

Benefits of online learning for working adults



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Abstract

With the rise of new technologies, working adults are forced to stay relevant in this constantly changing job market. Today, many organizations expect their employees to keep up with what is happening in the world around us. As a result, online learning is becoming popular among working adults. Online learning refers to learning and other supportive resources that are available through a computer. This paper examines the benefits that working adults enjoy in studying online such as flexibility, savings, new career opportunities, accelerated learning program, collaborative learning opportunities, self-paced learning opportunities, and self-responsibility. It also provides counterarguments such as online learning is difficult for ESL students, students with no access to computer, and students who constantly need an instructor because they could not work alone.

Working Adults Should Be Studying Online

With the rise of new technologies, working adults are forced to stay relevant in this constantly changing job market. Today, many organizations expect their employees to keep up with what is happening in the world around us. As a result, lots of working adults including myself are seeking ways to advance their career. I don't know how it would have been possible for me to balance education with work, family, and other obligations without studying online. Study online is similar to learning online; and "online learning refers to learning and other supportive resources that are available through a computer" (Carliner, 2004, p. 1). According to Friedman (2018), 6.3 million students in the United States, took at least one online course in 2016. I

strongly believe that working adults should study online. The purpose of this paper is to show the importance of online learning, especially for working adults.

Definition of online learning

The literature presents online learning with various definitions. First, online learning and e-Learning are often used interchangeably. According to Piskurich (2004), “ e-Learning is defined as: any form of learning that utilizes a network for delivery, interaction, or facilitation” (p. 8). For example, this network could be the internet, a college LAN or WAN in which learning takes place individually or as part of a class (Piskurich, 2004). In general, the terms e-learning or electronic-learning is used in business and industry training literature or international education and training information. For instance, in the United States, the term online learning or online instruction is preferred than e-Learning (Davidson-Shivers, Rasmussen, & Lowenthal, 2018). Another definition of online learning is associated to online instruction. Online instruction is defined as “ instruction delivered via an electronic medium with instructor and learners separated by space, but connected through the Internet and Web” (Davidson-Shivers et al, 2018, p. 5).

Types of online learning

There are three types of online learning: (1) asynchronous online courses, (2) synchronous online courses, (3) and hybrid or blended courses.

Asynchronous online courses. First, in asynchronous (or non-real-time) courses, instructor and students are not online at the same time (Carliner

and Shank, 2008). For example, asynchronous tools may include “ course announcements, student web pages, e-mail to instructors and class members, threaded discussion boards, wikis, blogs, and file sharing” (Piña, 2013, p. 3).

Synchronous online courses. Second, synchronous (or real-time) online courses refer to courses in which instructor and students are online at the same time (Carliner and Shank, 2008). Examples of synchronous online tools include tools found in an LMS ranging from “ text chat and a sharable whiteboard to full-featured videoconferencing, including multiple video streams, polling, and sharing of presenters’ desktops, applications and files to all participants” (Piña, 2013, p. 3).

Blended courses. Finally, blended or hybrid courses refers to the mix of face-to-face and online learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). According to Stein and Graham (2014), “ Blended courses provide the opportunity for teachers to mix the best of onsite and online to create a new learning environment for their students” (p. 9). For example, in a blended format, students may read course materials before attending class and discuss challenging topics with their instructor or participate in group activities in class to solve practical problems.

Now, that we have a basic understanding of online learning and know about the various types of online learning, we can proceed in discovering why I believe that working adults should be studying online.

Reasons for studying online

There are many reasons for studying online. I believe that seven main reasons are important to consider why working adults should be studying online: (1) flexibility, (2) savings, (3) new career opportunities, (4) accelerated learning program, (5) collaborative learning opportunities, (6) self-paced learning opportunities, and (7) self-responsibility.

Flexibility

The first reason why working adults should be studying online is flexibility. Flexibility allows learners to study where and when they want (Collis & Moonen, 2004). It also refers to being able to access your course 24/7 around your schedule and from anywhere in the world (Wang, 2010). From example, I can access my course in composition and research from home and study when everyone is at sleep. I also like the convenience that online courses offer. In addition, I could be on a business trip for example, and still complete my homework online and meet the deadline. I don't have to necessarily go to my campus to complete my homework or attend a lecture. Furthermore, flexibility also means convenience. For example, a stay-at-home mother can still take care of her family and attend class online. Another example will be shift workers such as registered nurses that may prefer online courses because they can study any time they like, either night or day (Wang, 2010).

Savings

The second reason why working adults should be studying online is cost. Many studies indicate that online learning reduces cost. According to Piskurich (2004), online courses allow you to save time and expenses

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associated with travel. For example, it will be easier to go to your computer desk at home or work than to travel 10 miles across time or even to another building in your workplace. In addition, online courses “reduce costs by eliminating class – related travel expenses as well as the costs of disseminating training materials” (Carliner & Shank, 2008, p. 31).

Furthermore, Young (2018) described a study in which savings for online courses ranged from \$12 to \$66 per credit hour when the overall costs of online courses were compared with the average costs at four educational institutions. For example, I was able to save lots of money in gas last semester because I didn’t have to attend all my classes on campus.

New career opportunities

The third reason why studying online is important for working adults is because they can upgrade their professional skills and stay relevant in this digital economy allowing them to embrace a new career in different sectors of the economy or be promoted in their current field. For example, I have been working in customer service for a while and I am now interested in learning healthcare management for a new career in the healthcare industry. According to Stoltz-Loike (2017), taking courses online could help you round out your resume so that you can compete in the job market.

Accelerated learning program

The fourth reason why studying online is important for working adults is that working adults could benefit from accelerated learning program. For example, traditional MBA programs require about two years of full-time study. But professionals from all industries can benefit from earning an MBA

in a year. This is the case of Missouri State College of Business, where students who have satisfied 80 hours of undergraduate work in business with a 3.0 GPA may qualify to participate in the accelerated Master of Business Administration program. If accepted, they will get a jumpstart on graduate studies by taking 6 credit hours of work during their senior year. Most approved courses are available online and explore marketing, finance and computer information systems. In total, the degree calls for 18 credit hours of foundational work and 33 credit hours of business core curriculum (Affordable College Online, n. d.).

Collaborative learning opportunities

The fifth reason why studying online is important for working adults is that working adults could collaborate with peers from different geographical locations. According to Dunlap and Grabinger (2003), online learning offers a collaborative environment in which students benefit from belonging to a peer group, from networking and mutual support within that group. Moreover, online collaborative learning offers the same benefits of computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL). CSCL is a new educational approach based on the use of technology and collaboration to improve learning (Goodyear, Jones, & Thompson, 2014). According to Yang et al (2018), CSCL helps build a learning community, improves social interaction and student motivation to learn, and enhances student engagement and understanding.

Self-paced learning opportunities

Self-paced learning is often described as individualized learning or self-instruction. The central idea is that self-paced learning allows the learner to

control their learning experience. Not only that learners are responsible of what they learn but they learn at their own pace regardless of being slow or advanced learners (Morrison, Ross, Kalman, & Kemp, 2013). There are many benefits of self-paced learning such as no time pressure, no need for a schedule, suitability for different learning styles, and improving memory (EasyLMS, n. d.). For example, if you are a slow learner you can take your time to complete your readings without worrying about time; and you are free to learn the course materials as you like. It offers a certain degree of freedom for all kind of learners; and it focuses on addressing learners' specific needs compared to learning that takes place in the traditional classroom (Morrison et al, 2013).

Self-responsibility

Online learning promotes self-responsibility. Working adults are known to be organized and self-directed. It also encourages autonomy for learners because they can identify future goals and develop planning skills. In addition, it allows students to be self-motivated since studying online requires considerable planning and organization (Ohashi, 2018). For example, every semester, I develop a personal study schedule that I paste in every corner in the house to keep my family and I informed about how I use and spend my time; this allows me to effectively balance my school with work and family activities.

Effectiveness of online learning

Although online learning offers many benefits, some scholars question the effectiveness of online learning and argue that it may not be suitable for all

students. According to Hudson, Maslin-Prothero, and Oates (1997), online courses are not effective for all students. They believe that English as a second language (ESL) students, or students who do not have access to computer technology, and students who are not able to work alone will find online learning difficult. I believe that these arguments are very weak.

First, the argument that ESL students will find online learning difficult is weak. I believe that an important number of colleges through the help of their instructional designers develop orientation courses for students on how to study online and navigate throughout online courses. For example, Blackboard, the current learning management system used in my school offers orientation courses on how to navigate throughout the platform and access course content.

Second, the argument that students who do not have access to computer technology will find online learning difficult is also weak because working adults during breaks can use their smartphones to study online or stay late in their office and use computers available at their workplace.

Third, the argument that students who are not able to work alone will find online learning difficult is very weak. I believe that students who study online can still communicate with the instructor or their classmates. For example, most online courses offer collaborative work or participation in discussion boards in which students can share ideas with others and ask questions about things they don't know.

Furthermore, Davidson-shivers et al (2018) also described five challenges of online learning including isolation, technology barriers, digital literacy, computer anxiety, and confusion about topics and assignments.

First, their argument that learners could be isolated from instructor and their colleagues is not valid and is similar to the third argument addressed above by Hudson et al (1997).

Second, the argument of technology barriers is not a valid argument because this new economy is essentially digital and most working adults know how to use a smartphone or a computer. According to Statista (n. d.), the number of mobile phone users was around 266 million in 2017 and represented over 80 percent of the US population.

Third, digital literacy is also an invalid argument because most college libraries offer orientation courses on how to use new technologies and address common issues such as plagiarism, cyber bullying, copyright, digital citizenship, and accessibility.

Fourth, computer anxiety is also a weak argument because we are in the era of information technology and our daily lives are surrounded with new technologies such as smartphones, smart TVs, and smart cars.

Finally, confusion about topics and assignments is also a weak argument because most instructors explain at the beginning of the semester through a syllabus what they expect from their students and instructors even offer online meeting to address students needs or provide feedback whenever students needed help in something they did not understand.

Conclusion and future study

In conclusion, working adults should be studying online because online learning offers many benefits. Although online learning offers many benefits, some scholars believe that it is less effective. I believe that desiring to study online or not is not the central issue instead how to facilitate the learning experience of working adults should be more important to explore.

Technology may change but how people learn will remain the same. Thus, improving working adults' learning experience should be the focus of future research studies.

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