

EVOLUTION AND TRAUMA IN CORPORATE E-LEARNING

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Abstract

We present the results of a qualitative study on how bad experiences in e-learning have traumatized companies and e-learning teams and how they have been coping and recovering from those experiences. The study is based on interviews with e-learning managers at prime companies with about 10.000 employees and training budgets over € 5 million Euros, and where e-learning initiatives account for about 50% of the training volume. The results show that companies have signs of confidence in their experience in e-learning and have been dealing with traumas as consequences of bad experiences. The managing teams revealed discomfort with some experiences, the reactions from the trainees, and some previous decisions. Specifically, we found cases of difficulty in handling adversities regarding the platforms, the learning contents, the trainees' maturities and attitudes, and the attitudes from syndicates and top management. The results of this study may help companies self diagnose their traumas and the impact of their negative experience on their decisions, in order to eliminate their internal blocking forces and improve their e-learning processes.

Keywords: *crisis; corporate; experiences; e-learning; maturity; recovering; trauma*

1 INTRODUCTION

Companies have been implementing e-learning projects to help improve their competitiveness for the last 15-20 years. In this period, they have been facing different supporting technologies and new approaches to online learning. The latest approaches included social learning, MOOCs, game-based learning, among many others. Most companies do not have time nor consider appropriate to their context to experiment all these trending approaches. Yet, when they put a new approach into practice, they expect to have good results. Unfortunately, things do not go well all the time and companies have to deal with the consequences of bad choices, bad reactions, dead ends, and indirect costs, as well with the anxiety, diminishing motivation, and lack of confidence of their management teams. Altogether, that creates defensive reactions, which can include, among others, avoiding experimenting new approaches, cutting features, restraining access to the courses, using less attractive learning resources, going back to traditional learning, or postponing decisions.

Most literature on e-learning is focused on success stories and good practices. Good results and success stories are often publicized, but that is not the case when things go wrong. Negative experiences tend not to be discussed, analyzed, or publicized. Yet, they may affect the companies and the people who had to deal with them. Some negative experiences may pass without being traumatic and can be seen as *learning experiences*, a part of the process, and a normal event. Others, may create individual and organizational *traumas*.

Traumatic experiences are events that may include large scale disasters (such as fires or acts of terrorism), corporate incidents (such as financial crises, deaths of colleagues, or robberies), and individual problems (such as health problems, personal losses, abuses and harassments, and family issues) [1, 2]. These events can cause psychological and physical symptoms and can even require intervention to be overcome, as they involve complex connections between body, mind, brain development and memory systems [3, 4]. Fortunately, most negative experiences in e-learning are not so dramatic, but that does not mean they do not create traumas in the companies and in the persons involved, or that they do not have consequences.

Most companies are focused on the impact negative events have on the customers and public image, and direct their efforts to manage the crisis, deal with the press, and handle the digital fuzziness around the crisis [5-7]. Yet, some traumatic events do not have an explicit public impact but still create internal traumas.

Learning from experience is the starting point to improvement [8, 9] and organizational learning is a competence that every company should have [10]. Companies would benefit from looking at how their negative experiences have affected them internally and how those experiences have influenced their current practices and the way they manage their e-learning projects. The ability to recover from trauma is an indicator of corporate maturity in e-learning [11]: if a company is able to look at what went wrong

and how it has affected or traumatized the company and its workers, and overcome all of that, it can keep on track to achieve the best learning results and pursue a successful learning strategy, without being constrained by the negative experiences.

This paper evolved out of a concern with corporate maturity and its connection with quality in e-learning. Improving quality in e-learning is achievable by working on specific issues that are blocking the evolution and maturation of the company. As the ability to recover from bad and traumatic experiences is an indicator of corporate maturity in e-learning, our purpose is to explore how companies are dealing and recovering from traumatic experiences in e-learning. Specifically, our study aimed at identifying stories of companies that were dealing with bad experiences in their e-learning projects. This paper presents those experiences, the reactive decisions, how the companies have recovered from their traumas, and how those traumas are blocking their initiatives in e-learning. In the end, we expect to help other companies self diagnose their traumas, rethink their defensive decisions and actions, and be willing to experiment new approaches in order to improve their practices and refocus on their business strategy. We also aim to make a contribution to the study of corporate maturity in e-learning.

Having those objectives in mind, we have conducted interviews with a small number of e-learning managers at prime companies with an expressive experience in e-learning.

In section II we present a brief summary of how traumatic events influence individuals and how they may cope with trauma. Section III is dedicated to business risks and corporate trauma and how traditional approaches to business crisis are not enough to deal with corporate traumas. Section IV relates corporate traumas to corporate maturity and focuses on the idea that if we can identify and deal with the traumas we can eliminate some of the blocking forces of corporate maturity and help companies improve their e-learning processes. We end up by presenting the results of an empirical qualitative study conducted to understand some of the traumas that companies have been facing in e-learning.

2 UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA AND TRAUMA RECOVERY

Human beings naturally want to be and feel well, but they experience unpleasant situations from time to time. At some point in life, they even may experience traumatic situations, which can be prolonged and repeated. Those negative experiences cause trauma and trauma affects all aspects of an individual's life. A traumatized person can develop fear, shame, guilt, confusion, distrust, despair, rejection, anger, anxiety, low self-esteem, and lack of security and control. Physical symptoms such as pains, racing heartbeats, agitation, or muscle tension may also arise. Overall, traumatic experiences change body sensations, moods, feelings, thoughts and mind images. Trauma even provides a disorder of memory [12] and that disorder also affects behavior, either by constraining action or by providing different meaning to a specific action. Specifically, traumatic experiences exacerbate the negativity bias [13], a cognitive bias by which individuals recall unpleasant memories more than positive memories and put more weight and value on negative things than on the positive ones [14]. Consequently, negative events are made more salient, potent, and dominant and, due to that, are more *contagious* [15]: They affect individual attitudes, decisions, and relations and therefore affect corporate behavior and strategy, as we will discuss later.

Rothschild [16] argued that the first goal of *trauma recovery* is to improve the quality of life on a daily basis (p.43). The key idea in trauma recovery is to restore confidence, power, and control. Recovery does not mean forgetting the traumatic event nor acting as if it did not had happened. Recovering from trauma means being able to proceed without being overwhelmed by a specific event or succession of events from the past. It also means getting control back and not being dominated by the past. Trauma recovery can be uncomfortable, painful, and difficult. It is a process that occurs over time and in intentional stages.

Janet [12] was the first psychotherapist to develop a therapeutic approach to treat post-traumatic stress. He was followed by other psychotherapists, such as Herman. Herman's [1] framework for managing trauma recovery has three phases:

Phase 1 is concerned with establishing safety and achieve stabilization, and can take hours or years to be achieved.

- Phase 2 involves processing trauma memories through remembrance and mourning and by expressing emotions and allowing grieve. The purpose of this phase is to be able to tell the event with no emotions attached and having it as just a piece of a life story, rather than react to it in a fight, flight, or freeze response.

- Phase 3 is focused on reconnection and integration. It is future-oriented phase, based on empowerment and self-determination.

Trauma recovery is measured by evaluating how life is going on a day-to-day basis and several instruments are used to assess recovery [17]. Not surprisingly, corporate recovery from traumatic experiences and organizational learning processes have a similar protocol [8-10]. The difference is that corporate recovery is more than the sum of individual recoveries.

3 RISKS, CRISIS, AND CORPORATE TRAUMA

Companies are made of people including individuals with traumas, individuals who have recovered or are trying to recover from their traumas, or just pretend to forget them. Each individual has her own portfolio of traumas and brings her old traumas to the company. Working for a company means being available to take risks in the name of the company and being exposed to the risk of experiencing new traumas. But individuals are not the only ones who can get traumas: companies also have their own traumas. Just as in humans and animals, traumatic experiences create anxiety and fear within an organization. They provoke something we could call an *organizational trauma* and a post traumatic stress within the company, turning the organizational climate less favorable to experiments, change, and innovation.

Risk is a measure of the adverse effect of an issue, and the *risk* of corporate trauma is now bigger than ever, because companies are assuming more risks: social changes and the pace of industrial and technological innovation are unprecedented, and time and money have been putting a lot of pressure on innovation. These factors combine with a trend towards greater individuality and an assertive public opinion, which increase corporate risks [18]. Corporate operations are never risk free, and successful companies are not those which *avoid risks*, but those which are able to manage risks and recover from corporate traumas when things go wrong.

Negative events and business crisis can threaten corporate reputation and, even when they do not create externally visible problems, they can mine internal reputation and, consequently, affect trust, loyalty, sense of leadership and innovation. The problem is that *negative events and business crisis* involve cognitive and behavioral problems and are usually dealt with logical, conscious, and systematic methods, such as public relations campaigns. These traditional approaches to crisis management are not enough to help the company overcome the traumatic experience. They are focused on the external impact and do not take into account that the business crisis creates trauma in the persons involved and within the company. They are also short-term action plans focused on reactions, and tend to forget that trauma is most times unconscious, silent, and may persist in time. Companies normally have public relations staff to deal with public crisis but they do not have corporate healthcare providers and organizational learning managers prepared to diagnose and treat the internal traumas created by those crises.

4 BACKGROUND, AIMS, SAMPLE, AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Background

This paper evolved out of a concern with corporate maturity and its connection with quality. We believe that aiming at and improving quality in e-learning is achievable by working on specific issues that are blocking the evolution and maturation of the company in that regard.

Companies are like humans: they get *mature* and grow in physical, cognitive, social and economical terms. Maturity means being able to maximize skills and talents, optimize the response to needs, and reflect past experiences into current attitudes and actions. Maturity is not an ending stage but a work in progress, and can be assessed by using *maturity models* and specific *indicators of maturity*. By assessing its own maturity, companies are able to identify specific areas that are less mature and need to be worked upon. This allows the companies to direct their efforts to that specific area, instead of dispelling those efforts.

There are several maturity frameworks, and each one dedicated to one specific area of the company: information systems, management, customer experience management, human resources and training management, etc. [19-23]. There are also several authors who suggest specific models, dimensions, and indicators of maturity in e-learning [11, 24-26]. Some models include the company's *ability to recover from failure* in their dimensions of maturity. We have been working with a model that includes seven dimensions of maturity [11]: strategy, structure, experience, learning design, learning products, learning process, and people. The experience dimension includes indicators to assess how sure and confident the company is regarding its e-learning initiatives and its own perception of its e-learning practices: as a group of isolated experiences or as a cruising-speed performance. It also includes the perception of quality of the previous experiences in e-learning and the ability to cope with past bad experiences, how the company recovered from them, how those experiences are currently affecting

initiatives and blocking innovation in e-learning, and how the ability to develop experiments and test different approaches to e-learning has been affected.

4.2 Aims

The present study explores corporate trauma as a blocking force to e-learning maturity. It also looks into how companies are recovering from trauma or have been conditioning their decisions in e-learning due to negative past experiences that traumatized the training team and the trainees.

Our study aimed at identifying stories of companies that have been dealing with bad experiences in their e-learning projects. Our intention is to relate those experiences to the decisions they are making, see how they have recovered from their traumas or how their traumas are blocking their initiatives and conditioning their strategy.

In the end, we expect to help other companies self-diagnose their traumas, rethink their defensive decisions, and be willing to experiment new approaches in order to improve their practices and refocus on the business strategy. We also aim to make a contribution to the study of corporate maturity in e-learning.

4.3 Sample and Methods

We have studied several companies, looking for corporate traumas in e-learning. We specifically looked for testimonials of experiences that went bad and traumatic events that traumatized the trainees or the e-learning teams.

The companies we have chosen are *prime companies* [27, 28]. Prime companies are focused on long-term results, invest an above-average percentage of revenues in research and development, and keep being innovative. These companies balance flexibility and control, innovation and paper work. A prime company performs with excellence and assertively, with a clear vision and a sense of leadership in its own markets.

We set a target of fourteen companies. All of these companies had to be *prime* companies, market leaders with strong international operations, about 10.000 employees, and training budgets around or above 5 million Euros. To reduce sector-related bias, we designed a multi-sector study that included banking, insurance, retail, energy, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, food & beverage, and transports. These companies share some challenges. Except for the energy and telecommunications companies, all the others live in a high competitive market where they are the leaders or challenge the leader.

The participants were the training and e-learning managers of these companies. The participants were recruited through an e-mail invitation. Prior to their interviews, they were e-mailed the major topics of discussion, and a guarantee of anonymity was given, in order to avoid public relations to condition the participation in the study or influence the responses. We also intended to provide the participants freedom to share their negative experiences, their personal traumas with those experiences, and the impact they had in the companies' way of managing e-learning.

We then conducted structured phone interviews with each participant for 2-3 hours. The interview questions were tested with two participants and, based on their feedback, the questions were refined. After conducting the interviews, we used NVIVO to analyze the data. We did not force the classification of the testimonials into a fixed structure of categories or themes, as we intended not to be fully constrained by the current literature on business crisis and trauma recovery, although those were major inputs in the design of our *interview protocol*.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Cumulative Experience and Lack of Confidence

Almost all the companies have shown lack of confidence in their e-learning activities. For instance, they considered that they are just taking their *first steps* in e-learning and that they have been just making some experiments. Yet, their cumulative experience in e-learning is not that small. These companies have been working on their e-learning initiatives at least for the past 4 or 5 years and deal with an average of 300.000 hours of training in e-learning per year. They have a regular and systematic offer in e-learning, providing some courses in e-learning on a regular basis, and their e-learning initiatives account for 45% of their training volume.

The first steps idea is reinforced with the low budgets of the e-learning courses when compared to face-to-face learning. For example, in a 5 million euro training budget, some companies do not spend more than a hundred or two hundred thousand euro in e-learning, i.e., they spend 5-10% of their training budget in e-learning. In addition, some of these companies have been managing training events for decades and the way of doing it has not changed much. Having that in mind, their e-learning experience is relatively new. As a manager said "we have not reached our zone of comfort in e-learning. Managing e-learning courses is not as easy and normal for us as managing traditional learning courses". Thus, and in spite of their expressive experience, most of the companies included in this study lack confidence on their work. Some of these companies do not have explicit signs of trauma but show signs of lack of confidence and immaturity. For instance, they consider e-learning projects as *special* learning projects, they do not prepare their training team adequately to manage e-learning courses, and they are still testing the organizational structure that fits best their needs in terms of e-learning. As we will discuss next, these are some of the factors that may have contributed to their negative experiences and the traumas that followed.

5.2 Traumas With Platforms

Several companies have been facing negative experiences regarding the platforms used to deliver and support the e-learning courses. Yet, we found companies that deal naturally with that and companies where those negative experiences led to creative and productive solutions, as we will present later. But we also found companies where the problems related to the platforms created some kind of organizational trauma. These traumas have produced reactions that would not exist in normal conditions and are blocking the efficiency of the learning processes. For instance, some companies have abandoned their e-learning portals due to their lack of fitness to their e-learning objectives and are still struggling to find an alternative to traditional learning. Others are using older versions of a platform, that were discontinued by the manufacturers, and were left without any technical support just because the migration process to a new version did not start as expected.

The traumas with the platforms have also been conditioning decisions. For instance, one manager, who has been facing severe problems with the company's platform, told us that he had been searching for a new platform for several months and had not reached a decision. The reason was because he just could not handle another bad decision on his shoulders and on his career. Meanwhile, the company was working with a platform that had problems uploading new courses and was blocking their training initiatives: a new learning product meant experiencing again the same old problems. Each new learning product is a new headache.

There were also financial traumas: one company was searching "just for an open source solution or a SCORM player" because they had made a big investment in their previous platform and felt that it was not up to their needs and uses. This company was willing to give up on several functions that were crucial just to avoid being cheated into making unjustifiable investments.

The good news are that we have also found cases of companies that were faced with negative experiences but did not develop organizational traumas and moved to rather creative and productive solutions. That was the case of a local subsidiary of a multinational company in a between-platforms situation. As the former LMS of the mother company was closed down and the in-house solution being developed was not yet available, they were unexpectedly left with no platform to work for a long time. The sudden lack of a platform to work with was a traumatic event. Yet, their response was productive: they started shooting small "how to" videos in some of their stores and sending them to other local stores on DVDs. When we asked why they did not create at least a YouTube private channel, we realized that there were other problems besides those related to the platform, such as lack of good Internet connections in the stores and privacy and confidentiality issues. Even so, the company was proud for being able to cope with an adverse event and find a solution, though sounding as a simplistic solution, and the team was motivated to find more elaborated solutions. When we ended this research, they did not have yet the new platform, but they were comfortable with the solution they had developed – and even proud for having found a solution instead of waiting for the new LMS. They were far away from the anxiety and disappointment they had initially. In this case we believe that the company had faced a traumatic experience when left out of a platform without notice, but was able to overcome it.

5.3 Traumas With Learning Contents

We also found signs of corporate trauma in negative experiences related to content management. Most of the companies we have interviewed do not use, or have ever bought, off-the-shelf e-learning packs, as they believe they are too generic and not adequate to their own context. So, they prefer to develop their own courses. The intense use of tailor-made courses – instead of standard, off-the-shelf

packs – is a sign of corporate maturity but also a source of potential trauma. That was the case for several companies.

Some companies provided courses with outdated contents, which caused embarrassment to their e-learning teams. These outdated contents were the result of the absence of maintenance contracts and revision plans. One manager told us that, as his team was able to perform minor updates using authoring tools, they had decided “it would be best not to have videos, audios, and dynamic graphics that we do not know how to update”. A negligent decision in the past regarding maintenance contracts had created embarrassing situations and lousy decisions.

Another company made a similar drastic decision and eliminated all audios and videos from the courses because they were not able to handle the theft of headphones in the company’s stores, which inhibited the trainees from attending the courses. As the manager told us, “that problem was out of my hands and that was very stressful: I’m responsible for the learning contents, but not for the equipment. The informatics department is responsible for the equipment and we could not trust them to have the equipment in the stores when we needed it. We had lots of complaints”. The elimination of videos from the courses was also the reaction of a bank. In their case, not only they faced the problem of updating the videos, but they also had problems with the Internet speed in several stores and “the communications of operations with the bank central systems were priority”. In these cases, peripheral problems had caused the trauma.

In the local subsidiaries of international companies, the problems were not outdated content but content that did not correspond to the company’s practices in the country and the local legislation. This was particularly true in fast food companies, which faced a regulation that was different in Europe in several details, such as the maximum temperature allowed to fry potatoes.

Even so, and although outdated contents were more serious, most of the traumatic experiences we have found were related to smaller details of the courses, such as typos. Strong reactions and complaints from the users regarding the typos in the course materials were commonly referred as a traumatic experience. A manager confessed that “it is truly demotivating having people being so aggressive. They do not know the effort we put up on that and they end up complaining for small things”. Several companies told us that the time-to-market of a new e-learning course is large also due to the fact that they have to check and double-check everything, because a small malfunction (as a broken link or blocked pop ups) can “simply take all the credibility out of the project”, as one manager put it.

The degree of aggressiveness of complains with course materials made most of these companies have extended pilot periods for each course. We found a company where “often, when we end up testing and retesting everything, the course content is out of date. Unfortunately, that happens frequently and we end up putting it online just to show that we were not doing nothing”.

In these cases, a small detail produced negative experiences and negative reactions, which in turn created organizational trauma: the result was the increase of the courses’ time-to-market, an apprehensive attitude towards the trainees’ reactions and the distribution of out of date materials.

Other negative past experiences were related to what was considered to be the workers’ illiteracy (reading and comprehension) and digital illiteracy. Complains regarding the contents made some companies withdraw some courses from their e-learning portfolio and return to face-to-face solutions. “We have to discuss every phrase to make sure that it will not have other interpretations. Yet, some trainees make sure they give other interpretations to it and then they start complaining about the course materials”, said one manager. This was a case that we had not diagnosed as a corporate trauma initially. Yet, we ended up treating it as trauma because the company gave up e-learning and went back to face-to-face learning without testing other solutions. For example, the company could have invested on improving the trainees’ literacies, which in the long run would be beneficial. Instead, they opted to exclude those trainees from any e-learning initiatives.

To a lesser extent, there were other areas where we also found negative experiences that caused traumas to the e-learning teams: the lack of families of e-learning courses, the lack of an efficient system to differentiate between levels of expertise, and the absence of reutilization of learning objects.

5.4 Dealing with the Trainees’ Maturities and Attitudes

As the last case shows, the trainees were also a source of frustration and negative experience to the e-learning teams. Several e-learning managers reported that they felt frustrated for being unable to change their trainees’ attitudes towards e-learning and that they had experienced several negative experiences due to the trainees immaturity and attitudes.

When asked about the kind of attitudes that were blocking training and created moments of anxiety for them, some managers told us about trainees who were afraid of seeming ridiculous making written comments that would leave a digital footprint. They also told us that frequently the trainees did not want to provide optional personal information, talk about themselves, or even post a profile picture on the learning platform. They often avoided making written reflections on their training progress and waited for face-to-face sessions to express their opinion or doubts.

These are just some of the signs of digital social immaturity that frustrates and traumatizes the e-learning teams and have to be dealt with. Some companies have been able to deal with it naturally, while others are still dealing with it. For instance, we have found companies that take the trainees' socio-digital (im)maturity as a fixed factor and have created successful strategies to deal with it, such as creating simpler contents, shorter courses, and smaller training groups. We have not found any case where the company had developed a program to accelerate and develop the trainees maturity, though. Other companies suggested that their digital maturity was not developing as expected and these were the cases where the most negative experiences had arisen. Negative experiences have also been reported in situations where the employees only attended e-learning courses because they were mandatory and their managers forced them to it.

In addition to social immaturity and adverse reactions towards e-learning, some companies also reported having problems with the employees' digital and regular literacy, as we have mentioned before. For example, the interpretation of what is considered a clear and simple text often creates problems and adverse reactions to the training in general and the e-learning course in particular. Due to that, some companies recognize that they keep their e-learning courses plain and cut to the point, and sometimes at an introductory level, which in turn leads to other complaints of the employees, who consider the courses too simple and with low added-value to their job.

Reactions and attitudes towards e-learning tend to vary in most companies. In some companies, older employees tend to see e-learning as a lost benefit: the benefit of being able to travel to another city, to sleep in a cozy hotel, and mingling during coffee breaks in face-to-face training. Traveling and lodging expenses related to training events are very expressive in terms of the training budget: on average, they represent 1/5, which means that in a 5 million euro budget, 1 million is dedicated to traveling and lodging expenses. Having the company expending money on traveling and lodging makes employees feel important and creates an indirect negative reaction to e-learning, as it symbolizes the loss of previous privileges. As one manager put it, "the first two hours of a face-to-face course are used as a cathartic moment, where they express their frustrations, their angers, and support each other for having similar problems". Attitudes towards e-learning are also influenced by the colleagues' comments and small jokes: training events are frequently seen as a kind of leisure moment, and people tend to wish each other "a great vacation". Altogether, that tends to create a negative reaction against e-learning, not due to it, but to the loss of those cathartic and vacation moments.

All these factors influence indirectly the global attitude towards e-learning and lead to small frauds, such as the one reported by a company that found that in several stores the employees declared having attended the e-learning videos in the store, but there were no signs that those videos had been watched. The company in question justified this as the result of their concern with the operations at the store and the easiness of skipping training, and decided to close the eyes and act as though the problem had not existed.

Another issue caught our attention regarding the trainees' attitudes and complaints: several companies have been shortening their e-learning courses to up to 30 minutes because their employees tend to complain aggressively more often in longer courses. For instance, the majority of the employees of a company considered a five-hours course too long, even though they were allowed to accomplish it in a 15 days period. The company decided to break it into shorter courses in order to avoid the constant complains.

One company mentioned that even though they liked to make major changes in their e-learning projects, they had to make smooth rather than disruptive changes, to avoid severe reactions from the trainees, since their previous disruptive innovations had not been welcome .

Bad past experiences have also impacted the current e-learning activities in terms of social dynamics. One manager mentioned that although they currently do not have any kind of social dynamics or tutoring, nor plan to have any in the future, that was not the case in the past. Yet, bad experiences made them cut any social dynamics, as online training forums were used by the employees to promote cars for sale, houses for renting, and even as a cathartic place where to express their criticisms of their managers or their clients. Several communication crisis had developed from that, which conducted to the end of interaction tools. Consequently, the company aborted the plans to experiment social learning and corporate MOOCs.

Overall, the trainee's immaturity, their negative reactions towards e-learning, and their complaints in general were a source of tense moments and traumas for the training teams and led to drastic decisions that either excluded the trainees from the e-learning strategy or aimed at reducing the complaints, but not dealing with the problems that were on the basis of those complaints.

5.5 Dealing with Syndicates and Top Management

Apart from those trainees who look to e-learning as the culprit of having lost the benefit of going out for some days of training, other trainees see it as flexible training solution. This is especially true in companies with stores (ex. retail, fast food restaurants, and banks) where the trainees can decide the best moments to dedicate to the course.

Yet, this flexibility is also a source of conflict and bad experiences, and consequently corporate traumas to the e-learning teams. As it was mentioned by several managers, most of the trainees prefer to attend the courses off the working hours and at home. This is a way of taking pressure off their working day, as by the end of the day they are relaxed enough to enjoy the course. Even so, this creates a conflict with the requirements of the syndicates. As a manager put it, "our business has evolved a lot, and people face a lot of pressure during the working hours, yet, the syndicates that represent them do not allow us to provide them the training after the working hours". Some of the companies that we have interviewed have aggressive syndicates and the relationship with them is tense. The requirements of the syndicates have made several companies block access to the courses out of the companies' networks and business hours and creating solutions that "only the syndicate approves". Other companies decided to defy the syndicates and are permanently expecting some kind of retaliation or complaint.

Besides syndicates and employees with negative attitudes towards e-learning, there is another blocking force and source of negative experiences: top management. Some e-learning managers reported that some top managers at their companies are the strongest blocking force to their e-learning initiatives: "as some of them do not enjoy following e-learning courses, they believe that these courses are no good for anyone". As a consequence, e-learning budgets, even though inexpressive when compared to face-to-face training, are often questioned by top management, who tend to be "more sensitive to expending € 6.000 with an e-learning course for all the employees than € 6.000 in a single registration at a top management seminar in a fancy European University". Having top managers creating resistances to e-learning creates anxiety and diminishes the motivation of the e-learning team, but is also seen as "an internal betrayal, something that should not occur within a company and leaves you not knowing what to do. We must not forget that they are our bosses". This inconsistency in the companies' leadership is traumatic to the e-learning managers, as they are left alone with the e-learning strategy on one hand and the top managers' attitudes towards e-learning on the other hand. So, in a defensive way, they opt to minimize e-learning initiatives that may cause adverse reactions among top managers.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Most research in e-learning is focused on good examples, best practices, and success stories. Yet, there are no success stories without some failures, pitfalls, and problems, which usually are hidden or kept untold.

The intent of this study was to explore how e-learning teams in big companies have been dealing with negative experiences in e-learning. Specifically, we wanted to know which of those experiences had been or could be considered traumatic and had influenced the way they conducted their e-learning projects. We also wanted to identify good examples of *trauma recovery* that could show that even bad situations can provide good contexts for innovation and changes for the better, and that the teams are able to overcome the traumatic experience. This study provides several examples of trauma events and trauma recoveries, as well as examples of situations where the companies are still struggling to recover from their traumas.

Among the prime companies we interviewed, we found companies with many years of experience that still do not feel confident regarding their e-learning practices. All of these companies reported having bad experiences. Some experiences had such a strong impact that created organizational traumas. Most of the traumas we found were related to the learning platforms, the learning contents, the maturity and attitudes of the trainees, the demands from the syndicates, and, surprisingly, the company's top management. We were not able to find traumas related to regulators, trainers, or instructional designers, although most companies have problems and negative experiences in those areas.

The traumas we have identified had different consequences. Some companies were able to react positively and developed creative solutions to deal with it. Yet, in some companies, the traumas

provoked several less productive reactions: the time-to-market of the e-learning courses increased, the process of decision making became less agile, and some trainees were left out of e-learning. In other cases, courses were cut or turned into a selection of less attractive materials, pedagogical creativity and innovation was blocked, and the learning experiments were minimized.

As we mentioned before, we have conducted interviews with a small number of e-learning managers at prime companies. With a small set of interviews, it is not appropriate to make generalizations, nor was it our intention. However, we were able to gather several stories that can be inspiring for e-learning managers. We have also made a connection between e-learning and the trauma literature, which is an unusual research area in e-learning that can bring another angle of analysis to e-learning projects and provide a framework to understand corporate maturity in e-learning.

This paper can help e-learning managers and companies become aware of possible traumas that may exist in their companies, get to know how other companies have been dealing with their traumas, and design their own recovery strategy.

The results we have reproduced are preliminary and express only some stories. It would be interesting to check later how the companies we interviewed have solved their problems and are coping with their traumas. Larger samples of companies, other sectors, and the inclusion of other institutions, such as higher education institutions, can provide more insights on how institutions are dealing with traumatic experiences.

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