

A SWOT ANALYSIS OF ELECTRONIC DISTANCE LEARNING BUSINESS COURSES

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ABSTRACT

"SWOT is an acronym used to describe those particular Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats that are strategic factors for a specific company" (Hunger and Wheelen, 1997). The SWOT analysis will investigate the electronic distance learning business courses (EDLBC) that use computerized presentations, testing accessed through the Internet, and e-mail for student-faculty communications on written assignments, questions, and comments. The SWOT analysis looks favorably on business courses' suitability to electronic distance learning. Factors and problems are identified to formulate a strategy for EDLBC.

INTRODUCTION

Electronic distance learning business courses (EDLBC) are offered to students anywhere, anytime, and anyplace (Nasseh, 1996; Marklein, 1998; Kauffman, 1996). The Internet opportunity of a course web page offers syllabi for courses containing the assignments, the faculty e-mail address, and the identification of the required textbook (Gendreau, 1997). The web page gives access to an interactive Power Point presentation with hyperlinks and sequential instructions using sound bites to take the learner through the course material (U.S. Department of Energy Study, 1995).

The SWOT analysis will investigate the EDLBC that use computerized presentations and testing through the Internet and e-mail for student-faculty communications on written assignments, questions, and comments.

SWOT ANALYSIS

"SWOT is an acronym used to describe those particular Strengths, Weaknesses,

Opportunities, and Threats that are strategic factors for a specific company." Companies, like Hewlett-Packard, use a SWOT analysis when they realize they are in danger of missing critical opportunities. Hewlett-Packard did a situational analysis to initiate the strategy formulation framework (Hunger and Wheelen, 1997). "This framework distinguishes between two features of the internal environment, strengths and weaknesses, and two features of the external environment, opportunities and threats" (Grant, 1998). If Hewlett-Packard is to prosper within its own industry, it must institute competitive advantages over its competitors. The task is to determine how to deploy resources and satisfy goals while implementing the strategy.

A limitation of the SWOT analysis is the difficulty in distinguishing strengths from weaknesses and opportunities from threats. "The lesson here is that arbitrary classifications of external factors into opportunities and threats, and internal factors into strengths and weaknesses, is less important than a careful identification of these external and internal factors followed by an appraisal of their implications" (Grant, 1998). The external and internal environments are analyzed in-depth to find the distinctive competence to take advantage of newly-developed opportunities (Hunger and Wheelen, 1997).

SWOT ANALYSIS OF EDLBC

A SWOT analysis of EDLBC will concentrate on computer access to the Internet, using computerized presentations and e-mail. A review of the literature on distance learning and the author's experience developing distance learning business courses is the basis for the SWOT analysis in the Appendix.

STRENGTHS

1. EDLBC gives students all sorts of options (Floyd, 1998). "Distance learning is helping students overcome barriers such as geographical distance, family responsibilities, and work hours to attend class" (Jayarman and Piper, 1998). The electronic technology inspires teachers' and students' motivation to learn more (McGrath, 1998). "On-line courses appear to be especially popular because they generally let students log in any time of the day or night to send e-mail messages, add their thoughts to continuing discussions, take quizzes, or read a professor's lecture notes" (Guernsey, March 27, 1998). "They can even be delivered to students who simply prefer to learn from the home, office, or hotel room" (Tucker, 1995). Students can access on-line courses anytime, anywhere, and anyplace (Nasseh, 1996; Marklein, 1998; Kauffman, 1996).

2. Students that are thinking about taking a course can look over course requirements and topics covered from any location (Junk and Fox, 1998). "Students will be able to learn huge amounts about what they can expect in a course before they ever take it..." (Young, May 15, 1998).

3. Asynchronous learning is self-paced and interactive (Jensen, 1998). Students can e-mail questions to instructors and check out the answers before doing assignments and taking tests. A Student at U. C. L. A. said, "That was worth all the fees I paid for all my classes, because I probably wouldn't have done as well on the midterm," (Young, May 15, 1998).

4. Research has found the course page hit counts are strong predictors of students' success in Web-based courses. Students that visited the instructor's home page more often achieved higher grades. Students lagging in visits to the Web page were most likely to have difficulty with the course (Guernsey and Young, October 23, 1998). More

sophisticated methods of assessment have been developed. The CyberQ system measures an array of answers to questions asked students to assess academic structure, content, process, and outcome (Tucker, 1995).

5. EDLBC have established a minimum level of computerization for faculty, students, and administrators (Young, May 15, 1998). They have forced the University to bolster its support for computer technology (McCollum, March 20, 1998).

6. Many Universities have run out of bricks and mortar for students. Utah State University turned away about 2,000 students because it lacked the space for them (Blumenstyk, February 6, 1998, A21). University administrators are impressed with the "...vision of education without bricks and mortar..." (Monaghan, 1998).

7. Organizations using distance learning can save money by reducing travel expenses (Kearsley, 1998). Some administrators have the perception that EDLBC could replace classroom teaching and hold down education costs (Monaghan, 1998).

8. In a survey of 4,000 UCLA students, over 60% felt that Web pages had increased their interaction with instructors (Young, May 15, 1998). Online course experiences are more satisfying for both students and teachers (Boettcher, 1998). End-of-course surveys given to online students at the University of Phoenix had satisfaction ratings exceeding those given to classroom students (Kauffman, 1996).

9. Computer technology like e-mail allows students to do a professional job. If students do work sent to a Web page for the whole world to see, they are motivated to take the assignment more seriously (McGrath, 1998).

WEAKNESSES

1. Students comment on course evaluations on their frustration at having to

learn computer technology (Junk and Fox, 1998: McCollum, March 20, 1998). Powerful psychological and social forces converge to make some students passive to online learning activities (Klemm, 1998). "Professors will not be forced to use technology in their classrooms or to deliver courses over the Internet" (Young, October 3, 1998, A 28). Some of the best faculty refuse to use electronic distance learning technology (Floyd, 1998).

2. New technologies for distance learning are constantly being developed. "New skills have to be learned almost every semester" (Battin and Hawkins, 1998). Learning how and when to use the technology and if it should be used are constantly asked questions at many institutions (Junk and Fox, 1998).

3. It takes sophisticated computers to distribute and receive electronic distance learning materials. The process does not work if the instructor or student has an old computer that cannot develop or reproduce the materials (Rose, 1998).

4. EDLBC require a high degree of computer literacy. Instructors need a high level of expertise to create the courses and students need the expertise to get the most out of the course (PBS, The Business Channel, 1998).

5. "Computing officials at liberal-arts colleges are worried about providing adequate levels of computing support..." (Jaschik, 1998). Faculty and students must have the necessary computer support for distance education (Kearsley, 1998). If institutions do not insist on computer support, the distance learning program will fail (Sherron, 1998).

6. Faculty and student training are critical to the success of a distance education program (Sherron, 1998: Kearsley, 1998).

7. Many students have unrealistic expectations for timely responses to e-mail messages (Junk and Fox, 1998). They think office hours last 24 hours a day, seven days a

week. (McCollum, June 20, 1998: DeLoughry, 1995).

8. It takes a lot of time to develop and offer distance learning courses. The first effort usually requires a second or third adjustment. Instructors must prepare materials for electronic transmission. There's added time required using the new technology called for in distance learning (McCollum, June 20, 1998: American Association of University Professors, 1997: Sherron, 1998: Junk and Fox, 1998).

9. A computer requirement at Florida's Wake Forest University adds \$3,000 to the annual tuition (McCollum, March 20, 1998). Many universities are trying to figure out how to pay for the developing and marketing of distance learning courses. NYU Online needs to raise thirty million dollars to support its distance learning efforts (Guernsey, October 16, 1998).

10. "Many people believe that a serious drawback of distance education is that it is missing the social interaction that takes place in a traditional classroom" (Kearsley, 1998). A survey of students at Greenfield Community College revealed that students complained about a lack of personal contact (McCollum, November 6, 1998).

11. The Western Governors University (WGU) has projected enrollment of 5,000 students for its first year but, so far, only ten people have enrolled (Blumenstyk, September 25, 1998).

12. Existing law prohibits financial aid for courses from institutions that offer more than half of their courses by distance education (Blumenstyk, February 6, 1998, A21).

13. California State University is a very high-tech university with a lot of low-income students. The university has been troubled with the problem of computer have-nots (Young, October 9, 1998).

14. Web courses with 50-60 students are being offered. Distance learning courses are not limited by room size and often have

no maximum size (Boettcher, 1998: American Association of University Professors, 1997). "Distance learning is increasingly seen as a means to increased educational productivity and cost control" (Tucker, 1995).

15. Class size and weekly student contact hours in distance education upset traditional formulations that determine compensation policy. Technology issues, class size, and compensation policy are becoming important in contract negotiations (Young, October 3, 1998, A28: American Association of University Professors, 1997).

OPPORTUNITIES

1. The WGU projected as many as 5,000 students to enroll in its first year distance education program (Blumenstyk, September 25, 1998). Distance learning courses appeal to single mothers, students that require courses not offered at their present school, and people working full time (Young, September 18, 1998).

2. Since distance learning course development is so time consuming, reusing existing resources is a cost savings option. Several "course templates" are currently available. Educators are developing materials that can be delivered multiple times (Boettcher, 1998).

3. "...[The new electronic technology has great theoretical appeal for addressing educational issues, such as how to teach more students at lower cost..." (Neal, 1998).

4. The IRS recently awarded \$100 million in contracts for the development of distance learning programs. "The Department of Labor estimates that companies spend \$50 billion annually on training" (Kreitzberg, 1998). Western Carolina University developed an asynchronously delivered Master's of Project Management degree program based on a survey to determine the educational needs of

business and industry (Nixon and Leftwick, 1998).

5. Several corporations and twenty-one colleges will provide computerized distance learning courses to sixteen states and Guam (Blumenstyk, October 2, 1998). Hudson Valley Community College collaborating with Time Warner offer on-demand instruction in homes and business throughout New York (Payson, 1998).

6. American InterContinental University specializes in business degrees with immediate training in a collaborative-learning setting. The objective is to give students applied knowledge that is going to make them immediately valuable to a company (Blumenstyk, October 2, 1998). The faculty at Western Carolina University create **EDLBC** based on business and industry needs; and real-world experience combined with theory (Nixon and Leftwick, 1998).

7. Many universities have an international electronic presence and attract students around the world (Blumenstyk, October 2, 1998). It's possible to attract international students for distance learning that will eventually finish on campus (Gendreau, 1997).

8. There is movement in the demographics favorable to distance learning, such as growth in the nontraditional college population, changes in employment structures, cultural and lifestyle changes, and the effects of technological development (American Association of University Professors, 1997). Gregory W. Cappelli, an analyst of education companies for First Boston Corporation, believes distance learning has tremendous growth potential (Blumenstyk, October 2, 1998).

9. "...[We will see a new generation of instructors who have actually taken their degree via distance education and, hence, have first-hand experience to build upon" (Kearsley, 1998). Students can earn several different degrees and certificates in online learning through an online program at The

Graduate School of America (Certificate in Instructional Design for Online Learning).

10. The College of Business at Western Carolina University is standardizing the distance learning process that works and changing those that do not work (Nixon and Leftwick, 1998).

11. "A new scholarship program at California State University at San Marcos gives students computers instead of tuition money." A \$2.6 million endowment supports the scholarship program (Young, October 9, 1998).

12. Eudora Pro's Pure Voice and a camera on top of a computer will allow faculty to offer synchronous office hours, where they can talk rather than write (Boettcher, 1998).

13. There is a growing body of knowledge on EDLBC (Phillips, 1998).

14. Distance education programs can offer students new learning opportunities. The interactive nature of the technology makes learning easier and more fun (Floyd, 1998).

15. The amount of education and re-education that would be required by the year 2000 will be approximately 30 credit hours of instruction every seven years. To get ready for re-education, universities are expanding their distance learning programs for lifelong learning (Sherron, 1998: Jensen, 1998).

16. Distance learning tools are available in abundance from Web banks, digital archives of shared instructional materials, groupware applications, databases to store students' work, and program administration models (Guernsey and Young, October 23, 1998: O'Keefe, 1998).

THREATS

1. WGU had ten days of computer glitches preventing enrollment in their distance education courses (Blumenstyk,

February 6, 1998, A21). Many professors worry administrators will chase the bottom line at the expense of academic quality. Professors have doubts about the soundness of WGU's academic programs (Biemiller, 1998).

2. "...[F]amiliarity with high-tech teaching methods is now a requirement for professors" (McCollum, June 20, 1998). The process of distance learning requires a total mind transformation from traditional classroom teaching (Nixon and Leftwick, 1998).

3. The threat of competition from virtual colleges offering online distance education has forced traditional universities to rethink how to provide instruction (Kearsley, 1998). The chancellor of the California State University System wants to compete with distance learning institutions like The University of Phoenix (Leatherman, 1998). "An institution must apply today's technology to its curriculum and programs to meet the customer's needs, to compete with other institutions, and possibly even to survive" (Nixon and Leftwick, 1998).

4. Distance education programs present a danger to on-campus instruction. For-profit universities that deliver distance learning courses might put traditional universities out of business (McCollum, June 20, 1998: Young, September 18, 1998).

5. University counselors have concerns about computer anxiety. The problems can snowball if a student gets off track with a computer. The problem may be major for one of distance learning's biggest potential markets-the nontraditional learner (McCollum, October 16, 1998, A28).

6. Many students do not have the money for new computers and software. "Students who can't afford a computer are at a real disadvantage...and are forced to fight with crowds in a noisy computer lab" (McCollum, October 16, 1998, A27).

7. Most faculty have not responded quickly or enthusiastically to distance

education. Many faculty are worried about being replaced by their own creations. The factors that negatively influence faculty participation include the lack of release time, lack of technical support, concern about faculty workload, and lack of grants for materials and expenses (Neal, 1998: Young, October 3, 1997, A28; Betts, 1998).

8. "Technology, no matter how slick, is no substitute for quality teaching" (Kreitzberg, 1998). Traditional on-campus experience is not the cheapest, but it is the best (Biemiller, 1998).

9. On-campus experience is not obsolete. "Education, moreover, is not reducible to the downloading of information, much less to the passive and solitary activity of staring at a screen. Education is an intersubjective and social process, involving hands-on activity, spontaneity, and communal experience" (Open Letter To Governor Gary Locke And The 2020 Commission On The Future Of Higher Education, 1998).

10. "Who owns and controls the intellectual property in a course produced for distance learning? How do the different modes of transmission affect the use of materials in a distance learning context?" (American Association of University Professors, 1997). Some universities believe in the work-made-for-hire doctrine that the institution owns the faculty's work. Professors are fearful of unwritten policies and have an interest in the development of such policy (Betts, 1998: Young, May 15, 1998; Burk, 1997).

11. Faculty members of the University of Washington are protesting their fears of being replaced with distance learning programs. There is an economic incentive to reduce labor costs. Professors could be phased out as universities digitize education programs (Monaghan, 1998: Young, October 3, 1997, A 28).

12. The market and rules for higher education are changing. Universities must

apply today's technology to its programs or be at a distinct disadvantage (Nixon and Leftwick, 1998: Blumenstyk, February 6, 1998, A 23).

13. National Science Foundation financing for faster computer links and new network tools is in danger of losing \$60 million (Young, September 25, 1998).

14. Many universities are requiring students to own computers when entering school while others are abandoning computer requirements (DeLoughry, 1995).

15. The momentum to use technology in teaching has resulted in administrators requiring faculty Web pages. Faculty not responding have been accused of "Luddism" (Neal, 1998).

16. Distance education programs require a major investment in support or they will fail. Will computer based education follow instructional television's failure to change the face of education? (Sherron, 1998: Neal, 1998).

17. "Distance learning has become increasingly admired by governors, legislators, institutional administrators...The political pressure to implement distance learning continues to grow rapidly across the country" (American Association of University Professors, 1997).

18. Online courses can be marketed to the wrong audience. Students who do not have the background or prerequisites will badmouth the program (Ganzel, Picard, and Stamps, 1998).

19. The Center for On-Line Addiction was founded to help people deal with information addiction. In a recent worldwide survey, fifty-five per cent were concerned that children will become information junkies (Reuters American, Inc. 1997).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

EDLBC will be successfully offered worldwide if the following factors and

problems are solved. Distance learning policies have to be developed with both university administration and faculty input covering release time, technical support, workloads, financial support, and course material ownership (Neal, 1998: Young, October 3, 1997, A 26: Young, September 18, 1998: Betts, 1998: Buck, 1997). When faculty reduce their fears and administrators and politicians figure out how expensive distance learning programs are, the threats to traditional on-campus programs will be subdued. Traditional, on-campus, classroom courses really are the best (Biemiller, 1998: American Association of University Professors, 1997). Students who cannot attend on-campus courses will continue to demand EDLBC. The tremendous growth potential for EDLBC and lifelong learning programs will account for increased demand for distance programs. Where demand exists, EDLBC will be offered by public, private, and for-profit institutions (Nixon and Leftwick, 1998: Sherron, 1998: Jensen, 1998).

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APPENDIX

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Access courses anytime, anywhere, and anyplace 2. Electronic view of course content before taking it 3. Self-paced and interactive learning 4. Automated assessment 5. Computerized the university 6. Education without bricks and mortar 7. Holds down education costs 8. Satisfying experience for faculty and students 9. Improved written communications 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reluctance to use technology 2. Constantly changing technology 3. Sophisticated computers 4. Degree of computer literacy 5. Computer support 6. Extensive faculty training 7. Office hours twenty four hours a day 8. More prep time 9. Increased costs 10. Lack of personal contact or social interaction 11. Over estimating demand 12. Financial aid 13. Computer have-nots 14. Large class size 15. Compensation policy
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increased enrollment opportunities 2. Reuse existing resources 3. Teach more students at lower cost 4. Demand for business courses 5. Academic/corporate partnerships 6. Training in a collaborative learning environment 7. International markets 8. Growth potential 9. Train Teachers in distance learning 10. Standardize the processes that work 11. Scholarship for computers 12. Synchronous office hours 13. Growing body of knowledge for EDLBC 14. New learning opportunities 15. Lifelong learning programs 16. Abundance of electronic distance learning tools 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reputation and credibility 2. Alter teaching styles 3. Competition 4. Threat to on-campus institutions 5. Computer anxiety 6. Expensive computers and software 7. Negative influence on faculty participation 8. Classroom education best 9. On-campus experience best 10. Distance education policy 11. Replace professors 12. Higher education is changing 13. Federal funding 14. Mandatory computers 15. Mandatory faculty web sites 16. Failure 17. Political pressure 18. Market courses incorrectly 19. Online addiction