

A-punkt

By Natalie Morawietz, F-BB

1. Facts about the institution

Name of institution	a-punkt
URL of institution	www.a-punkt.info
Country	Nürnberg (Zirndorf), Germany
Number of Employees	3 employees, 2 employers
Revenue in 2005	426.000 €
Experience with e-learning since	Since 2004
Business sector	a-punkt is an architecture firm (service sector)
Target group/participants in e-learning	Employees and employers needing further training in project management
Content	Courses dealing with project management and other "soft-skills"
Form	Blended Learning Arrangement
People interviewed	Ulrich Stieber (employer), Stefanie Brehms (employee), Sabine Bescherer (training provider/consultant)

2. How the institution used e-learning

2.1. Description of SME

a-punkt is a micro-enterprise active in the field of service, specialized in providing service in architecture. They provide complete consultancy and planning in the field of common architecture performance.

For a-punkt and especially the architects employed project management is an important "soft-skill" in their daily work. But competencies in that field are not provided during their study. So it was necessary for them to gain skills and competencies in that field by further training.

2.2. The courses

The course content is mainly focused on the following topics: Project management, social competencies and working techniques:

- Introduction into the project management
- Time- and task management
- Presentation techniques
- Planning of projects
- Planning in projects: time – resources – costs
- Project controlling
- Project finishing

In the program, a combination of eLearning (with teletutoring support) and classroom learning teaches learners key concepts in the field of project management, social skills, and work techniques, which the learners then apply in their respective workplace settings. In order to ensure intelligent and across the board implementation of all relevant concepts, learners work on an actual project and in so doing are provided with tutoring support, if desired. In addition, regularly scheduled workshops promote information sharing and allow for the presentation of interim and definitive results.

2.3. Number of employees involved

From a-punkt one employee (Stefanie Brehms) and also the two employers Ulrich Stieber and Harald Meierhöfer took part in the Blended Learning course “monkey”.

2.4. E-learning platform and technology issues

The eLearning courses are hosted by bbw-online. The courses are available through the Internet Explorer web browser used by a-punkt, no other software was needed.

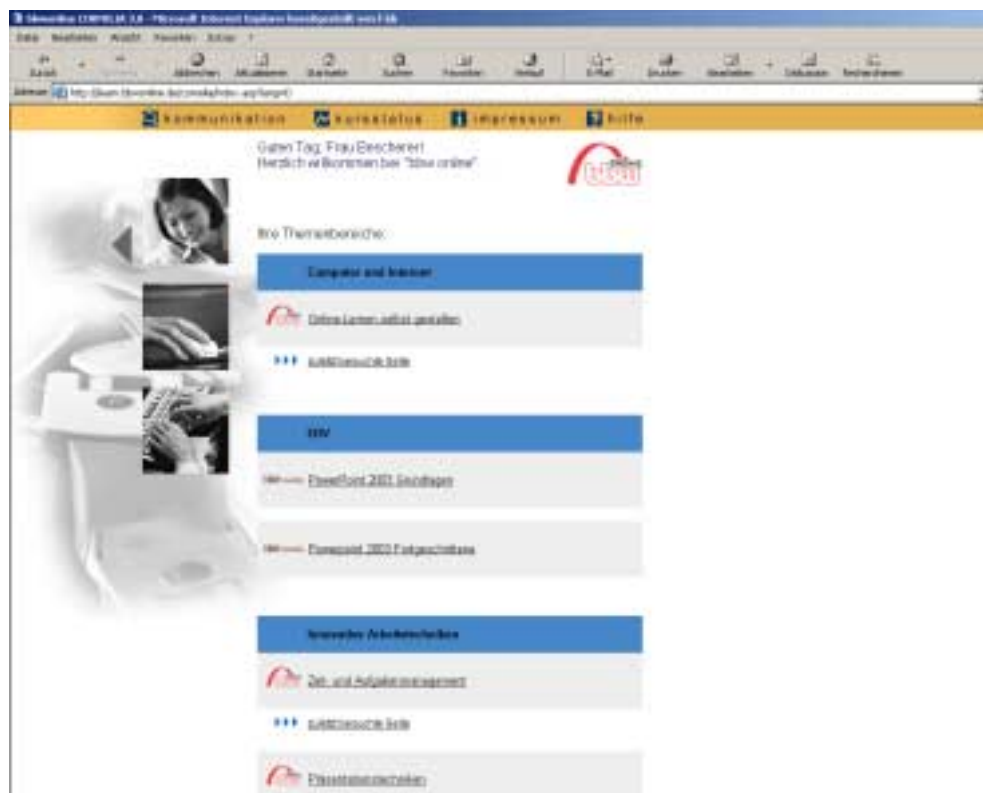


Figure 1. Screen shot from the web portal bbw-online

2.5. Course development

At the beginning of training, the participants come together for a half-day kick-off meeting to be familiarised with the training schedule, technical details and the eLearning system – i.e. with the learning management system and the handling of the modules. This joint introduction provides orientation and security to all those involved and creates trust. The learners personally get to know each other and their tutors; this supports the social component of learning.

2.5.1. eLearning phases

To acquire theoretical knowledge, the participants independently work on Internet-based learning programmes at their company workplace in three eLearning phases. An eLearning phase lasts for a period of approximately three weeks, in which three modules of three to four learning hours each are included. The contents come from the subject areas of project management, social competencies, work techniques, self-management, time and task management etc. During this time, the participants receive support from a teletutor who is available to them for questions and for correcting the integrated tests via e-mail with a response interval of 24 hours.

2.5.2. Face-to-face meetings

On three face-to-face days, the theoretical contents of the processed modules are consolidated and supplemented by practical examples and exercises. The participants learn from each other and with each other. They work out solutions in groups, creating e.g. a project schedule for a training project or finding practicable solutions for dealing with disturbances of their eLearning during working hours.

On the third face-to-face day, the transition to the practical company phase is made. The participants introduce the projects that they will carry out at their company. The human resource managers are also present at this meeting; in this way, they are actively included in the entire development process early on.

2.5.3. The practical phase: learning by working on a company project task

Project learning

In the four- to five-month practical phase, the participants work on their company project tasks. They are supported with expert coaching. The goal is to concretely implement and practice what they have learned during the self-learning phase in their everyday work environment. During this time, the eLearning-modules continue to be available to the participants as "reference material".

Intermediate workshop

The practical phase is interrupted by an intermediate workshop: the participants meet again to present the intermediate status of their projects to each other and to discuss their experience with the others.

Final workshop

In a two-day final workshop, to which the human resource managers of the co-operating businesses are invited again on the second day, the participants present their project results. The goal is to represent oneself and one's success in implementing the company project task. The learning processes are evaluated by the participants together. This makes it easier to communicate experience with the learning project to colleagues. Exchanging experience outside of one's own company expands one's perspective and helps to develop interdisciplinary competencies.

2.5.4 Disseminator model

A disseminator model ensures that knowledge is transferred at a respective company during the practical phase. The participants act as disseminators by directing at least one other employee at "their" company.

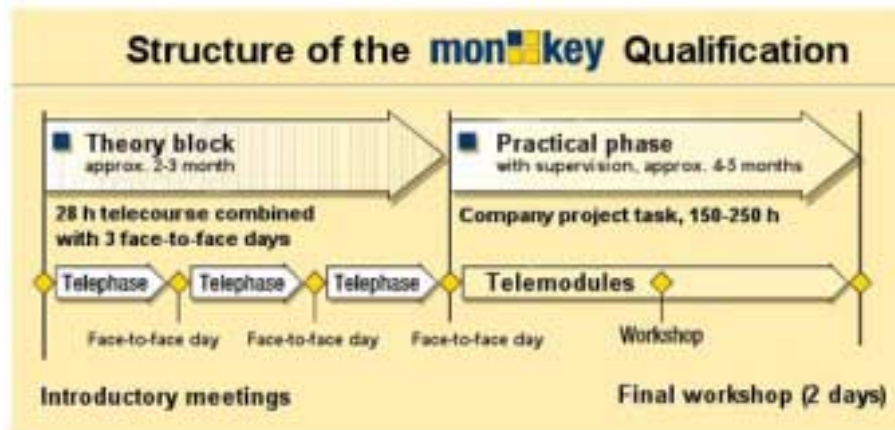


Figure 2. Structure of the Blended Learning Arrangement “monkey”

3. Effects and outcomes of the e-learning activities

3.1. Completion rates

From about 20 beginners in total about 18 managed to finalise the eLearning course. For all participants of a-punkt the driving force was to move forward the company and be able to use the learning outcomes in their daily work. Especially the project work implemented in the Blended Learning Arrangement is fully applicable to the needs of a-punkt. For example Ulrich Stieber developed as his project work in the course a new website for his company.

3.2. Satisfaction

Satisfaction of a-punkt is really high. The free organisation of learning time and learning place meets perfectly the needs of a-punkt as well as the provided course contents. The interactive learning arrangement can be simply transferred to other topics and places.

4. Challenges and barriers

In general the biggest obstacles for a-punkt can be stated as the following:

Sometimes it was not so easy to take part in the in-person venues as the fixed dates were not freely changeable. But nevertheless the face-to-face days were also a motivation to continue the further training. Concerning technical and organisational issues no barriers can be identified as the platform already existed and is easy to handle.

5. Success factors

5.1. Motivational impulses

"I am always amazed at how much I get from the feedback of the other participants. Today, I was completely frustrated and discouraged when I came, because my project isn't coming along well, but now I am returning to my work with a lot of suggestions and a new motivation."

This is what one participant said during the feedback round at the end of the intermediate workshop in the practical phase. Regular, joint meetings are not only good for loosening up the often ponderous learning process at the workplace. The social contacts in the workshop also aid self-directed learning and greatly contribute to the participants'

motivation. Inter-company meetings additionally encourage participants to learn from the experiences of others. The theoretical phase as well as the practical phase should therefore be interrupted by one or (even better) two intermediate workshops.

Another motivational impulse was the supervision of the learning process. One participant especially emphasised that it felt good to be able to call the trainer or tutor at any time. In practice, however, the participants rarely made use of this possibility on their own. In most cases, the initiative came from the tutor, who contacted the participants and visited them at their workplace at regular intervals.

5.2. "Control points"

In addition to the company visits of the trainer/tutor, there were also inter-company meetings. By presenting their own project status, everyone could find out whether and to what extent they had been able to apply what they had learned.

The following method has proven worthwhile: On the first day of the final workshop, the participants work in groups to prepare a presentation using guiding questions. This presentation gives the human resource managers, who are invited on the second day, specific feedback on what progress has been made with which elements of the further training measure.

The presentations give insight into the implementation of the company project tasks and document whether and to what extent the theoretical contents have been successfully applied in practice. All participants found the presence of the human resource managers on the second day to be beneficial.

5.3. General conditions at the company

When the "monkey" concept was being developed, it became increasingly clear that learning and company change processes had to be connected with each other. This requires that the learners inform their co-workers and superiors about the company project tasks that they have taken on and also include them in their learning process as early as possible. This was done by integrating the people responsible for human resources and the above-mentioned disseminator model.

The participants were directed not only to apply what they learned at the company but also to disseminate it actively. This organised transfer of knowledge can ensure learning success as well as make the acquired knowledge widely available at a company.

However, it has become apparent that the disseminator model cannot be implemented everywhere in the same way. Different company sizes, structures and cultures and different social backgrounds of participants make it necessary to adapt the concept. Possible measures are:

- setting up learning groups,
- organising an internal information event on the implemented project,
- setting up an information board or corner,
- individual coaching etc.

In any case, the sustainability of the further training (for the participant as well as for the company) depends on how successfully the measure is anchored in the company context: the earlier human resource managers and employees were informed and

integrated, the greater the success that was attained. Participants from companies that sent several employees also profited from a lively exchange, increased motivation and greater acceptance of the further training at the company.

"The concept of "monkey" is based on a high-quality further training that for once is really oriented to company practice. Because the participants not only learn things on a theoretical level, as is usual, but also have to apply them personally in company project tasks, the learning success is noticeable not only to the participants themselves, but also to the company."

This is how Ulrich Stieber summarised the very positive experiences of the participating companies with the pilot scheme. The acceptance grew rapidly even among smaller companies. At the beginning of the pilot scheme, several of them had still been sceptical whether the relatively complex learning arrangement would be practicable for them.

6. E-learning investments, developmental costs and operational costs

As the Blended Learning Arrangement "monkey" was developed in a project promoted by the State Ministry of Employment and Social Security a-punkt did not have to pay for the enrolment of the course. But of course the investment of work time and the investment for the project work had to be financed by a-punkt itself. But Ulrich Stieber does not see why SMEs will not easily profit from eLearning as further training. All employees working in a-punkt have to take part in further training from time to time. At the moment this is done by face-to-face seminar, e.g. in "security in building lots ". But Ulrich Stieber can imagine to do this continuously for all employees with eLearning if courses are offered from external training providers.

References

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