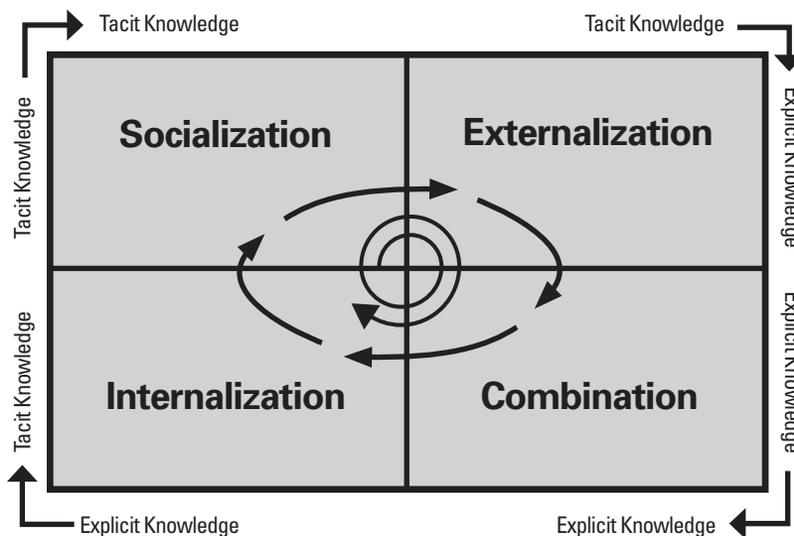
Step 2: Designing the appropriate content for e-learning by using tacit knowledge like deep knowledge, insights and expertise and explicit knowledge by factual knowledge, how to gain knowledge and incremental knowledge. Step 3: Designing the appropriate presentation for e-learning through engaging learners, developing cognitive skills, using learner's previous experience, using actual problems, encouraging cooperation among employees. Step 4: Implementation consideration using ready network, content application and software tools and learning map. Finally organizations need of commitment to e-learning by strengthening knowledge management activities for successful results.

### **CbceL- a tool for Knowledge Creation**

In practice, in many organizations employees join as groups keep posting, blogs and archives as a part of shared expertise in the media, then pose some questions and discuss on topics relating to tools which forms a part of study materials as identified by the groups. The required content is made a part of e-learning course materials and made available to help employees enrich their knowledge.

Competencies stress on application of learning. A high quality CbceL will help employees in the application of skills and knowledge to new situations and demonstrate mastery and knowledge. There is a strong belief that through socialization there is a possibility of interactive discussion that may result in wise thinking and learning. This may be the reason why corporates to encourage online discussion boards, wikis, white papers and columns as part of their daily activity. Employees keep posting their views and opinions and discuss on issues faced by them. This in turn gives rise to many activities. One sample model of knowledge creation is mentioned below.

Explicit knowledge is factual, how to do it, codified and easily communicable. Tacit knowledge is personal knowledge based on experience and it is very hard to explain. Capturing tacit knowledge is very difficult, but e-learning makes it possible to pass on the direct experience by sharing blogs, archives in a written format. Employees understand and try to internalize these concepts, which become a part of sharing and creating knowledge. Many companies the world over are making an effort to capture the tacit knowledge through the aforesaid means. One main advantage of intranet system is that; once something is posted online the data/ information is captured and stored in the server it becomes easy for retrieval.



### **Spiral of Knowledge Creation**

by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995)

## **CbceL -makes employees Self-directed Learners**

Competencies are the most effective mantra for today's business environment because the skill sets standards to be linked to the firm's strategy or if they are asked to follow the same curriculum, it may be waste of time and loss to employee engagement. It becomes very much vital to provide the employees with personalized, self-directed learning that shall result in empowering employees to self-assess against the skills defined by the company as necessary to efficiently perform their respective role.

In self-directed learning, the learners become empowered and they are responsible for decisions associated with the learning plan. It involves various activities and resources like study groups, electronic dialogues, and need not happen in isolation. Open learning programs and creative thinking and innovative courses also become a part of self-directed learning. Other important areas are associated with self-directed learning as this is predominantly applicable to employees in corporate sector who are behaviorally tamed to self-esteem, curiosity, desire to achieve, and satisfaction of accomplishment.

CbceL empowers learners and makes them accountable. It is very much effective, because it focuses mainly on skill sets needed to support the corporate strategy instead of generic competencies alone. An online competency management mapping system can enable employees form personalized development plans and align with courses taken and courses yet to be completed.

## **CbceL – delivers Personal Learning Plan (PLP)**

Corporate employees in order to get professionally trained, get enrolled in technology adopted integrated teaching- learning programs. The HR/ learning department develops a competency based on a learning framework which acts as a road map for developing employees which includes course outlines, support materials, effectiveness and assessment methods. Some of the courses also offer self-review tools also.

CbceL based personal learning program is a collection of training resources focuses on particular learning

needs of individual employees. It is a catalogue with personal learning space. It is linked to the performance of employees. The employees in some organizations are also given choices to change and modify the program according to their requirements. A total comprehensive package with a feedback system is provided for development of individuals with these kinds of program.

## **CbceL – comprehensive tool for Employee Assessment (EA)**

Assessment softwares are part of virtual learning program of any organization. E-assessment is normally different for each of the course content. Some of the options available for module builders are multiple choice questions (MCQs) loaded with answers and it automatically gives the overall results. Fill in the blank spaces is another option available for when answering by the learners a voice based command instructions that tells whether the answers are correct and incorrect. Tick the correct answers is another way of assessing case studies or article or any other published material, at the end of answering the total number of correct answers are published in a score sheet which pops up on the screen.

Mathematical problem solving is another way of assessment; for this particular type of assessment, a test answer sheet is available for doing calculating if any particular step or any incorrect entry made it does not move to the next step.

The mistake is highlighted in the different colour and a voice message is also available for announcement. For all these, mock demonstration with video and audio is available for e-learners. It prepares them for undertaking any course. There are many more types of assessment are available but these are most commonly used.

The softwares are installed in such a way that the scores are updated in the personal account of the employee's performance management system. Some organizations have linked employee performance support system (EPSS) with CbceL. Therefore it becomes part of overall employee assessment. Some organizations do use game based assessment or any other innovative way of assessment to ensure quality and effectiveness

and usefulness. To conclude on e-assessments it is a means of potentially powerful scoring, reporting and real-time feedback mechanisms for organizations in today's environment. Organizations do use authentic assessment, alternative assessment, performance assessment, dynamic assessment, portfolio systems, constructed response and higher-order assessment also based on the required situations.

### **CbceL - a medium to deliver Value Added Courses (VAC)**

In order to meet the demands of customers, corporates strive hard to develop new concepts and creations for future requirements to stay successful in the market. In CbceL value added courses become embedded as part of the program itself. For some employees, it may be soft skills particularly useful in imparting certain courses that really add value to an employee in terms of his personal growth. Certain courses like communication skills, selling skills etc., may also be imparted to the employees through CbceL without resorting to time consuming conventional methods. Moreover in CbceL system, an employee has the liberty of learning in his own pace without his work getting affected.

Value added courses for CbceL ranges from soft skills to advanced courses depending on the employee's competency requirements. Some organizations do float career growth plan linked to CbceL makes employees more talented and confident. Similar arrangement in corporates offer online university affiliated courses in order to deliver opportunity for additional qualifications. In today's scenario corporate virtual university is more commonly noticed which provides lot of value added courses for the corporate community.

### **CbceL can be Just-in-time (JIT)**

Just-in-time, originally a production strategy, is a strategy that strives to improve a business return on investment by reducing in-process inventory and associated carrying costs. Very recently the same concept has been applied in the field of teaching and learning called as Just-in-time Teaching Just-in-time Learning.

Just-in-time Teaching (JiTT) is a teaching and learning strategy based on the interaction between web-based

study assignments and an active learner classroom. Students respond electronically to carefully constructed web-based assignments which are due shortly before class, and the instructor reads the student submissions "just-in-time" to adjust the classroom lesson to suit the student's needs.

On the other hand, Just-in-time Learning systems deliver training to the employees as and when needed. In the beginning, employees were using interactive CD-ROMs to access information whenever they required. JiTT is more applicable in the field of education.

In a rapidly changing business world, information can quickly become obsolete. In traditional methods of training, an employee is taken away from his workplace and forced to undergo hours of training. Since there is a time gap, when confronted with difficulties in the job, an employee faces immense pressure to solve them all on his own. Moreover, development of personal competencies was also difficult.

The future of e-learning looks upon corporate world's requirement also delivers learning on demand (LOD). For organizations that require training immediately for employees who are widely spread across the globe e-learning LOD is the most applicable and sought after program. This also increases productivity, saves time and cost and has the ability to meet the critical emergent needs of corporates.

Through CbceL, various technology-based, self-guided tutorials and web-based assignments are delivered to the employees who can use the information to solve the problems, perform specific tasks or quickly update their skills.

The organization can save on both travel and education costs. The employees would prefer this approach as they can train at their own place, wherever and whenever they like. The employees can access the materials "just-in-time" to solve their problems and develop personal competencies.

Through this, CbceL also ensures savings by increasing productivity and efficiency. Online training cuts time by letting employees take in only those pieces of information that they need from the convenience of their desks.

## **CbceL in Soft Skills Training**

Soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects. Unlike hard skills, which are about a person's skill and the ability to perform a certain task or specific activity, soft skills are interpersonal and are broadly applicable.

Soft skills include personality traits such as- optimism, commonsense, responsibility, sense of humor etc. and abilities that can be practiced like empathy, teamwork, leadership, communication, negotiation etc.

CbceL can be extremely useful in imparting soft skills to the employees. By using CbceL, the organization can provide various modules on each soft skill like communication skills, negotiation etc. Through CbceL, the organization can provide different situations; create a virtual environment where the employees can practice their soft skills. Since it is all virtually done, the organization would not lose out on business and lose customers.

Soft skills training imparted through CbceL leads to cost and time savings for the organization. It even leads to increased productivity and efficiency among the employees. The employees can undergo the training on a repetitive basis to develop their inherent competencies. Moreover, it would not affect the work schedule of the employees.

## **CbceL accommodates Individual Learning Styles (ILS)**

Learning style describes the way an individual prefers to learn. Stewart and Fecetti (1992) define learning styles as "educational conditions under which a student is most likely to learn." It refers to the learning process. There are distinct patterns through which learning takes place. Under traditional methods, the focus is usually on how to "make" students learn better in a particular setting rather than creating a setting that is comfortable to all kinds of learners.

On the other hand, e-learning provides a platform that accommodates the three distinct learning styles- auditory learners, visual learners and kinesthetic

learners. It even can accommodate learning styles as presented by Kolb Learning Style Inventory, namely:

**Accommodators:** For individuals who rely on intuition rather than logic, CbceL can deliver situation based case lets.

**Divergers:** Individuals who perform better in idea generation that is brainstorming, incomplete problems and situation based queries and tasks on e-platforms, are very good at giving solutions to puzzles, cross words, decision trees.

**Converger:** Are individuals who use learning to solve their problems by finding the best practical solutions. They are individuals who are good in application based activity like synchronous courses like debates; discussions problems based learning and virtual aptitudes.

**Assimilators:** Individuals who require clear explanation over practical opportunity prefer reading, exploring and analysis. This type of employees prefer white papers, publications, web quests, research analysis etc.

Traditional methods cannot accommodate as many participants with different learning styles, preferences and needs. CbceL can accommodate the maximum number of participants with maximum range of learning styles, preferences and needs. However it allows the employees to develop their competencies in a manner that is suitable to their capacity.

It also allows the organization to cover all the employees at a lower cost than it is possible with traditional methods. This captures and benefits today's employee needs and motivates them to take the courses online.

## **CbceL in Corporate Decision-Making**

A decision is the best choice made from various available alternatives. Decision- making process is one by which manager respond to opportunities by analyzing options and making decisions about goals and courses of action.

CbceL acts as a guide for decision making for both the management and the employees. CbceL provides the database of each employee along with his progress

level, scales of measurement and his competency level. This data can be used to know where exactly an employee stands and how various important decisions like job enrichment, job enlargement, promotions, etc. can be made. Moreover, comparisons between the employees and their competencies can also be made from the data.

Even employees can track their own progress and take decisions with respect to the areas where they can improve upon their competencies. Through CbceL many employees can learn new methods in decision making, techniques of decisions making in groups, making decisions tree analysis, rapid decision making and how to avoid pitfalls in decision making. Some special e-modules can also be part of decision making courses.

### **CbceL in Virtual Organizations**

Virtual organization or network organization is a new form of organization in which people are connected through a network and where both horizontal and vertical boundaries are removed to a large extent. Thus it becomes a boundary-less organization. It is also known as modular organization and digital organization.

In virtual organizations, the network of individuals is made possible through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which is flexible and dynamic to meet the challenges posed by the market.

Virtual organizations consist of individuals working from physically dispersed workplaces. Since the employees are not tied to a particular workplace, the whole training and learning process through traditional methods becomes incompatible. Such situations warrant e-learning systems enabling individuals to develop their knowledge, skills and abilities. CbceL, in particular, would be of immense help both the organization and employees. The organization can use CbceL to train the required competencies in the employees. The employees can use the modules in CbceL to improve their competencies and performance, irrespective of the place where they work from.

### **CbceL in Value Chain Analysis (VCA)**

Value Chain Analysis describes the activities that take place in a business and relates them to an analysis

of the competitive strength of the business. It also identifies primary activities, secondary activities and links them to competitive advantage. This concentrates on application of VCA for online learners in corporate.

CbceL is an ongoing training process. Hence it forms a part of supporting activities. The traditional methods of training do not always guarantee a link with learning-performance. On the other hand, CbceL covers the gap between learning and performance. Ultimately, it contributes towards achievement of organizational goals. The traditional methods of training incur lots of traveling and education costs, whereas CbceL can deliver the training to employees wherever they are working (any time anywhere) and thus result in cost savings. CbceL, thus, contributes towards cost advantage which leads to gaining of competitive advantage by the organization.

Achieving competitive advantage is the very purpose of Value Chain. Hence if CbceL is administered by an organization, the organization can gain competitive advantage over its competitors.

### **CbceL a Lucrative Investment**

As e-learning is becoming increasingly important, organizations are forced to make this strategic decision for investment on e-learning programs. All organizations deliberate on the points of view of due diligence for any kind of investment that applies to e-learning also. The benefits of e-learning and importance created the value for e-learning. This decade being virtual with World Wide Web, most of the business transactions happen electronically. The corporate people looked into this as a training means which gave liberty to employees as anytime, anywhere at your own pace, at your style. CbceL is just an extended version of e-learning which sorts out many issues, corporate's need to look in the angle as e-learning a lucrative investment.

The important key to remember is the investment on CbceL is a strategic tool and not as a weapon. Most organizations look at return on investment (ROI) for e-learning, but it is not available in a day or fortnight. It is considered to be part of intangibles; it can only be viewed in performance and productivity of employees over the years.

## Conclusion

CbceL is a conglomerate of competence and e-learning for today's business environment. This paper reflects a picture of almost all the important facets of corporate requirements for up skilling employees and contribute towards achievement of organizational goals and objectives as well as develop themselves to be a part of talent supply chain. This is a unique approach which supports continuous learning and development in the organization. However, more research needs to be undertaken to give a holistic picture from the practical point of view.

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