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# Employees' Perceptions about Online Training Courses in Saudi Arabia

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore employees' perceptions about online training courses in Saudi Arabia by reviewing related studies that focused on online learning. Employees' perceptions about online training courses are a major research inquiry because the concerns and fears of the employees might interfere with the objectives of their training courses. The question that will guide this paper is what are the perceptions about online training courses for employees working at healthcare organizations in Saudi Arabia? Within the literature, ten peer reviewed articles selected and reviewed address the following themes (1) Online learner's perceptions and (2) context and perceptions. The findings will give insights into the perceptions and worries of the future trainees that will help instructional designers understand how the trainees can be satisfied and how to design a program for such trainees.

**Keywords**: *Perceptions, online learning and training, eLearning, employee development.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Online learning has recently been the focus of scholars and research studies due to its fast-changing nature and its beneficial applications. Consequently, online professional development (OPD) has shown considerable progress to meet the demand of online courses and online instructional design. Researchers have proved that the number of students engaging in online learning in general and OPD in particular is increasing.

For example, Armstrong (2011) stated that the number of online students studying in degree-granting eLearning courses in the United States jumped from 1,602,970 to 3,938,111 in less than five years, an increase of 145%.

Online training is best defined as computer-based training through which learners gain knowledge and skills from anywhere and at any time. Similarly, online professional development is the use of online sources to enhance individuals' ability to perform their work on-the-job training and workplace performance through a learning management system.

According to Penman and Thalluri (2014), what is special about online learning is the idea that learning and teaching become more interesting and more attractive, and the outcomes of online courses showed that learners' levels of achievement are improving due to the development in the styles of both instructors and their learners. However, users face challenges and concerns surrounding the growth of online training. Throughout the history of online education, research studies have shown that student perceptions are indicating major problems that may occur along with the implementation of online training (Kuo, Walker, Belland, Schroder, & Kuo, 2014); problems such as learners' backgrounds from different school cultures, learners' unfamiliarity with technology features, and instructors' choices of pedagogies and course design.

In the Saudi Arabian context, a recent study showed that Saudi Arabian trainees, the target population of this paper, come to the workplace from a school culture background that taught them to rely on the teacher for every learning activity (Hamdan, 2014). According to Hamdan (2014), it is recommended to conduct further studies on Saudi Arabian male learners in online education to register their responses toward participation in online learning. Following Hamdan's recommendation, a future study should include members of both genders in order to capture perceptions of online trainees that represent the concerns of the whole population, which in fact consists of both males and females. More studies in Saudi Arabia have also recommended that the issue of perceptions and challenges (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010) should be included in further investigation and research.

## 2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This paper will help provide information to people in the health sectors, those in educational institutions, administrators of training centers, policy makers, medical educational institutions, and instructional designers in Saudi Arabia. The findings will give insights into the perceptions and worries of future trainees that will help instructional designers understand how the trainees can be satisfied and how to design a program for such trainees.

### 2.1 Research Question

For the purpose of this study, the researcher has prepared the following research question that will guide this study:

What are the perceptions about online training courses for employees working at healthcare organizations in Saudi Arabia?

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Perceptions of Trainees

Hunte (2012) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the perceptions about support services that are provided online for first-time learners. In this study the focus was on determining learners' perceptions upon using the support services for the first time. The author prepared questionnaires to collect his data and made them available online to participants. He used eight items in his questionnaire to examine learners' perceptions through open-ended and closed-ended questions. The author noted to his participants that their feedback was important in order for the author to assess learners' perceptions of the services provided online. The investigation addressed two issues: online learners' unfamiliarity with challenges of the online teaching and learning environment and learners' perceptions of services provided as supportive elements of online continuous education and training. The research question carried the researchers' intention to discover the extent to which online learners in the Caribbean Parpados might achieve learning and initiatives that could enhance their effectiveness toward beneficial adaptation to use an online teaching and learning environment to improve their performance. Hunte (2012) showed from the data analyzed in his study that in online teaching and learning environments, learners' performance is related to and positively influenced by the presence of supportive services, and consequently these services ought to be designed according to learners' perceptions and needs.

Regarding learner's perceptions, Macdonald, Bullen, and Kozak (2010) used a qualitative longitudinal design to investigate the effectiveness of different pedagogical and instructional techniques for eLearning and online professional development training. The course they observed was three months long and run by a large-scale university in South Africa. Observations covered WebCT logs, discussion forums, and emails, and interviews were used to collect data from the learners before and after the learning sessions. The research problem was the provision of sufficient support to online learners during online education training. The researchers found a lack of awareness among employees and course administrators alike, plus a discouraged attitude toward online training as well as a failure to incorporate a human element in the course to provide the employees with supportive study hours. To accomplish this study, the researchers collected data using three methods; first, they conducted interviews with the learners before and after the course; second, they observed WebCT server logs, quiz scores, forums of learners' discussions, and emails from and to instructors to collect qualitative information about the services. The findings of the study concluded that the provision of various supportive services in the workplace of online training can cause the online training to be successful, or else their lack can cause its failure.

The importance of support that such services provide lies in the fact that learners' performance is highly dependent on these supporting services.

In regard to learners' perceptions about online learning security, Yang (2014) conducted a study to investigate students' perception concerning online learning security. The author stated that learners are worried about their personal information when it comes to eLearning environments. Yang (2014) addressed three questions: learners' worries about their online learning security, learners' perceptions concerning online learning security that is controlled by their teacher, and whether learners from different locations have different perceptions. Yang (2014) collected data through a survey with nine items concerning online learning security in two stages. The first stage took place in 2009, which was in paper format. He surveyed a large number of participants in two different countries, Japan and China. The second stage was conducted in 2012, which he made available online for participants. The same survey was used with different participants in the next stage. The findings of the study indicate that students have no concerns about their private information in online learning security if it is used only for educational purposes. It was concluded that there were no significant differences in perceptions of eLearning security between the two countries.

Asunka (2008) conducted a qualitative case-study method to study attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of university students to understand learners' characteristics while using instructional technology to access online learning and benefit from online teaching. In order to address the question of how learner perceptions help collaborative online learning, the researcher used data collected from various instructional sources. The researcher utilized students' responses to surveys, instructor and learner comments, and emails, as well as one-on-one interviews and a Web-server log as means of data collection to accomplish this study. The findings of the study reflected many significant learner concerns about developing issues of online learning and education technology. For example, the study found that (1) learner motivation can affect the evolution of online learning, (2) self-reported learner perceptions might be misleading to both researchers and administrators, (3) lack of proper access to technology might result in students' frustration about online education, and (4) inadequate course design and poor delivery of training could result in lack of learner engagement and failure of training programs. The study also concluded that future research and investigation should include learner engagement strategies and issues related to delivery systems and blended learning to distinguish varieties of using technology and effects of contextual factors (Asunka, 2008).

Similarly, Penman and Thallari (2014) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the issue of student dropout from health science courses. The author stated the problem that students with little background in biology and basic science find the health science major difficult,

which makes them choose to drop out of the course. This problem increases the dropout rate of the university and prompted the authors to start their investigation of what makes leaners decide to drop out of health science courses, impacting learners' retention rate at the university. Penman and Thallari (2014) wanted to explore learners' perceptions toward incorporating online courses that would help them succeed in their health science major. Penman and Thallari (2014) guided their study by posing general questions about the advantages and disadvantages of using online learning techniques as a way to improve learning ability. They narrowed down their questions to ask about learners' perceptions toward the use of online courses and virtual classrooms as a learning environment. They also asked questions about eLearning tools and students' reactions to these tools. The authors used a survey to collect data from students who participated in their study. They also used discussion pages to have students answer questions with regard to interaction with the content posted on the discussion board. The authors used the evaluation instruments to assess an online self-assessment and asynchronous class.

Penman and Thallari's (2014) study showed that incorporating well-designed online courses increases the outcomes of students' achievement. They also stated that these online courses have to be easy to access by students and should include features that help learners to interact easily with the content and with each other.

Alternatively, Batalla-Busquets and Pacheco-Bernal (2013) conducted a study in which they wanted to explore the training workers' perceptions toward different training methodologies. In this study the focus was on comparing the employees' perceptions regarding online as opposed to face-to-face training. According to the authors of this study, the 2,000 employees who were subjects of the study were in favor of online learning because they felt it was more flexible and modern. However, face-to-face learning still outweighs eLearning in terms of being more motivating. Both companies and their employees need training to perform better. Being trained in autonomy, initiative, and the ability to do in-job tasks with technology are all issues that the workplace and its workers are worried about. Improving employees' skills and knowledge to suit different tasks is the biggest challenge that may face the needs of a changing work environment. Batalla-Busquets and Pacheco-Bernal (2013) developed their research questions to gain insights into virtual training by asking questions directly related to the perceptions of trainees themselves, such as concerning virtual training in the workplace and intrinsic attitudes toward such training. The data for this paper were collected through a survey with items designed to elicit information concerning opinions related to both face-to-face and online training. The survey of the study was administrated online to a sample of 2,000 employees who were taking training courses at a workplace. The data analysis resulted in three categories of responses: responses related to face-to-face training, responses connected with online training, and responses related to both types of training. Following the analysis, the findings became representative of three groups of employee perceptions and their motivation status. The authors concluded that employees needed to have a more adapting attitude toward online training to create a more usable eLearning environment for professional development by distance learning.

Then again, Zhang and Yeung (2005) conducted a quantitative study to explore learners' perceptions toward incorporating eLearning lessons that would sustain learners through their online learning environment. The authors stated that most of the courses that are taught at the Open University of Hong Kong (OHHK) are offered online, and most of the learners struggle with the online learning environment. They wanted to investigate students' perceptions and understanding of technology and Internet use through incorporating support in the eLearning environment to help students be successful in their eLearning courses. The authors guided their study by stating four questions related to learners' perceptions, understanding, and anticipation about the Internet and technology used in their online learning environment.

They also included the variances that occurred among learners registered in two online courses in different languages to detect technology problems. Zhang and Yeung (2005) administered their data collection through two instruments in two stages. The first instrument was a survey questionnaire that included 118 items focused on all major elements of their study to deduct learners' perceptions, anticipation, and understanding of technology and Internet use in their eLearning environment. The second instrument was an interview that intensely examined the perceptions of learners toward the use of online help courses in their online learning environment. They selected participants who had had experiences of online learning. The study was longitudinal and took longer than a year to get accurate data about the learners. The author concluded from the data they analyzed that participants were confident using technology and the Internet through their online learning environment.

## 3.2 Context and Perceptions
Hamdan's study was designed to explore the correlations between culture of learning and use of online instructional technology. Hamadan (2014) also indicated a lack of efforts and practices that focus on social and ethical perceptions concerning Saudi online training and education. The research questions guiding the study revolved around the issues of how using online learning is related to the culture of learning and how students' perceptions changed due to use of online education technology. Hamadan (2014) conducted her study on first-year undergraduate Saudi Arabian students who were attending courses with English as the medium of instruction at two of the largest Saudi Arabian universities. The instrument for data collection was a 12-item survey that the researcher had revised and piloted on 30 students before the collection procedure started to

guarantee reliability and validity. The students in her study were all female and showed individual types of aptitude for and attention to interactive learning styles despite their backgrounds, which were mainly based on traditional one-way instructional techniques. Hamadan (2014) found that online learning engagement resulted in improving students' communication abilities and enhanced their learning interaction especially in terms of learner autonomy and levels of engagement. The Saudi students' attitudes and beliefs about online learning and discussion communities showed that before participating in real online discussions the students did not realize social perspectives that other students possessed and what perceptions they might have resulted from. According to Hamadan (2014), online learning helped students in a Saudi Arabian context to obtain experience and ability to work with various ways of processing information and learning styles.

Also, Becker, Newton, and Sawang (2013) addressed one main question, whether online learning is the perfect method to enhance employees' knowledge in the work environment. The authors used a self-administered questionnaire to collect their data from a large number of participants: 1,047 employees. The majority of participants in this study were male. The researchers made their questionnaire available to their participants online and in paper forms. Becker, Newton, and Sawang (2013) administered their sample to employees who had had experience with eLearning during the previous two years to see if their perceptions were based on their experience with eLearning. The data analysis showed that a large number of participants had experienced online learning during the past two years, while a notable number of respondents indicated that they never used online learning. Becker, Newton, and Sawang (2013) concluded that the acceptance of online learning in the workplace is widely dependent on the perception of learners who are involved in the process.

Finally, Bryce, Choi, Landstorm, and LoChang (2008) investigated how online learning affected health care employees' self-development and education. Health care workers need to keep updating their education with certain health information because of the changing nature of such areas of information, despite the workers' lack of time and demanding workloads. The researcher addressed questions of health workers' ability to access this online sort of education, how much the participants would learn, and health care workers' satisfaction as adult learners of online education of this kind. The researchers designed online quizzes for the collection of the needed data. The quizzes were presented to the learners to measure their learning achievement. A 25-item quiz was used before the course and after the course. A survey was also posted on the learning management system where the course material was delivered. The researchers wanted the participants to provide responses to the survey in order to measure their satisfaction. The survey consisted of questions related to ease, level of interest, and content efficiency. The items had a scale of 1 to 5, and the

students had to agree or disagree with the statements in each item. Moreover, the LMS was designed to collect demographic data about each learner. The researchers then processed these data and used them to measure users' accessibility. The study found that delivery of content for health care education or any similar adult workplace affected online learning in many ways. The researchers concluded that it is satisfactory and motivational to provide adult learners with online education because it helps minimize difficulties, suits their individual preferences, and eventually improves their professional development results.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The literature revealed that there is a research gap in individuals' perceptions about online training courses in the Saudi Arabian context. Based on the literature review, most of the studies found that learners have a positive attitude toward using online training courses. Because not many researches have been conducted in Saudi Arabia, the researcher included studies undertaken within or near Middle Eastern countries. It is very clear that there is a need for a study to explore employees' perceptions about online training courses in the Saudi Arabian context as recommended by other studies.

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