

ZSolt DÉZSI

EXPERIENCES OF USAGE OF E-LEARNING MATERIALS AND B-LEARNING METHOD IN SOME MEMBER STATES OF THE COMMUNITY, PART 2

AZ ELEKTRONIKUS TANANYAGOK ÉS A B-LEARNING MÓDSZER ALKALMAZÁSÁNAK TAPASZTALATAI A KÖZÖSSÉG NÉHÁNY TAGÁLLAMÁBAN, 2. RÉSZ

The European Union celebrated the 40th anniversary of the customs union in 2008. The customs union means among others the free circulation of goods and services, application of the common tariff and customs legislations, for which you need common practice in trainings and common trainings and training materials. Within the Customs Programmes the EU has exactly determined the tasks related to the trainings. For example within the Customs 2013 Programme the EU determines the application of e-learning environment, and the updating of the actual e-learning materials. Some member states have significant experience on the application of e-learning environment and b-learning method, some other member states, like Hungary are on different levels of the development process. I have collected very useful experience in the countries of both groups, which have furthered our national development process. In the second part the Finnish experience is presented and this country is a pioneer on the introduction of b-learning method.

Az Európai Unió 2008-ban ünnepelte a vámunió 40 éves évfordulóját. A vámunió magában foglalja például az áruk és szolgáltatások szabad áramlását, a közös vámtarifa és a közös vámjogszabályok alkalmazását, amelyhez szükség van az oktatás, képzés területén is egységes gyakorlat, közös képzések és tananyagok kialakítására. Az EU a vám programokban pontosan meghatározza az oktatással kapcsolatos feladatokat is, például a Vám 2013 programban az elektronikus tanulási környezet biztosítását, illetve a már meg lévő elektronikus tananyagok aktualizálását. Néhány uniós tagállam nagyon jelentős tapasztalatokkal rendelkezik az elektronikus tanulási környezet és a b-learning módszer alkalmazása területén, más tagállamok pedig Magyarországhoz hasonlóan a fejlesztési folyamat különböző periódusaiban állnak. Mindkét csoportba tartozó országokban nagyon hasznos tapasztalatokat szereztem, amelyek elősegítették a hazai fejlesztési folyamatokat. A második részben a finnországi tapasztalatok kerülnek bemutatásra, amely ország úttörőnek tekinthető a b-learning módszer bevezetése területén.

FINLAND

In the framework of the "Customs 2007" programme I took part in study tour organised by the Finnish Customs School, May 21-25 2007. The goals of this study tour were as follows:

- Studying the ways to set up trainings;
- Studying the training infrastructure;
- Experiencing the ways of designing and developing learning programmes;
- Observing the methods used to select the appropriate trainers;
- Studying the process of basic training;
- Revising ways of evaluation and assessment methods;
- Studying the role of e-and b-learning, designing a new training method;
- Studying the development of e-learning materials;
- Looking at the ways of distance teaching and correspondence courses;
- Studying the possibilities of financing the trainings, financial planning;

- Studying the role of the customs authorities in the civil/public sector.

The Finnish customs directorate

The Finnish customs directorate was 2600 strong in 2007. At that time a programme was under way in Finland aimed at re-organising the civil sector with the following desirable outcomes:

- Reducing the number of people working in the Finnish public administration from 120.000 to 60.000 (a 50% cut) by 2010. For the customs directorate it meant a decrease of 170 in numbers by 2010.
- The introduction of the programme “Well being at work”, a welfare project designed to assure the physical and mental well-being of workers in the public administration whose retiring age would be raised from 63 and 65 to 68. The Finnish customs directorate has made real headway in implementing this programme.

Finland has a 1400-km long overland border with Russia and a 600-km long one with Norway. As an internal EU-border, it has a 700-km long borderline with Sweden.

The most important aspects, considering the trainings, are the following:

- Protection of the internal market and the collection of common charges
- (approx. €9.5 bln/year);
- Protection of society from drugs and other hazardous materials smuggled in and also, the protection of society from economic crimes (law-enforcement and crime prevention)
- The liberalization of goods traffic, ensuring the constant flow of trade (with a special emphasis on AEO)

The Finnish customs administration employs 2600 people with a yearly fluctuation of 6% which breaks down into 3% leaving due to retirement, 1.5 % leaving on termination of their short-term contracts and another 1.5% leaving on their own accord. This 6% fluctuation means the base of the basic vocational training.

The customs directorate has one central School which nationally organises the tasks related to the basic and further training of customs officers; schedules and controls the trainings as well as the execution of contact trainings. The School communicates nationwide with the districts, the customs offices, the professional directorates and with the customers.

Fig. 1: Location of the Finnish customs authorities¹



Besides, the School has a wide network of connections on an international scale, the management of which is a special additional task for them.

The customs administration has five district centres and in each district there is a person appointed to keep contact with the School. There are additional contact persons in the customs offices that assist and supervise workplace training.

The Finnish Customs School

The training centre of the Finnish customs administration is located in the elite suburbs of Helsinki. One building houses everything: the classrooms, the offices, the canteen and the hostel too. For recreational activities the school has lounges, a library, P.E. premises, a gym and a sauna to offer.

Fig. 2: The organisational layout of the Finnish customs school

¹ Source: http://www.tulli.fi/en/08_Districts_laboratory/index.jsp, download date: 01.01.2009



As it is clear from Fig. 2 the Finnish customs school has a staff of 21 permanent employees but additional trainers and guest lecturers also take part in the trainings. They administer approximately 400 different courses yearly which cover 25000 student-teaching days.

Forms of training

The School organises the following trainings:

- Basic vocational training: 2 and a half years with the new b-learning method;
- Further trainings based on the demands of the various fields;
- Other trainings (e.g. management, informatics, foreign language courses);
- Trainings for customers;
- Trainings for contributors.

The HR strategy of the Finnish customs administration

The HR strategy of the Finish customs administration is based on three principles:

- Co-operation with the customers;
- Providing service;
- Crime prevention and law enforcement and the protection of citizens.

The co-operation with customers has to be present on all levels throughout the organisation. However, education is a primary objective. One of the activities is running trainings for customers and co-operators (customs agencies, software-houses). In addition, a new page was created in the e-learning framework where the customers can register and are supplied with relevant information, and where they can communicate with each other as well as with the customs authorities.

As a service task each professional field has to carry out their work related to their own field but there is no trespassing between the different fields. The connection between the fields is established via follow-up control and education.

The law enforcement and the crime prevention strategies are based on the adequate protection of the internal market and that of citizens.

The favourable results of the new strategy:

- Balancing the needs of the organisation and those of the customs officers as individuals;
- Balancing the development and the salary of employees (individual goals and evaluation);
- Tasks should be set up according to organisational units;

- Evaluating the results of the organisational units annually and based on clearly defined aspects;
- Discussing the results and developments.

The new educational method of the Finnish customs administration

The motto of the Finnish customs administration is: "From classroom learning to learning at your workplace with the help of b-learning"

The definition of b-learning

In a general sense every educational method can be called b(lended) learning where there are more than one method applied. These methods can be, for example:

- Classroom learning;
- Learning by working;
- Self-study;
- Group work;
- Internet-based training.

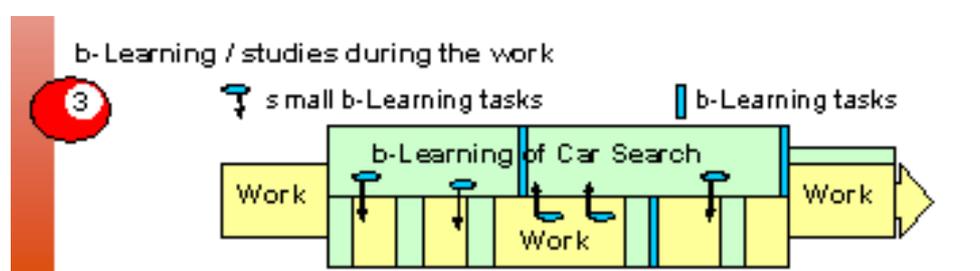


Fig. 3: The Finnish example of utilising b-learning²

According to the Finnish example the b-learning training is carried out alongside actual work where one has to carry out smaller or bigger realistic tasks defined and allocated by the School, at certain points of the module, and where one can put specific parts of the electronic curriculum into practice at once. These tasks are defined in a separate learning guide connected to the curriculum, which can be used during both learning and practice. The given tasks are, after completion, returned to the School where they are evaluated.

The advantages of the b-learning method are the following:

- Flexible, problem-based curriculum;
- Concentrates on processes instead of facts;
- Based on self-guidance;
- Creates an open-ended learning situation;
- Student-centred;
- Regards guidance and support very important.

However, it has a disadvantage: it is difficult to evaluate e.g. the results in personal development and quality improvements.

As opposed to traditional methods learning is based on one's own experiences and thus it fits into one's previous structure of knowledge.

Teaching is but supporting and guiding the development of links between students and the curriculum while learning is the understanding of basic rules and principles.

The realization of the b-learning method in Nuijamaa, a Finnish-Russian border crossing point

This is the biggest overland border crossing point in Finland, in an area that requires the maximum of attention and thus it is of primary importance with respect to training. Out of the 115-strong staff of the customs office, 25 are currently involved with basic vocational training in 9 different groups. At the customs office educational contact persons have been appointed on a voluntary base that apart from their daily work help students with learning.

² Source: Lecture by Mrs. Riitta Paalanen and Mr. Markku Hietanen, Finnish Customs School, 21 May 2007.

Some of the tasks of the contact persons:

- Keeping in touch with the district and the School;
- Supervising the students' studies;
- Compiling the timetable for students at work;
- Checking tasks;
- Evaluating and forwarding them to the School.

The new educational method of the Finnish customs administration is based on learning at work. The educational syllabus defines the number of lessons that has to be devoted to learning at one's workplace, for each field. This means about 30 lessons a month which are, in accordance with tasks of duty, allotted by the local contact person. The "timetable" is compiled in a way that one should not spend more than 3-4 hours with learning while on duty. For learning, the students have a separate office equipped with computers and Internet connection so that they can study the electronic learning material compiled by the School. The students can also use the two computers located in the meeting room of the customs office. Those colleagues not studying are observant of the time allotted for learning and will interrupt it only on reasonable grounds (e.g. there is a drastic increase in traffic).

Based on the experiences so far one can assert that the efficiency of transferring knowledge greatly exceeds that of the traditional method. Also it is not rare that students, based on their knowledge gathered from e-learning, ask such professional questions that are difficult to answer even by seasoned customs officers. As a consequence, a new need to deliver e-learning materials to all customs officers and customers has surfaced.

Establishing the b-learning method

The need to modernize education

The most important factor in employing the new educational method is that it is aimed at harmonising local professional needs with the proper academic knowledge in order to avoid having to take in unnecessary pieces of information. As a result of the training the cadets can become adept professionals with adequate skills who will later form the professional core of the staff.

It is also of great importance to develop skills related to the IT field and to utilising networks and also, skills related to the ability of making independent decisions. The new method entails the application of various training methods thus it increases variety and decreases incidental expenses.

The main goals of setting up the new method are training modern, open-minded customs officers who can gather information on their own and play an active role in their work. It is also set as a goal that the new learning method is capable of sharing knowledge based on practice.

The activities of the b-learning project

The activities of the project tasked with establishing the educational method can be broken down into the following phases:

1. Planning phase: 2001-2004: In this phase the new educational structure was drafted, the roles were defined and the partakers were chosen.
2. Shaping phase: 2004-2005: This was the phase when the related curricula were made. According to a decision made in the planning phase vocational training stopped for a year and in the span of this year 8 trainers designed the electronic curricula based on a professional needs analysis from customs offices.
3. Issuing phase, from 2005: The first basic vocational training started in 2005 in 9 groups, with 25 cadets each. The first groups finished the course in November 2007.
4. Evaluation 2008-: The assessment of the results and efficiency of the new method will be possible after the training has finished.
5. Development 2008-: Further development will be carried out based on the results of the assessment.

The participants of the new education system

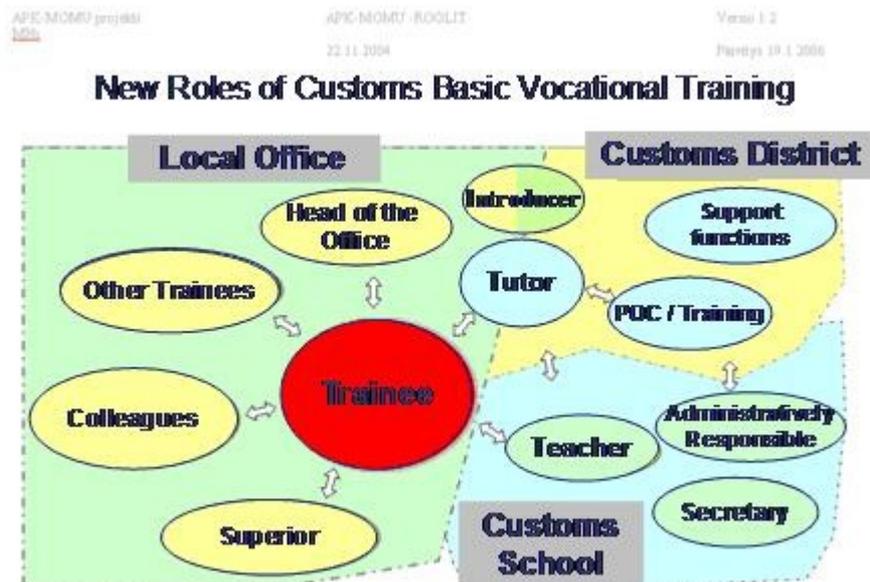


Fig 4: The participants of the b-learning training and their connections

As it is rather obvious from the figure above work and training are very closely related and a horizontal, as well as a vertical network of interactivity has formed among the participants.

„Only one person takes part in the training but 9 learn altogether.”³

The efficiency of the training

As for the efficiency it can be stated that:

- Instead of the previous 75 students, 350 students can be trained (at a time);
- There is no contradiction between local practice and academic regulations;
- The electronic curricula can be used after the training as well, during daily work;
- One of the educational tools, the workbook contains the details for self-study and those for learning through work;
- Learning has become an integrate part of daily work;
- Electronic curricula can be widely used.

Future prospects

Based on the project plans electronic curricula will be available to every colleague during 2008 and during the planning phase the learning environment will evolve into a working environment. An Internet blog will be set up for experts so less time will be devoted to answering frequently asked questions and it will also work as a banner for members of the organisation and also for the customers who will become something like “part-time customs officers”.

SUMMARY

The study tour to Germany provided an excellent opportunity to have an insight into the structure of the German customs administration, especially into that of their education system. We learnt what base they had to base the e- and b-learning on, what technical, human resources, financial and other requirements they had to meet to introduce them and what problems one may face when introducing and applying such systems.

It now seems obvious that the introduction of an e- and b-learning method of education requires significant preparation and planning on behalf of any customs administration and involves, apart from establishing the technical background, the development and constant maintenance of electronic curricula. It is also imperative that the given form of training fits in with the training system of the whole organisation and, equally importantly, that it is accepted by superiors and especially by users.

³ Source: Lecture by Mrs. Riitta Paalanen and Mr. Markku Hietanen, Finnish Customs School, 21 May 2007.

The Hungarian customs administration has the advantage of possessing the technical background (Internet and intranet connections, technical equipment) and the platform required for developing electronic curricula (Microsoft Class Server) but at the same time is lacking in self-developed the electronic curricula.

Based on experiences gathered the following requirements have to be met in order to introduce b-learning:

- Assessing the possibilities available;
- Requiring the tools and resources that may be needed;
- Creating the training schedule;
- Organising the teaching of electronic curricula already available;
- Creating the human resources necessary to develop electronic curricula and also developing them;
- Forwarding information to users.

At the Finnish customs administration we had the possibility of getting acquainted with a new, modern method of education which focuses on applying various different methods jointly, employs electronic curricula and learning through work with the guidance of the School.

The b-learning method is capable of harmonising the quality of control and service tasks performed by customs officers and may also be an adequate way to smoothly adjust the colleagues' abilities to the ever-changing demands of their workplaces.

The electronic platforms and curricula are easy to apply in other fields of education and this new model can also enhance the communicative skills of the colleagues.

As can be deduced from the study tour experiences, the new method introduced by the Finnish customs administration can be, with the necessary adjustments to national specifications, alongside proper planning and preparations, adequate for reforming our national way of training customs officers.

On a national level we already have the following resources, tools and functions available:

- A platform capable of electronic education (ILIAS), where more than 800 customs officers have already registered;
- The application of the b-learning method in the field of refreshment courses (ECS, AIS);
- Communication with our customers and the platform provided to them within the framework of ILIAS;
- IT and communication tools at the Customs School.

However, in order to introduce the b-learning method on a larger scale there is a need to develop electronic curricula for all professional fields and it is also essential that the different fields co-operate and communicate efficiently on every level during development projects and trainings, besides working out and accepting a new training strategy.

On the grounds of the British study tour we can state that many findings and experiences of the HMRC's curriculum development centre could and should be adapted into the training system of Hungarian customs officers.

Of these the following would be the most important:

- Trainings adequate to professional needs, with proper planning (for a year ahead)
- Planning the financial resources required for the trainings;
- Accurate planning and execution of curriculum development;
- Clearly defining the tasks, responsibilities and deadlines;
- Task-division during curriculum development.

As a summary of the study tours it can be established that electronic curriculum development and their application have taken rather different paths in different member states but certain elements of them could be put to use within the education system of the Hungarian customs administration as well. However, besides utilising electronic curricula, there is one thing all the above methods share and that is-learning through work, through practice.

Keywords: education, training, e-learning, b-learning, customs, customs authority, training programmes

Kulcsszavak: oktatás, képzés, e-learning, b-learning, vám, vámhatóság, oktatási programok

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