# Mobilising the global workforce for 2014

*Armin Hopp examines the issues around making a workforce truly mobile and sets out the training agenda for 2014.*

2013 has been a game-changing year for HR and learning and development departments. Long-promised global collaboration and elearning platforms, combined with fast, reliable Internet connections and smart mobile devices have finally enabled the creation of a mobile workforce.

Training and development departments can now make knowledge available for staff any time, any place and on any device. In the past 12 months enterprises have finally been able to tap into technology that works to provide abundant mobile elearning; 60% of those interviewed said that ‘flexibility and instant accessibility’ were the key advantages. 50% of companies surveyed are now using cloud-based systems, up from 25% last year and elearning is no longer confined to local systems – learners can now access systems from anywhere in the world.

In practice, the flexibility and accessibility organisations want from mobile elearning enables them to achieve concrete business goals. These may include improving staff recruitment and retention by offering them skills and language training that enables them to travel the world and be seconded overseas.

**Skills shortages**

Enterprises in many sectors are facing the threat of skills shortages and the resulting recruitment and retention issues once more. The 'Engineering and Technology Skills & Demand in Industry Annual Survey 2013’ found that half of UK engineering companies are recruiting engineers but an increasing proportion are experiencing problems getting the people they need, especially experienced staff. Confidence in being able to recruit sufficient suitably qualified engineering, IT and technical staff over the next four to five years has continued to decline.

The big issues of recruitment, retention and adding value to the enterprise through elearning prevail. Only 14% of the survey respondents cited ‘reduction of direct training costs’ as a critical driver for increasing online training delivery in 2014 and beyond. This is particularly surprising as most respondents hailed from European countries that are still emerging from their economic woes. Reductions in costs arising from savings in travel and time out of the office can be significant – but learning and development departments are looking beyond cost cutting towards adding value through flexibility. Many were actually talking about increasing budgets for online training.

Most respondents conceded that a lack of foreign language skills and intercultural differences were hampering their business mobility. Intercultural differences are not the same as language differences, and demand a broader approach to address the issues. In 2014 organisations will be looking to create their own individual corporate culture that crosses boundaries and languages and replaces traditional cultural differences.

However, creating a corporate culture does mean understanding common goals, and language facilitates exactly that. As work and communication take place within the online space, employees don’t even have to move, physically, to work with colleagues in another country. Now that the technological barriers have been broken down and employees can collaborate within cloud-based systems, language has become the last remaining barrier to the mobile global workforce.

**Speeding up time to market**

The challenges faced by HR directors and learning and development professionals in the mobile enterprise of 2014 will lie in developing a cross-border communication strategy that enables employees to communicate with each other and apply their skills wherever they are needed. An effective strategy will smooth communications and reduce decision-making times. Speedy and efficient decision making results in faster time to market and an effective and flourishing enterprise.

In summary, there are five key drivers transforming workforce mobility:

1. Workforce capability is a major issue as companies seek to create agility and mobility to help fill in the gaps. As countries emerge from the long economic downturn – some countries, such as Germany, are even experiencing a boom – enterprises are suffering from an inadequate and uneven distribution of skills. Language training will help enterprises leverage talent across a broader field so that skilled staff can work across borders as needed.
2. Enterprises will need to take care not to overwhelm employees. In the mobile world, employees are potentially available for work and training 24/7, but the key is to engage them with training. Research has shown that engagement improves training, so rather than engulf employees with fast paced elearning, blend it with coaching and face-to-face training. Make sure people have realistic targets and that they understand why they are learning.
3. Global integration of HR systems. We are seeing a huge movement towards the cloud, with 50% of companies using cloud-based training, up from 25% last year. These firms are also laying the technology groundwork for learning and corporate communications to work across borders and they will be looking to leverage all that integration by having users speak the same language.
4. The move towards big data. HR will benefit from a lot more data analytics in 2014, enabling them to make evidence-based decisions. HR departments have, characteristically, appeared to be guessing what might be best for their people. Now the technology is available that will allow HR to make evidence-based decisions to establish what the organisation needs to enable greater mobility. For example, with language training, using integrated cloud-based systems it is easy to run a gap analysis across the whole organisation to find out what people know, what they need to know and fill in the gaps, controlling the timing and delivery of language training centrally.
5. Enabling workforce mobility will increasingly contribute towards the talent acquisition process. A changing demographic towards an older population has left enterprises struggling to recruit young, skilled talent. Increasingly, organisations will be looking to train up their own talent from within rather than find skilled young workers. This is already happening in economies such as Germany, and the UK and US markets look likely to follow suit.

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In class after reading this article, you will be required to:

* Make connections (personally) with the text
* Raise challenges (disagreements) with the text
* Note concepts (like you were introducing the topic to another person) from the text
* Identify changes (for you or in the future) from the text